

MAY 2023

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HOW CHINA ENGAGES SOUTH ASIA

THEMES, PARTNERS AND TOOLS

EDITED BY

CONSTANTINO XAVIER

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How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools

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Published by:

Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)

CSEP Research Foundation

6, Dr Jose P. Rizal Marg, Chanakyapuri,

New Delhi - 110021, India

www.csep.org

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ISBN 978-93-95531-03-0

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Recommended citation:

Xavier, C., & Jacob, J.T. (2023). *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools*, New Delhi: Centre for Social and Economic Progress.

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Regional Connectivity Initiative

HOW CHINA ENGAGES SOUTH ASIA:

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CONSTANTINO XAVIER

JABIN T. JACOB

Report Summary

After several decades of limited engagement, China has rapidly deepened and diversified its relations with India and its neighbouring countries. However, beyond the economic dimension, not much is known of the other aspects of China's growing footprint in the region. As it garners political, diplomatic and security influence, China has also become increasingly entangled in various domestic processes of South Asian democracies, from shaping public opinion to influencing policy-making. As with other great powers, China's objective is two-fold: to encourage policies that are favourable for itself, and to pre-empt decisions that would go against its core interests. This report assess how China is becoming increasingly influential beyond just trade and other economic ties with India and its neighbours. Based on eight case studies by analysts and scholars from Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Sri Lanka, the report examines China's growing role in a range of sectors in these four countries, including education, public diplomacy, technology, social media, civil society, party politics, religion, and governance. It is among the first systematic, case study and evidence-based analyses of China's new methods and strategies of engagement with South Asia. Going beyond an India-centric perspective, the report also expands our understanding of how other South Asian countries perceive China and seek to promote their own interests and concerns.

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Abbreviations

ARSA	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BAC	Buddhist Association of China
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCC	Chinese Cultural Center
CCTV	China Central Television
CGGC	China Gezhouba Group Corporation
CGS	Chinese Government Scholarships
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CMEC	China Myanmar Economic Corridor
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPN-MC	Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Centre
CPN-UML	Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist
CPSL	Communist Party of Sri Lanka
CRCCA	China Religious Cultural Communication Association
CRF	China Reform Forum
CRI	China Radio International
DSR	Digital Silk Road
ECT	East Container Terminal
IANs	Indo-Asian News Service
IDCPC	International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PRC	People's Republic of China
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SLPP	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United National High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

Acknowledgements

This report is the outcome of a project that began just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. It would have been impossible to execute without the support of a number of people who worked hard to adapt our plans to a virtual format as our office remained closed and international travel was restricted. Nitika Nayar ably spearheaded the entire process and we owe much to her enthusiastic persistence and skillful coordination.

We are grateful to all authors from across the region for their stellar contributions and patience as the project developed through different iterations, including an extensive review and editing process. We are indebted to Shivshankar Menon for helping us frame the research project, engaging with the authors and sharing his deep expertise on China. He has been a constant source of support for the policy-relevant research and new voices emanating from this report. We are thankful to Rakesh Mohan and Shishir Gupta for their unfailing support for this project's objectives, and their valuable time and feedback at every step in the production of this report.

We drew on the constant support of a number of colleagues at CSEP, who provided valuable research inputs, feedback and support while we executed this project and produced this report: Anindita Sinh, Antara Ghosal Singh, Jahn timer Mukul, Nidhi Varma, Niharika Mehrotra, Riya Sinha, Shruti Jargad, and Yasser Naqvi. The CSEP Communications team has been instrumental in supporting the production of this report: we are grateful to Aruna Bose, Malvika Sharad, Mukesh Rawat, and Trishna Wahengbam.

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Preface

S H I V S H A N K A R M E N O N

There is an abundance of anecdotal and topical commentary on China's influence in South Asia. And yet, there is little by way of rigorous academic study on the subject. By encouraging reputed scholars from the sub-region itself to write these essays, describing aspects of China's influence in their own countries, the Centre for Social and Economic Progress has made a promising beginning in studying the nature and extent of China's influence in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Its additional value comes from its examination of the diverse instrumentalities that China employs to extend her influence, including through education, social media, Buddhism, and political parties.

What emerges from this exercise is a picture of variety in methods, effect, and impact. There is clearly a serious Chinese effort to increase her influence in south Asia over the last decade and a half, and that effort is marked by considerable innovation and sophistication in its methods. But the efficacy of those methods in terms of outcomes is, at best, mixed.

The reasons for the varied effectiveness of China's efforts to gain influence in south Asia differ from country to country. The one common factor that might explain the variance is the politics that seems inseparable from these efforts. This is true in terms of China's own shifting policies: from the Cultural Revolution export of revolution, to Deng Xiaoping's reforming emphasis on economics, to the securitisation of relationships under President Xi Jinping. It is also equally the case that Chinese influence operations are now often entangled in the domestic politics of south Asian countries, whether in Nepal, Sri Lanka or in Bangladesh. As a result, the proportion of local opinion favourable to China in south Asian countries, with the exception of Pakistan, has varied considerably over time and is not rising.

Equally important as the effort put in by China is the demand in south Asia for what China has to offer, particularly in terms of infrastructure building and financial support, which opens the door for China's soft power. In this respect, south Asia other than India is no different from the rest of the global south. It remains to be seen whether this welcome will continue as China gains power and agency in the international system and behaves as other great powers do. Already China is willing to be seen taking sides and expressing preferences in the internal politics of Nepal and Sri Lanka, and this has occasioned natural reactions in the political sphere.

What we have in this volume are contributions to a serious effort to understand an evolving phenomenon. China itself, south Asia, and the international environment are undergoing rapid change on an unprecedented scale. It is our hope that this volume will contribute to the growing international scholarship and interest in the phenomenon of China's growing international influence in a significant part of the world.

01

Introduction: Studying China's Themes, Partners and Tools in South Asia

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JABIN T. JACOB, *Associate Professor, Department of International Relations & Governance Studies & Director, Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR.*

Abstract

This chapter provides an introduction to the report, summarising its key objectives and findings. It reviews the drivers of China's recent and rapid rise in South Asia as well as the themes, partners, and tools that regulate its engagement with the region. In the first section, we discuss the context that has enabled a rising China and what we know about its growing global influence. We note that much of the knowledge in this field of study is focused on hard economic and security issues, that it is predominantly produced in the West, and that the case of South Asia is mostly missing. The second section sets the context for China's rapid rise in South Asia since the 2000s, with deepening and expanding engagements with all countries, though the divergence in India-China relations has complicated the regional picture. The third section presents the report's objectives, the methodological choices and limitations of our case study-oriented approach, and a summary of each chapter. The fourth and final section reviews the main patterns and findings of the eight case studies, offering some conclusions and suggesting future avenues of research to expand our understanding of the themes, partners, and tools that will shape China's future engagement with South Asia.

Recommended citation:

Xavier, C., & Jacob, J.T. (2023). Introduction: Studying China's Themes, Partners and Tools in South Asia. In Xavier, C. & Jacob, J.T. *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools* (pp. 1-12). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/eyMDv8z>

China's rising influence

China's presence is now felt in every corner of the world, in the Global North and the developing countries of the Global South alike. And as with other rising powers in the past, China's growing economic capabilities and interdependence are pushing it to protect and promote its expanding interests abroad through a combination of traditional and new instruments. China's *modus operandi* abroad reflects much of its domestic principles and experience, including its centralised, single-party-led political and economic models of organisation.

The infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) might be the most visible aspect of China's presence, reflecting its financial might through considerable investments, development assistance, and increased trade. But there are more subtle or even hidden aspects of Chinese influence. China's diplomats, senior Communist Party of China (CPC) officials, and its media have engaged in multiple projects to exercise soft power, shape narratives, intervene in domestic politics, and mediate bilateral disputes. The nature and scale of these efforts may vary depending on the political and economic environment in the host countries, but increasingly, China is willing to get involved despite challenges, creating opportunities for itself to actively shape this geopolitical region.

As China garners greater political, economic, diplomatic, and security influence worldwide, its key objectives remain influencing public opinion and decision-making processes overseas to encourage policies that are favourable to Beijing and precluding or preempting decisions that would go against its core interests.

Even as Chinese influence grows globally, pushback and opposition to it have also escalated, often driven by increasingly passionate and ideological narratives. China's influence has become progressively salient politically. From Europe to Australia, from

Zimbabwe to the Philippines, and from Taiwan to the Solomon Islands, anti-China sentiments have become significant. Major global powers have begun deploying countermeasures to thwart overt and covert Chinese influence.

It is now widely accepted that China's Confucius Institutes for language and culture training curtail academic freedom, attempting to prevent independent research on issues related to China and promoting one-sided and overly positive images of the Chinese party-state (Peterson, 2017). Several countries have responded by shutting them down. Australia has established several measures, including new laws, to ensure that Australian universities, non-governmental organisations, and political parties are less prone to Chinese influence. The United States has launched a tech war against China to safeguard sensitive information and the privacy and security of its citizens and enterprises. Indeed, the American tech measures followed India's restrictions on Chinese apps and technologies after a deadly military confrontation between the two countries along their disputed boundary in June 2020.

In Europe, the 5G debate has unearthed a growing network of Chinese lobby companies that are shaping the governance and regulation of the telecom and other critical industries. New Delhi has also long placed restrictions on academic, cultural, and people-to-people links with China for security reasons, and the United States and other developed economies have followed suit in recent years by issuing sanctions, travel embargoes, and visa restrictions against Chinese citizens on various grounds, from human rights abuse to technology theft. The foreign activities of the United Front Work Department (UFWD) of the Central Committee of the CPC have also long been highlighted by scholars (Brady, 2017; Dotson, 2019; Hsiao, 2019).

Yet the literature on China's rising influence continues to focus only on certain themes and geographies. First, economic and military dimensions continue to garner

the most attention, reflecting the changing balance of power. In Europe, most studies have concentrated on China's sudden rise as a commercial and investment partner, following the massive rise in Chinese foreign direct investment from €1.6 billion to €36 billion in just six years, between 2010 and 2016 (Huotari, 2018, p. 9). Besides the hard economic dimension, the rise of China has also been predominantly studied from the military angle, assessing how Beijing has modernised its defence forces and extended its power projection capabilities in Asia and beyond. Ghiselli (2021), for example, describes the slow “securitisation” of China's foreign policy after 2011 to protect its extraterritorial citizens and economic interests.

Second, much of the work on China's rise continues to originate in the United States and Europe, reflecting the continued centrality of Western universities and knowledge production systems. Beijing's growing clout is naturally seen as a cause for concern, with China being described as a “strategic competitor” (Chabra, Doshi, Hass, & Kimball, 2021, p. 2). Even though similar, if perhaps less acute concerns about China's growing leverage are felt in other countries and regions of the world, there has been less work done here compared to that in the more developed Western nations. Far less is known about how China has engaged other regions and how smaller and middle powers beyond the West have handled this increasing Chinese influence. There are now widely reported instances of Chinese presence and influence across different domains in Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands.

But South Asia stands out as a particularly understudied geography when it comes to China's engagements. This report seeks to help correct this situation by surveying the various dimensions of China's engagement with four South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The eight case studies by scholars from the region help further our knowledge about China's strategy and methods and about how different stakeholders in these

countries are responding to China's rise, whether by initiating, facilitating, or resisting engagement. What emerges is a clearer picture of the different themes, partners, and tools that have shaped China's new ties with South Asia. The three main sections of this report are described below.

First, *what* are the dimensions that predominate in China's engagement in South Asia? The *themes* include different sectors of engagement, from education to politics, as well as public narratives that support China's engagement, from economic “win-win” cooperation to images of Beijing as an ally of smaller states and a counter against Indian and Western hegemony.

Second, *who* are the actors that shape China's engagement in South Asia? The *partners* include a variety of both government and private actors, in China and in South Asian countries, who establish regular processes of consultation and cooperation to deepen engagement. In this case, the Chinese government often plays the role of a matchmaker, facilitating connectivity.

And third, *how* does China realise its engagement in South Asia, focused on different themes and partners? The *tools* include multiple methods to engage individual or institutional partners and countries, including a multiplicity of channels that are often, but not always, established by governments. The chapters in our report focus, in particular, on non-governmental communication instruments, including social media, as a preferred mode to signal and influence public opinion.

China's methods and strategies in South Asia

Following China's economic reforms and opening up, its rise as an influential economic and political actor in the global system has been frequently predicted. Its fall has also been predicted, if somewhat less frequently, across the same period. While the reasons for the rise

are well known, the reasons for its predicted decline or fall are often ignored or forgotten. For one, China under the ruling CPC has a tendency to run into significant economic and political upheaval practically every decade—a trend that has been obvious since the creation of the People’s Republic in 1949. Consider, for example, the Great Leap Forward (1958–62) or the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) before the reform era, or since then, the student protests of 1989, the more slow-burning fuses of corruption—the target of a political campaign over the past decade—widespread local government debt, the Covid pandemic, and lately, demographic decline.

Both, China’s suffering during such upheavals as well as its surviving them, so far, have a great deal to do with the nature of the government in place in Beijing—or more precisely, the nature of its ruling party. China is, for all practical purposes, a single-party state with the CPC dominating and guiding the other minor political parties in what is on paper a multiparty system. China’s internal upheavals have not failed to affect its external policies, but the CPC’s confidence and experience, which come with being entrenched in power, have allowed it also to conduct the country’s foreign policy with a greater focus on the *longue durée*. Its activities in building up political, economic, and military influence in South Asia offer a case in point.

There is certainly a great deal that we do *not* know about how decisions are made within the Chinese system, and some characteristics of decision-making are unique to the kind of authoritarian system that China is. These do make it difficult to study Chinese foreign policy, but that does not mean it is impossible to study. Indeed, China is no longer a “black box”—a particularly widely held belief in South Asia. The CPC has been broadcasting its intentions loudly and clearly, especially in General Secretary Xi Jinping’s “new era” (Xi, 2017, 2022), and there are already works by scholars from the Global South that analyse these intentions—both domestic and external (Jacob & Subba, 2022a, 2022b)—as well as

China’s methods (Abdenur, Folly, & Santoro, 2021; Benabdallah, 2020; Jacob, 2020a).

While China’s regional outreach and approaches in South Asia might have been something of a blind spot for a time, there have been some efforts to ameliorate this situation (Jacob, 2017b; Samaranayake, 2020; Wignaraja, Panditaratne, Kannangara, & Hundlani, 2020; Pal, 2021). There has also been some collaborative work between South Asian and Chinese scholars to assess changing dynamics (Ranjan & Changgang, 2021).

Given their experiences with the People’s Republic of China since its formation, most Indian policymakers have long watched warily Chinese attempts to expand their influence in South Asia (Gokhale, 2022a, 2022b; Menon, 2016; Saran, 2022). These early attempts did not amount to much or were unsustainable until China had also built up the economic muscle to go with its political propaganda and diplomacy.

With the launch of the BRI in 2013, any remaining doubts about China’s intention to reshape not just the regional order in South Asia, but the international order itself, have been more or less dispelled (Jacob, 2017a). Subsequent tensions on the disputed India–China boundary only provide added evidence of this Chinese intent.

This said, China is a relatively new player in South Asia compared to other external powers such as the United States, and, until recently, far from being either deeply involved or central to South Asian economies (Xavier, 2019, 2020). For these reasons, even as the number of studies on Chinese involvement in South Asia has grown in recent years, there is also much that needs to be studied. While there are trends in Chinese behaviour and activity in South Asia that are in line with what it displays in other geographies, there are also particularities that deserve greater attention from scholars and policymakers alike. These are the result of both South Asia’s unique features as well as the innovations that the Chinese party-state has responded with.

One of the unique features of South Asia is India's preponderance as a political and economic actor besides its dominant historical and cultural ties to the region. This is quite unlike, say, Southeast Asia, where historically Chinese influence has contended more or less equally with Indian influence. Another is the fact that most of the region has—since the beginning of this century at least—tended to move away from authoritarian rule and has seen regular changes in government. This has both created opportunities as well as complicated bilateral relations for Beijing.

Nevertheless, India's neighbours in South Asia view the BRI as offering them development opportunities that India itself has not been able to offer because of the latter's shortage of capacity and its lack of economic integration with the rest of South Asia. As a result, China is knitting together a new economic order in South Asia through the BRI, in which many countries have more significant economic relationships with China rather than with India. India itself has China as one of its largest trading partners.

Alongside this change in the economic order, there has also been an increasing shift in the political order, where smaller South Asian countries have become more accommodating of Chinese interests. Nepal, for instance, has clamped down on the flow of Tibetan refugees, and its ruling Communist Party of Nepal has close ties with the CPC, with active party-to-party links exemplified by the latter holding training sessions for the former (Jacob, 2020b). Sri Lanka and the Maldives have each at different times been led by China-leaning strongmen who have made economic decisions favouring Chinese parties (Jacob, 2018).

While research on China in South Asia has largely focused on the influence of hard elements such as economics and security, greater attention needs to be paid to the softer aspects of influence. This report attempts to fill this gap using case studies from across

the region, encompassing Nepali students in China, China's approach to the Rohingya crisis that impacts Bangladesh, its cultivation of religious and political elites in Sri Lanka and Nepal, and external messaging and perception management across Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka.

Objectives, structure, and findings

This report is the main outcome of a two-year-long research project on China's influence in South Asia at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP). We began before India-China relations nosedived with the military clash at Galwan, in eastern Ladakh in mid-2020. Our exercise was guided by four main objectives and methodological choices and naturally faced some limitations.

Description to fill the knowledge gap

Our first and main objective was to describe China's engagements with South Asia by undertaking evidence-based assessments of the themes, partners, and tools leveraged by China to do so. As noted in the previous section, China's rise in South Asia is a relatively recent development, and scholarship is still catching up to empirically map this new phenomenon. The picture is relatively clearer on China's economic and security presence in the region, including figures on trade, investments, or military cooperation. These concrete indicators are easier to track, and their centrality may also reflect India's strategic priorities and concerns. But when it comes to the soft dimensions of China's engagement, which are often less visible but just as substantive, the knowledge gap is far wider. We strive to better survey China's presence in the region across different dimensions, beyond the more apparent economic and security domains.

Analysis over evaluation

A second emphasis of our empirical approach is the focus on analysis rather than evaluation. Some literature focuses on China's operations

to export its authoritarian model and undermine democracy (Charon & Jeangène Vilmer, 2021). At the other extreme, other literature portrays a selfless China as an altruistic actor seeking to counter India's hegemonic role with cooperative "win-win" relations based on pure equality (Sangroula, 2018). These contrasting approaches may explain why much of the work of Indian authors tends to focus on the negative impact, while scholars from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka tend to emphasise the positive paradigm. We, therefore, asked contributing authors to focus on producing descriptive studies and not make any prior assumptions about the eventual negative or positive effects of China's engagements with the governments and peoples of these countries. As will be evident to the reader, perceptions of China's "influence" or "presence" in South Asia are not uniform among the authors in this report.

Case studies over quantitative generalisations

There are many approaches to studying China in South Asia. Quantitative methodologies seek to measure the scope and impact of China's relations across South Asia based on hard data. Qualitative methodologies, on the other hand, focus on case studies for a thick description of China's *modus operandi* in one specific sector. Driven by the project's descriptive and analytical objectives, we decided to focus on the latter methodology, inviting scholars to do deep dives into one specific dimension of China's engagement. Our report thus throws *some* light, but it does not comprehensively cover and illuminate all of China's multifaceted engagements in South Asia. The case studies approach somewhat limits our ability to arrive at categorical conclusions about China's intentions and effects across the region, but there is nevertheless enough meat in here for readers seeking an understanding or some sense of a Chinese "strategy" for South Asia.

Build regional capacity through collaboration and comparison

The fourth and final objective of this project was to expand regional research capacity on China. Through various online interactions, we were able to contribute towards building an emerging network of South Asian scholars working on China and its engagements in their respective countries and sectors of expertise.

While the project was hosted at CSEP, in New Delhi, all except one of the authors are from South Asian countries other than India, and at the time of writing, all except two of the contributors were located inside the region. Most are young or emerging scholars. By including only one case study that relates to India, we consciously tried to engage with and learn from voices in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka to balance the traditional India-centric focus that marks much of the study of China in South Asia. Far from being just subjects of great power rivalry in the region, these three countries have significant agency and their own history of dealing with China (Lim & Mukherjee, 2019; Plagemann, 2021). Even the most hawkish Indian policy towards China will have to be cognisant of different perceptions across the region.

Through several workshops, including discussions of draft papers, we also helped build a sense of community and collaboration for scholars to exchange and compare assessments across the region. Additionally, through a series of international workshops, "China's Global Influence: Comparative Cases," scholars from other regions presented their work on China's engagements in Europe (MapInfluencE, 2020), Southeast Asia (Xue, 2022), and South America (Abdenur et al., 2021) and also in the technology space (Hannas & Tatlow, 2021; Wallis et al., 2020) and at the United Nations (Piccone, 2018). This was a way to strengthen regional-global linkages. Scholarship on China in South Asia is comparatively less developed, and so there is scope for much growth as well as to note that there are learnings for other parts of the globe from South Asian experiences.

Limitations

No analysis of China's foreign policy engagements and regional and global intentions can be complete without analysis from South Asia. At the same time, no analysis of China's engagement with South Asia itself can be complete or comprehensive given the complexity of the countries in the region and a diverse extended geography that concentrates over a third of the world's population. Our approach and choice of methodology naturally have their specific limitations, of which four stand out.

First, the choice of contributing authors located in the region was constrained by the limited number of experts on China. There is a significant gap between a small-sized and very senior generation of Sinologists and a new, still emerging but promising generation of South Asian scholars specialising on China.

Second, our project also reflects a limitation of what is methodologically feasible for researchers: there are several media reports (and much policy interest) about China's covert operations in the region, including allegations about disinformation in India or electoral interference in Nepal. This is an important issue, but it would have been unreasonable and maybe even irresponsible to expect scholars to find the evidence necessary to prove this.

Third, regarding the selection of countries, our qualitative methodology forced us to often be opportunistic. For example, we have no case study from the Maldives or Bhutan, in the latter case because China's presence is still very limited. We also left out three other neighbours of India—Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Myanmar—which are part of the greater subcontinent and on whose relations with China there is already some significant work.

Fourth, and most importantly, the choice of sectors is far from comprehensive, leaving out many aspects of China's engagement that deserve further analysis, including, for

example, its para-diplomacy and engagement of sub-national actors. Our case studies also do not always allow a temporal analysis that tracks the rise or decline of China's influence, but they certainly suggest the existence of certain cycles and patterns.

Summary

The report contains eight chapters structured as three sections that focus on the *themes*, *partners*, and *tools* that shape China's engagement in South Asia.

The first section, "Getting a Toehold," assesses two examples of China's initial, probing engagement in two thematic sectors. In Chapter 2, Akhilesh Upadhyay examines China's forays into Nepal's educational sector, assessing how the rising number of Nepali students in China and those who return are facilitating bilateral relations. Upadhyay also examines how China's strict "zero Covid" policy has dented its positive image as an educational destination. In Chapter 3, Shahtaj Mahmud and Kriti Rai review China's novel role as a conflict mediator between Bangladesh and Myanmar, following the Rohingya refugee crisis. Beijing stepped in to build peace between two neighbours in India's periphery, but the authors find that it had limited, if not negligible, impact.

The second section, "Finding Partners," looks at how China is engaging new partners in the region. In Chapter 4, Chulanee Attanayake surveys the role of religion and Beijing's attempts to use Buddhism as a "tool of soft power" in Sri Lanka. The frequency and scope of engagement has been increasing in recent years, in tandem with the growing influence of the monkhood on its politics and public policies. Party-to-party links have also accelerated in the region. Based on primary interviews with Nepali politicians, Aneka Rebecca Rajbhandari and Raunab Singh Khatri analyse in Chapter 5 how the CPC has diversified its engagements with different political parties in Nepal. They show that ideology is no bar in Beijing's attempts

to influence Nepal's domestic affairs. In the case of Sri Lanka, in Chapter 6, Asanga Abeyagonnasekera looks back at the 2015–21 period to assess the CPC's engagement with the Rajapaksa family and their rule, which coincided with China's rapid forays into the Indian Ocean region.

The third section, "Communication Strategies," reviews the narrative and institutional *tools* that China deploys to engage with the region. Chapter 7 by Amish Mulmi surveys China's cultural diplomacy initiatives in Nepal, seeking to reinforce a positive image of the "good neighbour" to the north. His assessment of the Chinese Embassy activities in Kathmandu demonstrates the rapidly growing and diverse range of outreach tools used to shape public narratives about China, including Tibet. In Chapter 8, Ananth Krishnan looks back at the 2020 India-China military confrontation in Ladakh to analyse the emerging patterns of the CPC's external messaging that target Indian audiences on traditional and new media platforms. Krishnan argues that while messaging is still a limited and sometimes unintended consequence of growing national sentiment in China, it will have growing implications for India's China policy.

In the final chapter of this volume, Sanjana Hattotuwa deploys novel methodologies to offer path-breaking insights into how China uses various Facebook accounts in Sri Lanka to propagate its policies and narratives. He argues that such "online operations" mirror earlier offline initiatives to disseminate the CPC's propaganda, and they show high levels of coordination, strategic planning, and execution.

Key trends, patterns, and future research paths

Studying China's growing and evolving engagements in the region, the chapters in this report offer several takeaways about some obvious patterns of Chinese behaviour in South Asia. Five such patterns stand out.

One, India's centrality in the region is a factor that the Chinese emphasise to drive their engagement with other governments. This engagement shows both expected and unexpected patterns of behaviour. While Pakistan is not a case study in this work, it should be obvious that the fact that India is generally seen as a common adversary allows China to promote ties with Pakistan using conventional hard security and economic methods. Using this as a benchmark allows us to see more easily the innovation that China brings to the rest of South Asia in terms of the range of its approaches.

In each of the three smaller countries examined in this work—Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—India is seen as too big to ignore or to even anger beyond a threshold, but each country has a unique equation with New Delhi based on historical and cultural factors and a different degree of closeness in bilateral ties. Beijing is cognisant of these differences in degree as well as of both the limits of India's influence in these countries and of the range of tolerance for New Delhi's demands in their capitals. India's overbearing nature—as commonly perceived by ordinary Nepalis and Sri Lankans—allows China to insinuate itself into closer ties with governments and ruling elites in Nepal and Sri Lanka.

In Bangladesh, meanwhile, where the ruling party is seen as traditionally aligned with India, the Chinese have had to resort to an unusual and riskier tactic to find a footing in popular and elite perception by trying to "help" Dhaka in dealing with the Rohingya crisis spilling over from Myanmar. Beijing's intention, thus, is to find approaches and offer inducements and incentives that allow it to balance better against New Delhi. But this is not always easy as the case study from Bangladesh shows. It can also lead to new complications as suggested by the two case studies from Nepal of students with exposure to China and the latter's cultural diplomacy.

Two, China pays careful attention to language and discourse, to “set the mood” as it were, in bilateral ties. “China’s Tibet” is an important placeholder in China’s relations with Nepal and other South Asian countries as is the “one China policy,” for example. It is not that the Chinese do not know that the former is an illegitimate claim that undermines historical and cultural linkages between South Asian regions and Tibet or that the latter is again a historically suspect claim. But it is precisely these weaknesses that make it imperative in the CPC’s worldview to stress and push such claims all the more loudly and visibly. Over time, the belief is that sheer volume and persistence will sediment these claims as normal and unexceptional among foreign audiences, including those in South Asia.

Three, China is adept at employing both traditional and new media in spreading its message. The case study from India shows the depth and sophistication of China’s approaches, even in what has traditionally been a hostile environment. China has invested much in its international radio and television services as well as in expanding its media presence across geographies. This investment is not simply monetary, which might see fluctuations over time, but also includes cultural and human investment in the form of language specialisations, support for its researchers to conduct fieldwork, and large embassies that include not just ministry of foreign affairs personnel, but also CPC officials and scholars embedded in critical positions, so as to promote knowledge of and exposure to the outside world.

Some of these approaches might become difficult over time with increasing concerns about Chinese intentions and popular hostility. Indeed, print and other traditional forms of media can be restricted by multiple means by governments. However, regulating disinformation via social media is an entirely different kettle of fish for governments, especially as the final case study in this volume, on China’s instrumentalisation of Facebook in Sri Lanka for propaganda purposes, shows.

Essentially, it should be clear that China has a wide spectrum of activities in its quiver, ranging from traditional diplomatic “charm offensives” in the form of scholarships and exchange programmes for students to targeted fellowships and organised visits for particular individuals and institutions, and from traditional media outreach via print and radio and television waves to using the internet and social media to amplify its outreach. While China’s tools and methods are multiple, its objectives and messages are always on point—to sustain the CPC in power using foreign policy and influence in foreign capitals to protect its interests—control over Tibet, claims over Taiwan, and dislodging the United States as the global hegemon and regional powers like India from positions of influence. To this end, China employs a mix of both fact and fiction. While the greater volume and intensity it can deploy is not in doubt, it is another matter, however, to assume that China’s propaganda efforts, its disinformation campaigns, or its interventions in elite politics in other countries are always successful.

This said, complete success might not be as important an objective for the Chinese at this early stage of their intervention in South Asia as establishing a presence and being counted as a player in regional capitals—spaces that, from Beijing’s perspective, have been dominated for too long by only India or the United States.

Four, while it is easy to observe that China can often overreach and suffer blowback—consider the common impression that it has backed one or the other political formation in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, or the Maldives or that it simply does not deliver as promised—it is important to note that China learns from its mistakes. It is quick to adapt and to change course as well as methods. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the contretemps over Hambantota led to the replacement of a regular ambassador from China’s diplomatic corps with one from the CPC’s UFWD (Cheng Xueyuan), who not just engaged in damage control, as a traditional diplomat is wont to do, but attempted assiduously to cultivate Maithripala Sirisena,

Mahinda Rajapaksa's successor as president, and to raise China's profile even further in that country. UFWD ambassadors—with their greater weight in the political system back home than regular ministry of foreign affairs ambassadors—have also served in Bangladesh (Zhang Zuo, Li Jiming) and Pakistan (Nong Rong), perhaps with similar briefs to resolve crises and to push the envelope for their country still further.

Five, China is increasingly becoming experienced and comfortable with engaging with South Asia's many and diverse political traditions and systems—including the instabilities and upheavals that plague them. It is also becoming savvier about social and ethnic diversities in the region as is evident from its social media outreach and investments in multiple languages and reaching out to various ethnic and religious minorities—Muslims and Tamils in Sri Lanka and Buddhists in Bangladesh, for example. While the CPC's belief in the right of countries to “independently choose social systems and development paths” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023) is essentially a criticism of Western-style democracy and electoral politics, it remains willing to engage with the democracies of South Asian

countries through ties with various political formations—both the ruling party and the opposition—even as it tries to promote its own political system whether overtly, through “Xi Jinping Thought” study sessions for political parties in the region, or covertly, through social media propaganda. We should expect China to deploy ever greater resources to influence and shape political, economic, social, and media spaces; legislative agenda; regulatory environments; and above all, civil society in South Asia.

This study is hopefully only the beginning of a trend of longer-duration and more in-depth studies of Chinese activism in South Asia. China's tasks in the South Asian countries that have been examined in this work are only getting more complicated. For example, perceptions in Sri Lanka following the country's debt default, and China's reluctance to help finalise an International Monetary Fund assistance programme, or popular perceptions in Pakistan that is reeling under an economic crisis despite its great faith in Chinese assistance deserve more granular analyses. China's thinking, its responses, and the instruments that it will deploy in response should form part of a useful and important research agenda for the future.

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Getting a Toehold

02

Nepali Students in China: A Source of Soft Power for Beijing?

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Abstract

With growing momentum in Nepal-China diplomatic ties, it is important to look at the scholastic exchanges through history, notwithstanding the political turmoil of the Tibet-China Wars, harsh weather conditions in the Himalayas, and China's 'closed-door policy'. Educational ties waxed and waned until the Cultural Revolution, which led to the establishment of China as a republic in 1949. The 1950s saw Nepalis starting formal education not only in Beijing but also elsewhere in the vast Chinese geography. Initially, many Nepali students pursued science, technology, engineering and mathematics and especially medicine. With increased Chinese government scholarships available to Nepalis and some institutions also teaching in English, there was a steady rise in the number of Nepalis heading to China. By 2019, China was the fifth most sought-after destination for Nepali students while English speaking countries and India have historically been major destinations for them. In 2020, China's zero-Covid policy forced thousands of Nepalis to pursue online classes from home, which led to a serious compromise of their academic and career pursuits. This chapter traces the chronology of educational exchanges between Nepal and China, explores the volume of Nepali students there and why it has grown over the years.

Recommended citation:

Upadhyay, A. (2023). Nepali Students in China: A Source of Soft Power for Beijing?. In Xavier, C. & Jacob, J. T. (Eds). *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools* (pp. 15-26). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/I8u5RJN>

Introduction

The reach of Beijing's soft power in Nepal can be explored by tracing the evolution of educational ties between the two countries. From a handful of students on government scholarships in the 1960s and a hiatus during the Cultural Revolution, the number of Nepali students in China steadily increased after 1978.

After the Deng era, two milestones bolstered China's attractiveness as a major education destination for young Nepalis. In 2008, the year Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics, Kathmandu saw large numbers of pro-Tibet protests—probably more than in other parts of the world combined—in terms of the frequency of the protests.¹ It was a wake-up call for Beijing. China began engaging with Kathmandu on multiple fronts. This was also the year that Nepal became a democratic republic. China discarded its traditional approach of treating Nepal's monarchy as the centre of political power. This marked the beginning of the cultivation of intimate relationships between the political parties of both countries, most notably between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the two leading communist parties of Nepal—the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre).

In 2017, Nepal became a signatory to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as part of which China offered more scholarships for Nepalis. China now views young returnees—on scholarships as well as self-funded programmes—from its modern universities and institutions as ambassadors to expand its footprint in the geopolitical neighbourhood. Additionally, China has also demonstrated that it has the resources to challenge the traditional influence of India and western democracies on Nepal's administration and public life. By all accounts, China will continue to be a major destination for Nepali students in the years to come. However, for the foreseeable future,

India and English-speaking democracies (Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States) remain the leading destinations for Nepali students because of cultural and linguistic familiarities as well as the immigration opportunities they offer.

Methodology

To trace the evolution of Nepal's educational ties with China, one of the best empirical approaches would be to analyse official figures on Nepali students in China over the years, but they are scant and sketchy. As a result, my methodology includes drawing from books, academic and research papers, websites, and a wide range of interviews.

I interviewed 32 students, past and present, from various age groups, backgrounds, and disciplines. Most medical students, for example, were between 17 to 19 years of age, either in their final year or had taken a gap year due to the Covid pandemic, which had kept them out of China. Two of the medical students interviewed had studied in China in the 1960s during the Cultural Revolution.

In recent years, some students have been on Confucius scholarships, studying 'Chinese as a Second Language' (non-degree courses) for five years so that they can become Chinese-language teachers in Nepal. A mid-career Nepali government officer was enrolled in a master's programme in Public Policy (2017–2018) at Peking University.

Several interviewees, mostly enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects (aged 19–23 years), suffered from the discontinuity of stipends and were interviewed through WeChat groups for Nepali students. Around 10 of the students interviewed felt they were victims of unclear application processes and university requirements. Four undergraduate students, who were enrolled in social science courses, were self-sponsored and later received

¹ As reported by a senior officer in Nepal Police in an interview.

scholarships, either from the university to cover tuition fees or through city scholarships. The latter covered tuition fees but also offered an 'extra amount'.

There were six interviews with officials, three of them Chinese. A Nepali academic based in China offered important insights that filled in some gaps. Several rounds of extensive interviews were conducted with Aneka Rajbhandari, a master's student in Chinese politics at Renmin University in Beijing and now a member of 'The Araniko Project', which provides commentary and analyses on current events related to China with a focus on Nepal and South Asia.

China's soft power through education can be best understood by exploring the trends in the numbers. How many Nepali students have travelled to China since 1978 and which cities and provinces have been their major destinations? However, the minimal and almost non-existent documentation on the part of the Nepali government and vague explanations on the part of the Chinese government makes the task difficult. Though we came across many Nepalis who knew someone studying in China during the interviews, no accurate public records of a) how many students are currently studying there and where, b) the ratio of students on scholarships versus self-funded programmes, and c) the overall breakdown of their disciplines was found. China annually releases a "Statistics of International Students" notice that enumerates the total number of international students and provides further information on students from the top 15 countries that send students to China; Nepal is not one of them. Among countries that made it to the top 15 in 2017 from South Asia were Pakistan and India, with 18,626 and 18,717 students respectively. (Ministry of Education, 2016).

The most recent figures released by the Chinese government put the total number of foreign students in Higher Education Institutions in China as of 2019 at 1,72,571, with 1,40,637 being graduates (Ministry

of Education, 2019). According to a Nepal Embassy official in Beijing, finding the exact number and location of students is "tricky" because the numbers change constantly (for example, when a student graduates and returns home and the embassy is not informed, as there is no mandatory provision for reporting this). Given the lack of accurate figures, this chapter focuses on trends and dynamics: the geopolitical, cultural, and educational background of Nepali students in China and what has been observed over the years in the media, official communique, scholarly journals, and personal interviews conducted with Nepali and Chinese officials and Nepali students who studied in China.

Education as an enabler of China-Nepal ties

Given Nepal's relatively small population of less than nine million, poor literacy, and the Rana rulers' reluctance to educate the population, only the elite got to pursue higher education during their more than a century of rule. Under the Rana regime, until 1951, Nepalis rarely received formal education and the literacy rate was under 5%. After the collapse of the regime, when American aid allowed the public education system to expand rapidly, Nepali students also began travelling to China on Chinese government scholarships (Whelpton, 2005). According to Dong and Chapman (2008), the Chinese government started providing scholarships to international students in 1956 and provided financing to cover the daily expenses of only 50 recipients from around the world. In the same year, China offered 30 seats in self-financed courses for students from western countries but this was met with little interest. By 1960, this number increased to approximately 2,000 international students from 40 countries (Dong & Chapman, 2008).

In 1966, Mao Zedong launched the infamous Cultural Revolution. A Nepali medical student then, interviewed for this chapter, said he was sent home from his university based in a major Chinese city during that period and

was recalled after the revolution. Nepal sent very few students to China during that period, and those who went did so on government scholarships. “Those were ‘cold times’ in Nepal-China ties and the Nepali students who were sent home were not sure when and if they would be invited back to complete their studies,” said another China returnee, now a senior doctor in Kathmandu.

When Deng Xiaoping came to power, China made dramatic changes in its foreign policy in an attempt to undo the damage of the Cultural Revolution. It also worked at re-building its relationship with its neighbours. This meant opening its doors to foreign students. In 1980, 52 academic majors in 42 Chinese higher institutions were deemed eligible to receive international students. By 1986, the number had grown to 300 majors in 82 higher institutions (Dong and Chapman, 2008). Since then, Nepal has seen a steady increase in the number of students looking to China as a viable option for higher education.

The 1980s saw a rapid growth of international student enrolment in China. By 1986, 300 majors in 82 higher institutions had already been approved for receiving international students (Dong & Chapman, 2008). From that period onwards, there was a marked increase in China’s engagement with Nepal on various fronts. A major factor behind China’s strong overtures was its security concern regarding Tibet—its soft underbelly bordering Nepal. In the runup to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, Nepal saw a sharp increase in pro-Tibet protests. Chinese surveillance and influence in Kathmandu grew as the Nepali police continued to receive funding and orders to quell pro-Tibet activities in Kathmandu (The Economist, 2012).

The year 2017 was another turning point. Nepal officially joined the BRI, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s ambitious project to reconfigure infrastructure and trade routes to connect Asia,

Europe, and Africa. This gave Nepalis access to more Chinese Government Scholarships, such as those under the Silk Road Programme. Thereafter, one can witness a steady increase in the number of Nepali students opting to study in China, reaching more than 6,400 in 2018 (Nepali Times, 2019)². The students are enrolled in a wide variety of disciplines, from STEM to Chinese-language courses, Chinese politics, and international economy.

Today, Nepalis see the relationship between the two countries as that of an ever-growing economy—now the world’s second largest—and a small neighbour who has faced constant economic struggles. As much was conveyed in 2018 by a senior CPC official, who urged a group of visiting Asian journalists to see his country as a civilization-state and not as a nation-state. He suggested that they read Martin Jacques’ *When China Rules the World*, “though we don’t agree with everything in the book.”³ The CPC official wanted the journalists to carry home a strong message: China’s rise as a world power was inevitable, and Asian societies would do well to study and appreciate the long history of their civilizational ties with China.

Nepali students can currently apply to more than 100 universities across China, most of which are in Beijing (19), followed by the coastal Jiangsu and Guangdong provinces and Shanghai, while only one university is located in the north-western province of Xinjiang, which mostly receives foreign students from Central Asia. Significantly, no academic institution from Tibet has been enlisted on the Chinese Embassy website thus far. Though in low numbers, Nepali students have been enrolled in universities across China, from Heilongjiang and Xilin provinces in the northeast to Guangdong province and Hong Kong in the southeast to Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in the southwest and the central province of Jiangsu (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Nepal, 2004a).

² The number of Nepali students in the US was 13, 270 in 2019. (US Embassy in Nepal, 2018).

³ The author was part of the Asian journalists’ delegation at the CPC headquarters in July 2018.

Why Nepali students choose China: cost of attendance, proximity, and scholarships

The average tuition fee of a Chinese university classified as ‘affordable’ ranges from RMB 5,000 (CUCAS, n.d.a) to RMB 35,000 per year (around US\$ 750 to US\$ 5,250). The fees differ according to the level of education and subject areas. In Ningbo University (Zhejiang province, eastern China), the average tuition fee for a first-year undergraduate programme ranges from RMB 18,000 to RMB 25,000 per year (around US\$ 2,700 to US\$ 3,750). However, an MBA programme at the same university costs RMB 32,500 per year (around US\$ 4,800) (CUCAS, n.d.b.). Similarly, a master’s programme at Yunnan University costs between RMB 8,000 to RMB 12,000 per year (around US\$ 1,200 to US\$ 1,800) (CUCAS, n.d.b.). On the other hand, universities classified as top-tier in the standout urban hubs cost upwards of RMB 50,000 per year (around US\$ 7,500). For example, an MBA from Fudan University in Shanghai costs RMB 165,300 per year (around US\$ 25,000) (Fudan University, n.d.). The same programme at Tsinghua University in Beijing costs RMB 198,000 per year (around US\$ 30,000) (Tsinghua School of Economics and Management, n.d.).

To put this in perspective, 1 RMB is close to 19 Nepali rupees (NRs) or 12 Indian rupees and the gross salary range for a typical Nepali household is between NRs 16,000–54,000 per month or RMB 900–2,900/US\$ 126–430 (CEIC, n.d.). Given these statistics, one can infer that only middle-class and upper-middle-class Nepalis can afford self-financed programmes in Chinese universities. Among the self-financed students who were interviewed, many agreed that Chinese universities were far more affordable than studying in countries such as Australia and the United States and that the fees could be

covered with their family income and savings.⁴ An obvious reason why Nepali medical students—among the largest segments of Nepalis enrolled in Chinese universities—choose China is affordability. A five-and-a-half-year MBBS course in Nepal costs around US\$ 68,000 (NRs 87 lakh) (RMC, a) while in China, a six-year programme costs only around US\$ 31,000 (NRs 39 lakh) (RMC, b).

Low-income households, on the other hand, rely solely on scholarships, and they are willing to travel to remote regions and little-known universities to access them. Some students even said that they had enrolled in programmes arbitrarily, in relatively backward regions, because they had received generous scholarships. Many of these students were looking to emigrate in search of better lives and use China as a transit point. As a significant share of Nepali students rely on Chinese scholarships to secure a better life, Nepalis will remain dependent on China for the foreseeable future.

However, China does not provide permanent residency easily. Only 1,576 permanent residency permits were granted in 2006 (The Economist, 2020). Unsurprisingly, Nepalis studying in China do not consider it their end goal. Instead, they opt for opportunities in high-income countries, such as Australia, which has a sizable Nepali population and offers higher wages and far better access to education for their children and a better quality of life. An interviewee said that some of his Nepali classmates who have managed to find jobs in Beijing could not afford international schools for their children and “the best they could afford are far less expensive Pakistani schools.”⁵

Since Nepal and China are neighbouring countries, travelling between them is fairly easy and affordable. An undergraduate interviewee said that they would need to save for just two to three months to be able to afford a round-trip

⁴ After Australia, the leading destinations for Nepali students are Japan, Cyprus, China, Canada, United States, New Zealand, South Korea, and UAE, with the numbers fluctuating from year to year.

⁵ The interviewee pursued their masters in China.

ticket. This helped them maintain connections with their family, community, and culture.

There was a consensus among the students interviewed that the scholarships provided by the Chinese government were what attracted them most. In 2004, the CGS offered 6 undergraduate seats and 14 postgraduate seats to Nepali students. There were 45 Chinese government scholarships for Nepali students in the 2007/2008 academic year, with the majors being School of Basic and Biomedical Sciences, electronics, construction, and education (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal, 2007a).

According to the Nepal government, China currently provides scholarships annually for Nepalis “not exceeding 100 students” (MFA, n.d.). A student explained that this number may look smaller than expected as CGSs are not the only scholarships provided by the Chinese government. Other scholarships include the Confucius Institute Scholarship and South-South Cooperation Scholarship depending on the type of programme. Still others start as self-financed students and later (after a semester or a year) apply for scholarships at the university or with the city government, which then covers a portion of their costs if not all.

Meanwhile, one interviewee claimed that in Nepal's case, “most scholarships” are awarded to those within the intimate network of Nepal's communist parties—mostly the two leading communist parties, CPN-UML and CPN-MC. The interviewee also claimed that the recipients, often the kin of senior communist leaders, receive the most lucrative scholarships, up to RMB 12,000 per month.⁶ These scholarships are neither publicised nor documented. This in part explains the strong party-to-party relationships between the CPC and Nepal's communist parties.

One such programme that has admitted many Nepalis is “a full scholarship set up by China's

Ministry of Education to support prestigious Chinese universities to recruit outstanding international students for graduate studies in China” (Myanmar Study Abroad, n.d.). The BRI Scholarship is available to students from the 146 member countries (Green Finance & Development Center, n.d.). The Economist (2019a) mentioned how the number of foreign students in China grew fourfold while those from BRI countries expanded eightfold between 2004–16: “In 2012, the year before BRI was launched, students from those countries on Chinese government scholarships were less than 53% of the total number of recipients. By 2016 they made up 61%. China says it reserves 10,000 of its scholarships every year for students from BRI countries.”

The scholarship for BRI countries, also marketed as the Silk Road Programme by provinces in China, is affiliated with many universities. The eligibility criteria for each of these universities are different. Most scholarships offered by the Chinese government—the BRI, Ministry of Commerce, and Jiangxi Provincial Government Scholarships—have an upper age limit ranging from 25 years to 40 years and require the applicants to be in “good health condition.” (Wuhan University, 2022) Here, we begin to understand that China looks to educate a younger, more productive cohort of Nepalis, perhaps also in the hope that they are a long-term investment.

“In countries such as Britain, Australia and America, foreign students are welcomed mostly because universities can make more money out of them than out of locals,” argues The Economist (2019a). “In China, it is the opposite. Foreign students enjoy big subsidies. Often, they are more generously treated than local students” (The Economist, 2019a). In 2020, there was a brief uproar on Weibo, a Chinese microblogging platform, when a Nepali student received RMB 13,000 (approximately US\$ 1,955) as a monthly stipend. A Weibo user posted, “This is a

⁶ The interviewee is a China returnee currently working in a major media outlet in Nepal.

letter of admission from a Chinese university awarded to a Nepalese student. What do you think of this special treatment?” One of the comments on the post stated, “Subsidies (scholarships) for foreign students should be completely cancelled and funds should be spent on Chinese students instead.” A second Weibo user pointed out that “China has 600 million people earning less than 1,000 RMB per month, which means less than 12,000 RMB per year. China gives Nepalese students 13,000 RMB per month.” (Weibo, 2020)⁷

The Chinese government is perhaps looking at these scholarships not only as an investment in fostering friendly relationships with other countries but also as an investment in its economy—as a means of ensuring a steady flow of productive and healthy youth into their universities and potentially also into its workforce, at least in the short- and medium-term. By offering substantial scholarships, China follows in the footsteps of India, the West, Japan, and the Gulf countries, which have attempted to establish themselves as cultural and educational hubs for Nepalis. However, unlike the aforementioned countries, China has gone a step further in establishing soft power through higher education. It is looking to not only buy influence but also construct a Sino-centric world. Xi Jinping’s regime attempts to re-establish China as a “civilization-state” and educational exchanges are designed to legitimise the CPC’s historico-cultural narratives (Pan & Joe, 2014).

Obstacles: language barrier and the pandemic effect

Many of the scholarships require candidates to meet certain Chinese-language proficiency levels or take a language course before their programmes commence. Many of these programmes, especially master’s courses, require a high level of language proficiency. Most of the universities designated for scholarships offer courses only in Mandarin. On the other hand, the Chinese Government

Scholarship-Great Wall Program, funded by UNESCO, includes degrees that are fully in English and, hence, do not have a language requirement. By insisting on language proficiency, the government of China limits scholarship opportunities to foreigners. This means that students who do not have any background in or experience in learning Chinese do not have access to the scholarships. In doing so, China discourages a move toward diversifying its society.

For Nepali students, who can potentially qualify for Indian or western universities that offer English-medium studies, studying in China can be an ordeal, primarily because of the linguistic barrier in the classroom and outside the campus. Navigating provincial cities can be a nightmare without fluency in local dialects. Inside the classroom, one needs an even greater proficiency in Mandarin to keep up with fellow Chinese students, especially in master’s and PhD programmes in the social sciences and humanities, which call for both sound understanding and nuanced expression—both in verbal participation in the classroom and in written papers. Competitive Chinese universities provide conditional offers to international students: they first need to become proficient in Mandarin to get a confirmation of enrolment. A student currently in a university in Beijing found herself wondering even before she arrived in the Chinese capital, whether it was worth the risk, as even after learning Mandarin for two years, she could still be denied entry into the core humanities programme of her choice.

Despite all the facilities Chinese universities offer, this in part explains why another immediate neighbour, India, is still the number one destination for Nepali students. Additionally, India does not require a student visa, offers courses in English, and Nepalis are far more comfortable with Indo-Nepali cultural and linguistic similarities. Close to 65,000 Nepalis were enrolled in India in 2018, according to the All-India Survey on Higher Education carried out by the Indian

⁷ The information from the post and comments have been translated by Aneka Rebecca Rajbhandari.

government (New Business Age, 2020). This is 27% of the total foreign students in India for the year, making Nepalis the largest bloc of foreign students. The figure is 10 times the number of Nepali students in China in the following year. (*Xinhua*, 2019)

If a Nepali citizen wants to prepare for studies in China, access to Mandarin classes is limited, though there are Confucius Centres across Nepal that are funded by the Chinese government. The Confucius Institute at two of Nepal's leading universities, Kathmandu University and Tribhuvan University, are high-level Chinese language and culture institutions, cooperatively established by Hebei University of Economics and Business and Kathmandu University. They offer short-term vocational courses in Nepal. Each year, they train 40 Nepali tourism professionals in a six-month Chinese-language course. The agreement, which came into effect in 2018, will only remain valid for five years. China has also sent many language teachers to Kathmandu, with many schools now adopting Mandarin as one of their required courses, though according to government regulations, schools are not allowed to make any foreign language other than English mandatory (Zhang, 2019). Still, many schools have chosen to ignore this as China offers to pay the salaries of Chinese-language teachers. A small number of private schools are now paying for these teachers, some of whom are Nepalis (PTI, Kathmandu, 2019).

According to the former Indian ambassador to Nepal, Ranjit Rae (2021), China has established 26 'China Study Centres' across Nepal, aimed at strengthening cultural and educational interactions. According to Rae, many Nepali students study in Chinese universities, and there is a steady exchange of delegations and study visits between the two countries (Rae, 2021). In recent years, Confucius Centres have been dismissed for being propaganda machines of the CPC. China has now opened China Cultural Centres (CCCs) around the world. In 2015, the most recent year for which

data are available, the Culture Ministry spent 360 million RMB (US\$ 57 million) on these CCCs (The Economist, 2019b). The CCC in Nepal is "still in the stage of preparatory work and will be inaugurated soon" according to their website (China Cultural Center, 2015).

Students reported that some universities in China do not clearly state their eligibility requirements regarding language proficiency and entrance exams. International students are currently attending online classes while their Chinese counterparts are at university. International students who are new to the language and culture are often caught off-guard by impromptu class announcements, even though the classes are broadcast live or are recorded, said a student. The linguistic and cultural barrier also affects the admission process. Some students shared that they had to change their programmes after their first year of the Chinese-language course. A student who wanted to study psychology at a Beijing university eventually had to settle for international relations. Studying psychology required a higher level of mathematics (equivalent to the mathematics classes required to graduate with an engineering degree), and the student claimed she was not made aware of this.

Since the first COVID-19 cases broke out in Wuhan, over half a million international students from 196 countries have been sent home (Khadka, 2021).⁸ The Nepali government sent in an aircraft to retrieve nearly 180 Nepalis in February 2020. This was a month before the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The swift action by the Nepali government was praised widely by the public, but the students who were aboard the flight were unable to return and resume classes in person for more than two years. An IT student at a university in Wuhan said he would graduate while still in Kathmandu and had given up on the idea of any Chinese exposure altogether—a factor that had primarily driven him away from a similar programme in Australia four years ago.

⁸ In the US, the number of international students dropped from 1,075,496 to 914,095 between the academic years of 2019/20 to 2020/21. (Open doors, 2021).

While the world adjusted to a new sense of normalcy, holding in-person events, classes, and even graduation ceremonies, China's strict zero-COVID policy left no room for foreign students to return to campus life and experience the cultural immersion that they had expected out of their programmes in China. Many were also deprived of invaluable opportunities upon graduation. (Chitrakar, 2021)

Students enrolled in humanities programmes mentioned a lack of engagement after being outside the campus for more than two years. STEM students, who require a high degree of in-person experience and mentorship, seem to be the most aggrieved. They are unsure how they will be able to sit for their practical tests or if they will be able to do so at all. This cohort seemed most worried about their long-term career prospects.

Trapped in Nepal, medical and engineering students were not able to secure internship opportunities, initially due to the pandemic, and because the Nepali government refused to provide them with an alternative career path without completing their internships (Sangroula, 2020). While no official explanation has been given, the interviewed students think that it may be because of the scarcity of internship positions and a preference for students who studied in Nepal. Additionally, those who study in China need to go through a tedious academic equivalency process.

Many of these students also saw their stipends discontinued abruptly in mid-2020. While they have been promised that the accumulated amount will be paid once they return to China, they juggled jobs in Nepal and online classes in China. Unsurprisingly, this has forced some to drop out of their programmes altogether while others have opted for a gap year. However, taking a gap year is not an ideal situation, as the students risk losing their scholarships. The CGS covers a fixed period of five years (one year for the Chinese language course and four years for the degree), and when students on scholarships take time off, it means that they will be required to fund the gap year themselves.

Numerous WeChat groups (with a capacity of 500 students per group), created by the Embassy of Nepal in Beijing to communicate COVID-19 evacuation processes in 2020, are now being used to share various signed petition campaigns and to organise protests. These issues were also raised by the Foreign Minister of Nepal, Narayan Khadka, to the Chinese leadership when China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, visited Nepal in March 2022. Wang assured that the return of Nepali students to China was one of his government's immediate priorities and agreed to start the process at the earliest (Giri, 2022). It is still unclear what Beijing will do to address the concerns. In her interview in April 2022, the Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi, said that the foreign ministries of the two countries were working on plans to ensure the students' return to their universities. However, she also said that to prevent the spread of the pandemic, the Nepali side had "unilaterally" announced the suspension of international flights with most countries, which led to the suspension of direct flights between Nepal and China (Ghimire, 2022). On July 6, 2022, the ambassador said, "The Chinese side has promptly reviewed and approved the application of the first batch of Nepali students to return to universities in China. Some students have already arrived in China to continue their studies" (Hou, 2022).

Conclusion: a picture with mixed messages

This chapter explores the rise of Chinese influence, often described as soft power, through enhanced educational ties with Nepal. While only a handful of elite Nepali students were enrolled in Chinese institutions until the 1960s, the number steadily picked up after Deng Xiaoping came to power and China worked at re-building partnerships with its neighbours. Nepali students can currently apply to more than 100 universities across China in both self-funded and scholarship programmes. Between 2004 and 2016, the number of foreign students in China grew fourfold while those from BRI countries expanded eightfold. In

2016, China saw a total of 40,000 international students, marking a 35 percent increase from 2012 – 5,160 of those were Nepali students, out of whom 733 studied in China for less than six months and 4,427 students studied for more than six months (ChinaPower, 2016). The Chinese government is perhaps looking at these scholarships not only as an investment in friendly relationships but also in its economy over the short- and medium-term. These students are also seen as future leaders who will help China establish strong connections with Nepal's academia and institutions. By offering substantial opportunities to Nepalis, China follows in the footsteps of India, the West, Japan, and the Gulf countries who are attempting to establish themselves as cultural and educational hubs for Nepalis.

Even so, the message from Nepali students returning from China is mixed. Most of the students interviewed seemed happy with their choice and the exposure they had received in China (Zuo, 2022). Some students had carried on with master's programmes in China after completing their undergraduate studies, while medical students had come back to establish successful careers in Nepal (Kharel, 2013). However, there are reports of students applying to China after failing their MBBS entrance exam to get into medical colleges in Nepal. A student suggested that the reason behind the "consistently weak performance" by Nepali

students who had graduated from Chinese medical schools is because of Nepal's systemic laxity for students seeking to study abroad, particularly in China.

A parallel can be drawn between the current situation of Nepali students who have been pushed out of China due to the zero-COVID policy and those who were sent back to Nepal during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. The ebb and flow of these movements offer a metaphor for the Nepal-China relationship at large: though there have been many problems along the way, ties have evolved and have remained fairly stable. In keeping with Nepal's growing relationship with China and the latter's rise as a world power, there has been a significant increase in the number of Nepali students in China after the Cultural Revolution. After 1978, as China opened itself to the world and witnessed unprecedented economic growth, its doors were flung open to foreign students. This growth and renewed Chinese sensitivities over Tibet have been decisive in shaping China's growing engagement with Nepal. This has also meant a strong emphasis on people-to-people ties and China opening its doors to Nepali students. China now views the young returnees from its modern universities and cities as new ambassadors poised to help expand its footprint in the geopolitical neighbourhood.

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03

China's Role in Conflict Mediation: A Case Study of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Since 2012, when Xi Jinping became general secretary of the Communist Party of China, China's mediation tactics have moved in a different direction. In 2017, as violence swept across Rakhine State in Myanmar, there was an influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh, placing enormous constraints on the developing country. China has maintained friendly relations with Myanmar, made investments in both Myanmar and Bangladesh via projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, and overseen two failed repatriation processes to send Rohingyas back to Myanmar. This raises the question of whether China, being an emerging global superpower, intends to preserve peace and stability or whether its actions reflect a salami-slicing strategy to expand its sphere of influence across the world. Given the uncertainty of the repatriation of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, this chapter analyses China's role as a mediator in the crisis and its implications.

The authors thank Nitika Nayar and Shruti Jargad for developing the timeline, "China's Mediation Role between Myanmar and Bangladesh."

Recommended citation:

Mahmud, S. & Rai, K. (2023). China's Role in Conflict Mediation: A Case Study of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh. In Xavier, C. & Jacob, J. T. (Eds). *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools* (pp. 27-43). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/rlagwwy>

Introduction

In August 2017, the Myanmar military-led brutal attacks against the Rohingya community in Rakhine State resulted in the deaths of over 24,000 Rohingya Muslims (Habib, 2019), mass destruction of their villages, and the fleeing of approximately 742,000 Rohingyas to neighbouring Bangladesh (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019a). A United Nations (UN) fact-finding mission reported serious human rights and international humanitarian law violations and recommended investigations of senior military personnel for crimes against humanity, genocide, and war crimes (UNHRC, 2018a). Today, Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar region is host to some of the world's largest and most densely populated refugee camps.

In September 2018, the UN Human Rights Council passed a motion to prepare a panel to investigate the possible genocide taking place in the state of Rakhine. However, this was met by strong opposition from China, with support from the Philippines and Burundi, whereas more than 100 countries were in favour (Routray, 2018).

The same year, in a conversation with Bangladesh's foreign minister, Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, and his counterpart from Myanmar, Kyaw Tint Swe, China's state councillor, Wang Yi, was quoted as saying, "The Rakhine state issue is in essence, an issue between Myanmar and Bangladesh. China does not approve of complicating, expanding, or internationalising this issue. China hopes that the two countries can find a resolution via talks, and China would be willing to continue providing a platform for this communication" (Reuters, 2018). China's then-deputy UN ambassador, Wu Haitao, also publicly reiterated the need for the international community "to view the difficulties and challenges confronting the government of Myanmar through objective optics, exercise patience, and provide support and help" (Reuters, 2018). He also added that, "all parties should work constructively to help reinforce this momentum, de-escalate the situation and

alleviate the humanitarian conditions step-by-step" (Gao, 2017).

This chapter covers how China played the role of mediator between Myanmar and Bangladesh, despite having a non-interference policy, and explores the prospect of China playing a positive role in the Rohingya repatriation process in the near future.

Bangladeshi context of the Rohingya crisis

The massive influx of refugees in 2017 was not the first time Bangladesh witnessed such an event. Bangladesh has been housing Rohingyas facing persecution and violence in Rakhine since 1977. More than 2,00,000 Rohingyas made their way into Bangladesh between 1977 and 1978 (Faye, 2021). Further, in the early 1990s, about a quarter of a million Rohingyas fled to the neighbouring lands of Bangladesh when military presence in Rakhine increased, bringing with it forced labour, rape, and torture (Faye, 2021).

Ever since the Rohingya started fleeing from the crimes against humanity in Rakhine, Bangladesh has kept its borders open to fleeing Rohingya refugees, which is regarded as a sign of the country's goodwill. With international support, Bangladesh has improved and expanded its existing refugee camps, negotiated with the Myanmar government, and is currently vaccinating children as well as registering the Rohingya population.

Since late 2020, Bangladesh has relocated around 20,000 Rohingya refugees to Bhashan Char and plans to move roughly 1,00,000 to the newly emerged silt island (Human Rights Watch, 2021), a solution intended to address the overcrowding in mainland camps in Cox's Bazar. Though Bangladesh has been receiving international aid for the upkeep of these refugees, the pressure on the land has been significant (Kumar, 2021). Amid criticism, the rest of the world must take notice that Bangladesh has single-handedly managed the crisis, with no guaranteed solution in sight.

Bangladesh is strongly opposed to the idea of integrating the Rohingya into its population. Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen reiterated this view in 2021 when he responded to the World Bank's proposition for integrating Rohingyas into Bangladesh, "We took a very strong stance. We didn't like it and opposed it strongly. We conveyed it" (Moinuddin, 2021). The movement of refugees into Bangladesh has put significant pressure on local public services while simultaneously aggravating climate vulnerability. As efforts to repatriate the refugees have made little progress and with international fatigue setting in, Bangladesh has restricted the free movement of Rohingyas and installed barbed wire around the camps.

China's interest in Myanmar

Myanmar sits to the south of China and holds great strategic utility—it acts as a critical junction between South, East, and Southeast Asia. China's interest in Myanmar is not only strategic but also economic. The proposed China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to connect China's Yunnan province with Mandalay in Central Myanmar while stretching southeast down to Yangon and southwest to Rakhine. In addition, China has heavily invested in Myanmar's infrastructure sector, including the development of the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which will revolve around the deep-sea port in the Bay of Bengal. The construction of this deep-sea port and the Kyaukphyu SEZ was one of 33 deals signed between China and Myanmar under the CMEC initiative during Xi Jinping's two-day state visit in 2020, the first by a Chinese leader in 19 years (Aung & McPherson, 2020). In 2021, Chen Hai, ambassador of China to Myanmar, said: "[China is] committed to promoting national stability, economic growth and improvement of people's livelihoods, and safeguarding democracy and rule of law" (Strangio, 2021).

Established ties between Myanmar and China through long-term investments, such as those in the Shan, Chin, and Rakhine provinces, may

place China in a position to mediate between Bangladesh and Myanmar with regard to the Rohingya crisis. This may also bring about an impetus for positive change as clashes between the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Myanmar forces have hampered several Chinese investments in the state of Rakhine.

Sino–Bangla relations

In a December 2018 seminar titled "China–Bangladesh Relations: Prognosis for the Future," China's Ambassador to Bangladesh, Zhang Zuo, in his speech, called attention to the various facets of the Sino–Bangla relationship, which was elevated to a strategic partnership of cooperation after the successful state visit of President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh in October 2016 (FMPRC, 2018a):

"China and Bangladesh are neighbors who look out for each other during either safe or disturbing times. In the face of opportunities and challenges, we should work together to be good partners for peace and cooperation.... China will continue to play a constructive role in properly solving the problem of Rakhine State in accordance with the three-phase solution of stopping violence, repatriation and development, and support Bangladesh and Myanmar to find a proper way for the repatriation of the displaced people, as well as a proper solution for the issue of the Rakhine State through dialogue and consultation... China encourages the construction of the 'Belt and Road' initiative... We should strengthen communications, improve cooperation mechanisms, promote the security of projects under the 'Belt and Road' initiative, improve law enforcement capabilities and safe construction cooperation, take effective measures to ensure the protection of life and property of employees of the projects, institutions and enterprises in the other country, and continue to deepen practical cooperation in all areas of law enforcement and security" (FMPRC, 2018a).

China and Bangladesh have been on relatively good terms since 1975. Their economic alliance was strengthened after Bangladesh formally signed the BRI in October 2015, a move that

complements the strategic partnership between the two countries (Mint, 2021). In fact, the agreement made Bangladesh the second-largest recipient of Chinese funds in South Asia following Pakistan (Rahman, 2021). As in Myanmar, China has also heavily invested in Bangladesh, which is a large market for Chinese goods. To further strengthen the Sino–Bangladesh bilateral relationship, China granted Bangladesh duty-free access to 97% of tariff products under the Duty-free Quota-free scheme (Dhaka Tribune, 2020). China is now Bangladesh’s largest trading partner (Ramachandran, 2019). In October 2020, China signed 27 memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with Bangladesh, which were valued at US\$ 24 million (Pitman, 2020). Bangladesh had to turn to China as Western sources had refused to fund several infrastructure projects. However, China has been steadily investing in Bangladesh’s infrastructure development, including upgrading Chittagong Port, constructing railway links (such as the Trans-Asian Railway), and investing US\$ 1 billion for improving digital connectivity (Ramachandran, 2019).

China's changing response to the Rohingya crisis

The first instance of information on aid released by the Chinese embassy in Bangladesh is on September 28, 2017, and it stated that 150 tonnes of aid had been released to “refugees who had poured into Bangladesh recently.” Declaring appreciation for the humanitarian assistance provided by Bangladesh thus far, the statement added that—as China’s “good old friend,” Bangladesh would continue providing support (Gao, 2017). Surprisingly, the Chinese foreign ministry, in its official statement, made no mention of the term “Rohingya” and rather used the word “refugees.” Perceived as an attempt to placate Myanmar, this move received heavy criticism from the international community. Moreover, in another statement provided by Lu Kang, the spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry, the term “refugee” was replaced by “displaced people,” a subtle insinuation of apathy and disassociation from the plight of the Rohingyas:

“The Chinese side is highly concerned about the difficulty facing Bangladesh in resettling the displaced people in the Myanmar-Bangladesh border area. In order to help the government of Bangladesh with the resettlement efforts, the Chinese government has decided to provide emergency humanitarian supplies to the government of Bangladesh, the Chinese side supports Bangladesh’s efforts to resettle the displaced people properly and stands ready to continue providing assistance to Bangladesh as its capacity allows” (Gao, 2017).

Despite the growing Sino–Bangla ties, Beijing appears to be determined to stand with Myanmar on the Rohingya issue. In 2018, Russia and China boycotted talks on a resolution drafted by the United Kingdom at the UN Security Council that aimed to convince Myanmar to allow the return of approximately 7,00,000 Rohingya refugees (Nichols, 2018).

Beijing officially steps in to play mediator: China's “three-phase solution”

In November 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, at a press conference with the then Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, announced a “three-phase solution” to the Rohingya crisis. The first phase involved a ceasefire in Rakhine State to halt further violence and displacement; the second encompassed bilateral dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar to find a feasible solution to the crisis; and in light of China’s description of the conflict as a by-product of impoverishment and underdevelopment in Rakhine State, the third solution pertained to poverty alleviation (China Global Television Network, 2017). However, Chinese claims that poverty was the root cause of the conflict were vague and dismissed key factors like the discriminatory 1982 Myanmar Nationality Law that denied citizenship to Rohingya ethnic minorities, thus rendering them stateless.

The “three-phase solution” also failed to acknowledge decades of systemic repression

of Muslim Rohingyas at the hands of the Buddhist majority. The proposal blatantly disregarded the final report put forth by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State led by former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan under the umbrella of the Kofi Annan Foundation. The report was published on the eve of the 2017 ARSA attacks and highlighted the need for governments to address the socio-economic afflictions contributing to the disproportionate marginalisation and discrimination of the Muslim population in Myanmar. China's conciliatory approach towards Myanmar has helped it build better relations with the Government of Myanmar, especially with the military. Though China maintained that it had no strategic interests in the region, its diplomatic approach has helped keep Western powers at bay while limiting the crisis intervention to China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. However, China has failed to do anything substantial for the Rohingyas or for Bangladesh as the country shoulders the burden of incoming refugees.

After China announced its "three-phase solution" in early 2021, A.K. Abdul Momen, expressed optimism and confidence in China's capacity to facilitate and moderate the Rohingya repatriation process. The following quotation by him suggests Bangladesh's stance in early 2021: "We still have confidence in China. We maintain friendship with all. China and Japan have advanced. China's progress [on repatriation talks], to some extent, is on the way to implementation" (The Daily Star, 2021).

However, after the colossal influx in 2017, despite attempts at drafting a repatriation mechanism, not a single refugee had returned to Myanmar a year later. In 2018, under diplomatic pressure from China, authorities from Bangladesh and Myanmar came together in a meeting to implement the repatriation agreement as agreed upon in 2017 (ICG, 2018).

China has advocated that both Myanmar and Bangladesh avoid negotiating the repatriation

process at multilateral forums. Wang Yi also hosted a side meeting with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in September 2017. The Chinese Public Security Minister, Zhao Kezhi, also met counterparts from Bangladesh and Myanmar after both countries met on October 30, 2017 (ICG, 2018).

As a result, the repatriation attempt took place in November 2018 between Bangladesh and Myanmar without consultation with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or representation from the Rohingya population. Only 2,260 people from 485 families were on the list, and the repatriation was to start with the return of 150 refugees each day. However, the refugees on the list went into hiding and refused to go back as they feared for their lives upon return to Myanmar. Subsequent attempts have also failed. Myanmar authorities have not been supportive, according to a Bangladeshi government official stationed at the Rohingya camps during the first repatriation attempt.¹ The Rohingya refugees on the list demanded citizenship, safety, security, shelter, and justice upon their return. Instead, the Myanmar government proposed a digital national verification card (VNC) process, stripping the Muslim Rohingyas of full citizenship (Milko, 2019).

The Rohingyas do not perceive China's involvement positively due to China's policies against the Uyghur people in East Turkistan (Asat, 2020). It is difficult not to question China's neutrality as a mediator. Like the "systemic and institutionalised oppression" committed on Rohingyas in Myanmar (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019, p.67), the Chinese government has detained over a million Uyghur Chinese Muslims in internment camps in the Xinjiang region (Hill, Campanale, & Gunter, 2021). On that note, the "unconscionable treatment" of the Uyghurs and the blatant sympathy demonstrated by Myanmar may have led to hesitation

¹ Interview with former government official of the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Bangladesh

among the Rohingyas to comply with China (Asat, 2020). China's efforts have also been questioned by UN diplomats in Yangon, as they believe China's quick solutions might be apathetic towards human rights issues (McPherson, Paul, & Naing, 2020).

Conflict resolution diplomacy by China: Where it stands now

Between 2018 and 2020, China managed to arrange three meetings between Myanmar and Bangladesh and it remains positive about the Rohingya repatriation process (McPherson, Paul, & Naing, 2020). However, efforts by China keep failing, and as frustration grows, the Bangladeshi government has approached Russia to launch a similar trilateral initiative between the three countries. Russia may fare better than China as the country shares goodwill with the Myanmar junta, in addition to friendly ties with the Bangladeshi government, which is evident from its investment in the country's first nuclear power plant in Rooppur. By starting a trilateral process of diplomacy with Russia and Myanmar, Bangladesh may be striving to amicably resolve the Rohingya refugee crisis (Kumar, 2021).

Even though Bangladesh has tried to engage with Myanmar bilaterally since the exodus, it has not managed to make any significant progress. Yet again, in 2019, A.K. Abdul Momen sat for a meeting with his counterparts from Myanmar and China (The Daily Star, 2019). Following the meeting, Momen developed a plan for a tripartite agreement, which led to the formation of a working group comprising the three countries (China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar). The group was formed by jointly evaluating and pushing forward the repatriation process. Similarly, in 2021, China established a tripartite framework and initiated a 90-minute virtual dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar, expressing its support in favour of the two nations forming a durable and quick solution to the

Rohingya crisis. No concrete result has come of this group, and voluntary repatriation has stalled (Dock, 2020). The working group was supposed to meet on February 4, 2021, but its plans were disrupted following the Myanmar military coup on February 1 (Mostofa, 2022). The repeated failure to engage in fruitful discussions with Myanmar indicates that China either mishandled the diplomatic developments between Myanmar and Bangladesh or that Myanmar does not heed China's instructions.

Considering China's role in the Rohingya repatriation process, a government official commented,

*"I worked in the field and was present during the first attempt of the Rohingya repatriation process, and in this regard, China played no role whatsoever in hastening the repatriation process or helping Bangladesh. They did not even make a significant contribution in terms of charity. In fact, USA and Turkey were the two biggest donors."*²

In 2021, referring to the recently held tripartite dialogue between Bangladesh, Myanmar and China, a senior Bangladeshi politician, Abdul Moyeen Khan said, "I do not believe that even after Chinese mediation the citizenships and rights issues of Rohingya will be ensured." (Kamruzzaman, 2021)

Moreover, China's approach as a mediator seems to be flawed given that the Rohingya refugees were excluded from the negotiation table and based on how quick China has been to defend Myanmar. For instance, despite the 2021 coup leading to socio-political chaos resulting in a civil war and a sudden surge in COVID-19 cases across Myanmar (Kurlantzik, 2022), China blocked the UN Security Council from issuing a statement of concern over violence across Myanmar and the failure to implement the Five-point Consensus issued by the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) group. Though the

² Interview with former government official of the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Bangladesh.

Five-point Consensus called for reasonable action to end violence, the appointment of a special envoy for the mediation and facilitation of a constructive dialogue among all parties, and the immediate halt of violent activities across Myanmar, China vouched for a slower process as opposed to immediate action (South China Morning Post, 2022). Evidently, China wants to ease pressure on Myanmar from the international community to secure its vested economic interests (ICG, 2018).

With the junta in power, Myanmar may have initially wanted to reduce its dependency on China, as the country has been suspicious of China's involvement in supplying arms to militant groups (Gupta, 2020). However, the military coup has led to pro-democracy protests within the country as well as added pressure from Western countries.

The US and European countries have already sanctioned Myanmar, placing restrictions on the import of military equipment by the latter. They further tightened sanctions in 2022 following the coup in February 2021. Given the current situation in Myanmar, the junta is uninterested in pro-democratic political alliances and are seemingly unfazed by the West. The neighbouring Southeast Asian countries seem inclined toward avoiding any involvement in the situation to prevent political and economic spill-overs.

The plans being developed by China and Myanmar for the construction of the CMEC are mutually beneficial in terms of being a potentially profitable commercial venture for Myanmar and a vital point of access to the Indian Ocean for China. This implies that both nations have far more to gain as an alliance than otherwise (Bremmer, 2021). Additionally, according to Chinese experts at the United States Institute of Peace, China's support of the military junta is motivated by the following: first, limiting Western influences in the borderlands; second, preserving the stability of the China–Myanmar borderlands; and third, protecting the strategic economic corridor linking the Indian Ocean to China's southwestern provinces (Tower, 2021).

At present, the plight of the Rohingya crisis is beginning to lose recognition in the international arena due to the recent return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine. The Rohingya crisis has been ongoing for nearly five years. With no progress in sight, the international community's sympathy has started to wane, and the plight of the refugees does not dominate headlines anymore. The hospitality of the local population toward refugees sheltered in densely populated camps is starting to fade as well. With no signs of repatriation on the horizon, Bangladesh is in a tough spot as pressure is building on already burdened resources and climate degradation is setting in.

In this context, China has not been honest in its role as a mediator. It has enabled the Myanmar junta to prevent the return of the Rohingya. To sum up, the following timeline lists some of China's geopolitical involvement in the Rohingya crisis.

Timeline: China's mediation role between Myanmar and Bangladesh

2017

- **March 27: China disassociates from the consensus on the draft resolution at the UNHRC**
In the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), China disassociates from the consensus on the draft resolution entitled "Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar" to dispatch an independent international fact-finding mission to Myanmar. China expresses that the international community must respect Myanmar's sovereignty and create a favourable environment for parties to resolve differences through dialogue (UNHRC, 2017a).
- **September 21: Wang Yi meets with U Thaung Tun during the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) session in New York**
In his meeting with Myanmar's National Security Advisor U Thaung Tun, State

Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi conveys China's support for Myanmar in actively seeking dialogue with Bangladesh. He calls on the international community to treat the Rakhine State situation impartially and encourages both countries to seek a solution through friendly consultations (FMPRC, 2017a).

- **September 29: Chinese envoy commends Bangladesh's efforts to improve the humanitarian situation for Rohingya refugees**

At the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Chinese envoy Wu Haitao calls for the international community to encourage dialogue between Myanmar and Bangladesh to address the refugee crisis. As a friendly neighbour to both countries, China has been actively engaging with Myanmar and Bangladesh to influence them positively to address the issue through dialogue and consultation, he says (*Xinhua*, 2017a).

- **October 5: Bangladesh military personnel build relief tents supplied by China for Rohingya refugees**

China sends a second consignment of relief material for refugees in Chittagong, including 2,000 tents and 3,000 blankets. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is expected to personally distribute the Chinese relief blankets on her visit to the Rohingya camps (*Xinhua*, 2017b).

- **November 16: China votes against the draft resolution in the UNGA**

In the UNGA, China votes against the draft resolution entitled, "Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar." The draft resolution is adopted by a recorded vote of 135 to 10, with 26 abstentions (UNGA, 2017).

- **November 18: Wang Yi meets with Sheikh Hasina and Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali in Bangladesh**

In his talks with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, Wang Yi notes that the Rohingya issue should be resolved by Bangladesh and Myanmar through dialogue and consultation (FMPRC, 2017b). He welcomes the signing

of an agreement on the repatriation of refugees and expresses China's willingness to assist in the settlement of the issue (FMPRC, 2017c).

- **Wang Yi introduces China's position on the Rohingya issue**

In a press interview in Bangladesh, Wang Yi expresses China's willingness to play a role in resolving the Rohingya issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar. To this end, China has repeatedly advised the latter to achieve a ceasefire at the earliest in order to prevent more locals from entering Bangladesh, and to work with Bangladesh to find an acceptable solution, he says (FMPRC, 2017d).

- **November 19: China proposes a three-phase plan to address the Rakhine State issue**

In his meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi in Naypyidaw, Wang Yi outlines a three-phase plan to ease the crisis: first, to have a ceasefire and restore order; second, for Myanmar and Bangladesh to solve the issue through friendly consultation and sign and implement the repatriation agreement at the earliest; third, for the international community to help develop Rakhine State to achieve stability (FMPRC, 2017e). President U Htin Kyaw expresses Myanmar's willingness to negotiate with Bangladesh to solve the problem as per China's proposed three-phase solution (*Xinhua*, 2017c).

- **Wang Yi meets with Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyidaw**

In the meeting, Myanmar's military chief, Min Aung Hlaing, thanks Wang Yi for his shuttle mediation between Myanmar and Bangladesh and agrees with China's three-phase solution (FMPRC, 2017f).

- **Consensus reached by China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh**

In a joint press meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, Wang Yi announces that China's proposal of addressing the Rakhine issue through three phases was received positively by both countries. "I just concluded my visit to Bangladesh and the country clearly expressed its willingness to continue the

bilateral consultations with Myanmar and Myanmar took the same stand,” he says (FMPRC, 2017g).

- **November 24: China seeks role in Myanmar's peace process**
In a meeting with Min Aung Hlaing, President Xi Jinping expresses China's willingness to play a greater role in Myanmar's domestic peace process and in safeguarding the stability of the border region (Baijie, 2017).
- **December 5: China votes against a resolution in the UNHRC**
In the UNHRC, China votes against the draft resolution entitled, “Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar.” The resolution is adopted by a recorded vote of 33 to 3, with 9 abstentions (UNHRC, 2017b).
- **December 21: Wang Yi meets with Ye Aung**
In his meeting with Myanmar's Minister for Border Affairs Ye Aung, Wang Yi expresses that China is willing to play a constructive role in resolving the Rakhine State issue between Myanmar and Bangladesh through bilateral consultation. Both sides also exchange views to develop Rakhine State through the CMEC (FMPRC, 2017h).

2018

- **March 23: China votes against a resolution in the UNHRC**
In the UNHRC, China votes against the draft resolution entitled, “Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar.” The draft resolution is adopted by a recorded vote of 32 to 5, with 10 abstentions (UNHRC, 2018b).
- **April 22: Wang Yi meets with former Myanmar President U Thein Sein in Beijing**
In the meeting, Wang Yi conveys China's support for bilateral negotiations between Myanmar and Bangladesh to settle the issue of the displaced people fleeing from Rakhine State. China also expresses hope that repatriation will be implemented at an early date (FMPRC, 2018b).
- **May 14: Chinese envoy expresses hope that both countries resolve issues through bilateral dialogue**
At a meeting in the UNSC to brief members on the visit of the Security Council mission to Bangladesh and Myanmar, Chinese envoy Ma Zhaoxu makes a statement recognising the efforts of both countries in addressing key issues. He calls for the international community to increase humanitarian assistance to both countries (UN, 2018a).
- **June 28: Wang Yi meets with U Kyaw Tint Swe in Beijing**
Wang Yi meets with Myanmar's minister for the office of the state counsellor, U Kyaw Tint Swe, and notes that China supports friendly negotiations between Myanmar and Bangladesh to resolve the Rakhine issue and will continue to provide necessary assistance (FMPRC, 2018c).
- **June 29: Wang Yi holds talks with Abul Hassan Mahmud Ali in Beijing**
The Chinese side states that due to the joint efforts of Bangladesh and Myanmar, the conditions for initiating the repatriation of refugees have been met and that China hopes that the first batch of repatriation work will be implemented at the earliest (FMPRC, 2018d).
- **September 27: China votes against a resolution in the UNHRC**
In the UNHRC, China votes against the resolution entitled, “Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar.” The resolution is adopted by a recorded vote of 35 to 3, with 7 abstentions (UNHRC, 2018c).
- **Trilateral informal meeting between Wang Yi, U Kyaw Tint Swe, and Abul Hassan Mahmud Ali at the UN headquarters**
At an unofficial meeting at the UN headquarters, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh reach a three-point consensus to resolve the Rakhine issue. The countries agree to first resolve the issue through friendly consultations; second, repatriate the first group of refugees; and third, hold a joint working group meeting to draft

a roadmap and timeline for repatriation (FMPRC, 2018e).

- **October 18: China objects to a security council briefing by the chairperson of the fact-finding mission on Myanmar**
In a written letter to the president of the Security Council, China expresses opposition to holding the UNSC briefing and cites that it is out of the mandate of the fact-finding mission to brief the UNSC (UNSC, 2018).
- **October 24: China criticises the credibility of the report by the fact-finding mission on Myanmar**
In his statement to the Security Council, Ma Zhaoxu also pays tribute to the assistance provided by Bangladesh to the refugees and states that through meetings with both countries facilitated by China, Myanmar has pledged to develop a timetable for the repatriation of refugees (UN, 2018b).
- **November 9: Wang Yi meets with Shahidul Haque in Beijing**
Wang Yi and Bangladesh's foreign secretary, Shahidul Haque, exchange views on the issue of repatriation of refugees. The Chinese side commends both countries for the progress made in handling the Rakhine issue. Haque thanks China for its support and assistance (FMPRC, 2018f).
- **November 16: China votes against a draft resolution in the UNGA**
In the UNGA, China votes against the draft resolution entitled, "Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar." The draft resolution is adopted by a recorded vote of 142 to 10, with 26 abstentions (UNGA, 2018). China's representative notes that Myanmar and Bangladesh had agreed to start the repatriation process and expresses China's support (UN, 2018c).
- **December 16: Wang Yi meets with U Kyaw Tin in Laos**
In his meeting with Myanmar's minister for international cooperation, U Kyaw Tin, Wang Yi conveys China's hopes that Myanmar maintains communication and cooperation with Bangladesh to realise the repatriation

of the first group of people as soon as possible. He expresses Chinese support and calls on relevant agencies of the UN to play a constructive role (FMPRC, 2018g).

2019

- **February 25–March 5: China's special envoy visits Myanmar and Bangladesh**
During both his visits, China's special envoy of Asian affairs, Sun Guoxiang, meets with Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing in Myanmar as well as the state minister for foreign affairs, Mohamed Shahriar Alam and Shahidul Haque, in Bangladesh to encourage both countries to speed up the implementation of the repatriation agreement (FMPRC, 2019a).
- **March 22: China votes against a resolution in the UNHRC**
In the UNHRC, China votes against the draft resolution entitled, "Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar." The resolution is adopted by a vote of 37 to 3, with 7 abstentions (UNHRC, 2021).
- **July 5: Wang Yi meets with A.K. Abdul Momen in Beijing**
In his meeting with Bangladesh's foreign minister, A.K. Abdul Momen, Wang Yi underlines that China has followed closely the development of the Rakhine issue and is trying its utmost to mediate it. China encourages both countries to strengthen communication and integration and handle differences properly for early and smooth repatriation of the first batch of displaced persons. The Chinese side is willing to continue to offer necessary assistance (FMPRC, 2019b).
- **July 6: Joint statement by China and Bangladesh mentions the Rakhine issue**
On the occasion of Sheikh Hasina's official visit to China, both countries issue a joint statement and affirm that the solution to the Rakhine issue lies in the early return of the displaced people who have entered Bangladesh from the Rakhine State. China expresses that it will continue to host trilateral meetings between the three countries to provide a platform for dialogue to promote repatriation (FMPRC, 2019c).

- **August 27: Wang Yi holds talks with U Kyaw Tint Swe in Beijing**
Wang Yi expresses that China is actively communicating and mediating for the resolution of the Rakhine issue and praises Myanmar's practical measures for repatriation. China supports proper settlement through bilateral channels between Myanmar and Bangladesh and opposes the multilateralisation and politicisation of the issue (FMPRC, 2019d).
- **September 23: Trilateral meeting between Wang Yi, U Kyaw Tint Swe, and A.K. Abdul Momen at the UN headquarters**
The meeting produces three points of consensus on the Rakhine issue: first, to realise the repatriation as soon as possible; second, to establish a China–Myanmar–Bangladesh joint working group for the implementation of repatriation under the political guidance of the foreign ministers of the three countries; and third, to strengthen tripartite cooperation to develop Rakhine State and the border areas (*Xinhua*, 2019a).
- **September 26: China votes against a resolution in the UNHRC**
In the UNHRC, China votes against the resolution entitled, “Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar.” The resolution is adopted by a recorded vote of 37 to 2, with 7 abstentions (UNHRC, 2019b).
- **December 7: Wang Yi meets with U Kyaw Tint Swe and other ministers in Naypyidaw**
Wang Yi conveys that China is willing to continue to assist Myanmar in carrying out the repatriation and resettlement of displaced people, promoting economic development, and improving livelihoods in Rakhine State. The meeting is also attended by U Thaung Tun, Minister of Construction Han Zaw, and Minister of International Cooperation Kyaw Tin (FMPRC, 2019e).
- **Wang Yi meets with Aung San Suu Kyi in Naypyidaw**
Wang Yi says that China is paying close attention to the Rakhine issue and is ready to provide assistance on repatriation-

related work and help promote economic development in Rakhine State (*Xinhua*, 2019b).

- **December 27: China votes against a resolution in the UNGA**
In the UNGA, China votes against the draft resolution entitled, “Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar.” The draft resolution is adopted by a vote of 134 to 9, with 28 abstentions (UN Digital Library, 2019).

2020

- **April 7: Wang Yi holds a telephone conversation with A.K. Abdul Momen**
In the meeting, Momen conveys hopes of starting the repatriation work as soon as possible, and Wang Yi expresses China's willingness to continue to play a mediating role (FMPRC, 2020).
- **October 23: Wang Yi holds a telephone conversation with A.K. Abdul Momen**
Both sides agree to hold a meeting of the China–Myanmar–Bangladesh joint working group at an early date. China has been actively engaged in mediation and communication to find a proper solution, says Wang Yi (*Xinhua*, 2020).
- **December 31: China votes against a resolution in the UNGA**
In the UNGA, China votes against the draft resolution entitled, “Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar.” The draft resolution is adopted by a vote of 130 to 9, with 26 abstentions (UN, 2020).

2021

- **January 10: MoU between China and Myanmar**
China and Myanmar sign an MoU to conduct a feasibility study of a railway linking Mandalay with Kyaukphyu, a major town in Rakhine State. The Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar Chen Hai says that the railway will strengthen Myanmar's national reconciliation and peace process (*Xinhua*, 2021a).

- **January 11–12: Wang Yi visits Myanmar**
During the visit, Wang Yi conveys China's support for Myanmar in properly resolving the Rakhine State issue, encouraging talks between Myanmar and Bangladesh and the early repatriation of displaced people to Myanmar from Bangladesh (*Xinhua*, 2021b).
- **January 19: China–Myanmar–Bangladesh agree to maintain consultations at vice foreign minister level**
As a follow-up to implement the consensus reached during Wang Yi's earlier visit to Myanmar, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui hosts a video meeting with Myanmar's deputy minister of international cooperation, Hao Dusong, and Bangladesh's foreign secretary, Masud Bin Momen. China expresses its willingness to continue to actively mediate and support both countries to strengthen dialogue (FMPRC, 2021a).
- **February 26: Chinese envoy says that Myanmar and Bangladesh must resolve the Rakhine issue through bilateral dialogue**
Speaking at an informal meeting of the UNGA, Chinese envoy Zhang Jun refers to the Rohingya issue in light of the military coup in Myanmar, "We do not hope to see new difficulties in solving this problem due to the domestic situation in Myanmar" (*Xinhua*, 2021c).
- **May 21: Wang Yi holds a telephone conversation with A.K. Abdul Momen**
Over the phone conversation, Momen says Bangladesh wishes to resume dialogue to start repatriation as soon as possible.

Wang Yi conveys that China understands Bangladesh's legitimate concerns and supports addressing the issue through friendly consultations (FMPRC, 2021b).

- **July 15: Wang Yi meets with A.K. Abdul Momen in Tashkent**
In the meeting, Momen conveys that Bangladesh wishes China to continue playing a mediative and constructive role to resolve the Rakhine State issue (FMPRC, 2021c).

2022

- **April 27: Li Jiming visits settlement camps in Cox's Bazar**
Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh, Li Jiming, visits households of displaced people and repatriation centres in the camp area. China has been making efforts to improve conditions in the camps; in the future, China will continue serving as a bridge of communication between Bangladesh and Myanmar and will play a positive role in facilitating early repatriation, says Li (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2022a).
- **April 28: China gifts medical equipment to Sadar Hospital in Cox's Bazar**
In the handover ceremony, Li Jiming notes that China has played the role of mediator between Bangladesh and Myanmar and has been working with relevant stakeholders, including the UNHCR, to facilitate the early repatriation of the displaced people (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2022b).

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Finding Partners

04

China's Buddhist Influence in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Religion has emerged as one of the critical soft power tools for many countries worldwide, including China. China has a long history of integrating religion and religious outreach in its foreign policy and diplomacy. This chapter explores China's use of Buddhism as a soft power tool in Sri Lanka enabling closer ties. It looks at China's activities in the island state and identifies how Buddhism is used as a foreign policy and diplomatic tool. While China's use of Buddhism as a soft power tool is a choice and a necessity for the Communist Party of China's foreign policy objectives, given the nature of China's economic statecraft, its Buddhist activities are viewed with some reservations.

Recommended citation:

Attanayake. C. (2023). China's Buddhist Influence in South Asia. In Xavier, C. & Jacob, J. T. (Eds). *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools* (pp. 47-55). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/aLjLQPH>

Introduction

Religion has emerged as a critical soft power tool for many countries. Today, religion and religious outreach activities are integrated into the state's foreign policy and diplomatic strategy. The manifestations of this soft power tool vary. While some make informal efforts to cultivate religious solidarity and a shared identity through historical and cultural similarities, others use more direct forms such as deploying religious institutions and actors to realise specific foreign policy goals. Countries in the Middle East use Islam to pursue foreign policy objectives (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018a, 2018b). Russia uses the Orthodox Church to expand its cultural and political influence (Petro, 2015; El Ghouli, 2015). India, especially under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been using Buddhism as an important element of its soft power (Mazumdar, 2018; Scott, 2016; Kishwar, 2018).

This chapter explores how Buddhism is emerging as an important soft power tool in China's statecraft strategy with Sri Lanka. It also attempts to identify if the use of Buddhism has helped China realise its foreign policy goals. The chapter uses publicly available information to trace China's activities in Sri Lanka.

China's Buddhist diplomacy

China has a long history of using Buddhism as a tool of diplomacy. Even though religions were vehemently attacked after the Communist Party rose to power in 1949, and its adherents persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong used Buddhism to persuade foreign nations that the religion was thriving under communist rule, hoping that their Buddhist constituencies would push their respective governments to adopt pro-China foreign policies (Zhe, Fisher, & Laliberté, 2019, p. 27). It was with this objective that the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) was set up in 1953 (Zhang, 2013).

With China's opening up in 1978, the government became more tolerant of religious faiths and slowly employed them in statecraft to boost Chinese soft power. During the post-Mao era, Beijing employed Buddhism as a diplomatic tool to enhance its relationship with South Korea and Japan, when China organised a Buddhist Friendly Interaction Conference between the three countries (Scott, 2016; Zhang, 2012). Communist Party of China's (CPC) party leaders since Jiang Zemin have openly supported the development of Buddhism, making public appearances alongside temples (Ji et al., 2019). Jiang, in 2001, acknowledged that religion could act as a stabilising force in society and could be mobilised as a positive force for national development (Zhang, 2013). Hu Jintao approved the organisation of the World Buddhist Forums in 2006, 2009, and 2012 (Zhe, Fisher, & Laliberté, 2019).

Under Hu's successor, Xi Jinping, China has accelerated the use and mobilisation of Buddhist diplomacy (Ramachandran, 2019). In 2006, during his time as party secretary of Zhejiang, Xi promoted the first World Buddhist Forum. In 2014, he welcomed the first World Fellowship of Buddhists meeting in Baoji. In March 2014, addressing the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris, President Xi praised how Buddhism had impacted China. He went on to say that after the religion spread from India, it went through an extended period of integrated development with Confucianism and Taoism. He noted that Buddhism in China had "Chinese characteristics" and has profoundly impacted religious beliefs, philosophy, literature, art, and customs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014).

China is also involved in the Common Text Project undertaken by the International Council for the Day of Vesak under the stewardship of Maha Chulalongkorn University in Thailand (Asian News International, 2018). It is active in international Buddhist organisations such as the World

Fellowship of Buddhists and the World Buddhist Forum. It hosted the 5th Session of the World Buddhist Forum in 2018 in Fujian with over 1,000 Buddhists, scholars, and representatives from 55 countries and regions (Ramachandran, 2019).

Buddhism represents one of the pillars of the Chinese tradition, which the CPC claims it aims to preserve (Laliberté, 2011). As a result, China is introducing a Buddhist narrative into its diplomacy despite being a self-proclaimed atheist country.

Historical China- Sri Lanka Buddhist relations

China and Sri Lanka's shared Buddhist relations are centuries old. They have continued throughout different historical periods and kingdoms of Anuradhapura (377BC - 1017AD), Polonnaruwa (1017 - 1232 AD), Yapahuwa (1273 - 1284AD), Kurunegala (1287 - 1332AD), Kotte (1412 - 1597AD), and Kandy (1469 - 1815AD).

The earliest Buddhist connection between the two countries was when the Chinese monk, Fa Xian visited ancient Sri Lanka. According to his travel journal, *Records of the Buddhistic Kingdoms* (also known as *Fo Guo Ji* or *The Travels of Fa-hsien*), he spent two years in the monastery of Abayagiri Viharaya of Anuradhapura studying Buddhism. According to local legends, Fahian Gala cave (also known as Pahiyanigala) and Fahian Temple in Kalutara allegedly got their names as Monk Fa Xian spent his days here during his visit to the island.

Inspired by Monk Fa Xian, another scholar-monk, Xuanzang (664 AD), set off on a voyage to Sri Lanka during the Tang dynasty. Even though he could not make it to Sri Lanka, his travelogue made frequent references to the island nation (Mendis, 2017). Both Monk Fa Xian and Monk Xuanzang's travelogues became crucial sources of information for archaeologists in the nineteenth century to

unearth Buddhist sites and unveil Buddhist history (Zhang, 2013). The inscription on the stele found in 1911 of Zheng He's mission states that he paid tribute to a local Buddhist temple on the mountains of Sri Lanka (which could possibly be Adam's Peak according to historians), which is yet another example of the historical Buddhist links between the two countries (Senanayake, 2018; Wang & Ye, 2019; Daily FT, 2012). Sri Lanka was among the destinations where the emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (1368-1398) of the Ming dynasty sent two diplomatic missions led by Buddhist monks (Zhang, 2013). Similarly, a Sri Lankan monk Dharmaduta voyaged to Nanjing during the reign of Emperor Xiaowe (471-499 AD) (Senanayake, 2018; Bastiampillai, 1990).

Dual ordination procedures transmitted to China from Sri Lanka provide evidence of Sri Lanka's influence on the development of Buddhism in China. More than a dozen Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns arrived in Nanjing through a mercantile ship and ordained 300 Chinese nuns in the fifth century, establishing the Bhikkuni order in China (Zhang, 2013; Bianchi, 2019; Heirman, 2001).

It is to be noted that Buddhist ties between the two countries were dormant during the period when Sri Lanka was a colony under the European powers—Portuguese (1597 - 1619), the Dutch (1658 - 1796), and the British (1796 - 1948). Since gaining independence, Sino-Sri Lankan relations have been revived, but Buddhist ties have not experienced the same progress. This could be a result of the political changes within China. The Cultural Revolution, waged between 1950 and 1979 in China, featured anti-religious campaigns, and all churches, mosques, and temples were closed. In recent years, the gradual development of Buddhist exchanges between Sri Lanka and China reflects changes in religious policies in post-Mao China. For instance, when modern China looked to re-establish dual ordination in the 1980s, China turned towards Sri Lanka again (Bianchi, 2019, p. 163). Additionally, in November 1986, five student monks from the Buddhist

Academy of China were invited to study in Sri Lankan universities for five years and received bachelor's and master's degrees with distinctions (Zhang, 2022, p. 15).

China's recent Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka: Engaging with the community

The slow and steady growth in China's and Sri Lanka's Buddhist engagements and exchanges synchronises with Beijing's use and mobilisation of Buddhist diplomacy during President Hu's tenure. It also coincides with Beijing's gradual foray into Sri Lanka since 2005.

One of the most important meetings was in March 2007, when President Mahinda Rajapaksa visited China at the invitation of President Hu, commemorating the 50th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations. During the visit, the two countries discussed increasing exchanges in the form of Buddhist activities, including sending Sri Lankan delegations to the World Buddhist Forums. The Chinese welcomed Sri Lanka's proposal to establish an International Buddhist Zone (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2007). Since then, there have been numerous interactions and exchanges between Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka and China. For instance, in May 2018, a senior delegation led by the Sri Lanka Buddhism minister visited Beijing. Both sides promised to strengthen Buddhist exchanges and cooperation (Zhang, 2022, p. 17).

There is limited information available in the public domain on the frequency and regularity of exchanges between the Buddhist communities in the two countries. However, the limited existing information shows an increase in the number of exchanges. These exchanges are mainly of two kinds: interactions between the Buddhist monks from China and Sri Lanka and Chinese engagement with the Buddhist community through the Sri Lanka-China Buddhist Friendship Association (SLCBFA).

Interactions among Buddhist monks

Since 2015, there has been a significant improvement in Buddhist ties between the two countries. This could be attributed to President Xi's state visit to Sri Lanka in September 2014 and the 60th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations in 2017.

In 2015, an exchange programme organised by the Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka facilitated 100 Chinese Buddhists to visit Sri Lanka and 150 Sri Lankan Buddhist monks to visit China (The State Council of The People's Republic of China, 2015). In the same year, on October 24th and 25th, a 25-member delegation from Sri Lanka participated in the 4th World Buddhist Forum jointly organised by the BAC and the China Religious Cultural Communication Association in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province of China. The Sri Lankan delegation included representatives from the Asgiri, Malwathu, and Amarapura Chapters, which are the leading Buddhist monastic fraternities of Sri Lanka (news.lk., 2015). Athuraliye Ratana, a parliamentarian and an influential monk in Sri Lanka's domestic politics, was part of the delegation. Since then, the Sri Lankan delegation has frequently participated in World Buddhist Association events.

2015 also saw several visits by Chinese delegations to Sri Lanka. In May 2015, Ming Sheng Thera, vice president of the BAC and president of Guangdong Provincial Buddhist Association of China, visited Sri Lanka with a 30-member delegation. They met with Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena and the chief prelate of the Ramanna Nikaya (Embassy of The People's Republic of China in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2015).

In 2016, a Sri Lankan delegation attended the first "Summit Forum of Theravada Buddhism" that was held in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan (Zhang, 2019). The forum is considered an important beginning for revitalising Theravada Buddhism in China, and this visit,

therefore, marks an important landmark in growing Buddhist ties between Sri Lanka and China. Given the involvement of Sri Lanka's leadership in practising and promoting Theravada Buddhism globally, this emerged as a new avenue for the two countries to engage. In 2017, Chinese monk Yin Shun led a delegation to take the relic of a Chinese Buddhist monk, Benhuan, to Sri Lanka to be worshipped (Zhang, 2022, p. 17). Monk Benhuan is a Chan master and a religious leader, the first abbot of the Hongta Temple in Shenzhen, and the honorary president of the BAC between 2010 and 2012 until his death. In the same year, a nine-member delegation led by Guangquan, the deputy secretary-general of the BAC, the dean of the Hangzhou Buddhist Academy, and the abbot of Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou, and Qingyuan, director of the Tibetan and Southern Buddhism Office of the BAC visited Sri Lanka on the invitation of the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka (shandongfojiao.cn, 2017). In 2018, during the visit by Sri Lanka's Buddhism Minister Gamini Jayawickrama Perera to pay homage to the Lord Buddha's Relics at the Ling Guan Temple in Beijing, he met with senior Chinese Buddhist monks (Sri Lanka China Buddhist Friendship Association, n.d.c).

These exchange visits have paved the way for the two countries to reminisce about their long history and build good relationships and friendships among the countries' Buddhist societies. They have opened avenues for China to build a fraternity within the Theravada Buddhist community.

However, what is most important is how these exchanges have led to the building of connections between Buddhist fraternities that have access to and influence domestic politics in Sri Lanka. Asgiriya Maha Viharaya is one of the chief Buddhist monasteries and

the custodians of the sacred tooth relic of Buddha kept in Sri Dalada Maligawa. It is also the headquarters of the Asgiriya Chapter of Siyam Nikaya.¹ These temples and fraternities significantly influence Sri Lanka's domestic politics.

The BAC is similarly established in China and operates under the patronage of the Chinese government. While it may have a limited influence on Buddhist citizens in foreign countries, its local temples, devotee associations, and delegations have used their contacts and exchange visits to develop relationships and fraternity with other Buddhist communities (Zhe, Fisher, & Laliberté, 2019, p. 24). For example, Sri Lanka was invited to the meeting hosted by China to discuss cooperation among Buddhist communities in the Lancang-Mekong region to combat COVID-19 and improve people's livelihoods (*Xinhua*, 2021).

Engagement with the Buddhist community via the Sri Lanka-China Buddhist Friendship Association

China's Buddhist diplomacy has even gone beyond engaging with monks and religious leaders. In 2015, SLCBFA was established (Pal, 2021). According to its website, it was inaugurated in the presence of Sri Lanka's chief monks from all Nikayas and Ming Sheng Thero during his visit in 2015. The website notes that the SLCBFA "has embarked on a journey to develop historical Buddhist friendship between Sri Lanka and China that spans the gulf of time, harkening back to several centuries" (Sri Lanka-China Buddhist Friendship Association, n.d.a).

The Association is engaged in various charity services and activities such as providing dry

¹ Sri Lanka has three main Buddhist orders or Buddhist fraternities; namely Siyam Nikaya, Amarapura Nikaya, and Ramanna Nikaya. The Amarapura Nikayas and Ramanna Nikaya were unified to form the Amarapura-Ramanna Nikaya on 16 August, 2019. Following this unification, the Amarapura-Ramanna Nikaya has become the largest Buddhist fraternity in the country. Siyam Nikaya has two major divisions or chapters called Malwatta and Asgiriya. These two chapters are the custodians of the sacred Tooth Relic. They have two separate *maha nayakas* or chief monks. There are five sub divisions within the two major units of Malwatta and Asgiriya.

rations and IT equipment to poor families and communities (Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka, 2020; Sri Lanka-China Buddhist Friendship Association, n.d.b). It also carries out small public service projects such as providing purified drinking water (Sri Lanka-China Buddhist Friendship Association, 2016, n.d.d). The Association also promotes Dhamma education in the country by providing materials and equipment such as public address systems, chairs, and desktop computers with printers (Sri Lanka-China Buddhist Friendship Association, n.d.b). According to the SLCBFA website, it receives financial assistance from the Embassy of China to carry out these projects. Representatives from the embassy often inaugurate these projects.

Additionally, the SLCBFA enables Chinese Buddhist temples, societies, and organisations to extend their charity work to Sri Lanka. In 2016, following a massive flood in Sri Lanka, students and families from three schools in the heavily affected Kegalle district received financial assistance worth 300,000 yuan (jjfj.com, n.d.). A total of 130 families benefitted from the stipends and donations provided by Kaiyun Temple in Fuzhou, Kaiyun Temple in Quanzhou, Kaiyuan Zhiye Culture and Education Charity Foundation in Fuzhou, and Kaiyuan Temple Poverty Alleviation and Disaster Relief Public Welfare Association in Quanzhou. The donation was organised by Benxing, the executive director of the BAC, the vice president and secretary-general of the Fujian Buddhist Association, and the abbot of Kaiyuan Temple (jjfj.com, n.d.). More recently, in December 2021, the Association facilitated the distribution of 2,500 gift packs from the China Charity Foundation to students from Dhamma schools.

China's motivations

China's religious diplomacy aims to promote international understanding and acceptance of its religious policy (Zhang, 2013). Using slogans such as building a "harmonious world", China advocates for religious activities and attempts to improve its image. In recent years, China has been using Buddhism as a

convenient diplomatic resource (Scott, 2016).

There is both domestic and international impetus for the CPC to promote Buddhism. Domestically, promoting Buddhism internationally would have a strong political appeal for the more than 100 million Buddhist followers in the country. Buddhism is historically rooted in the country and is largely a localised religion. Its doctrines and teachings have become a part of China's national mentality, bearing strong "Chineseness" or Chinese identity in its cultural diplomacy (Zhang, 2012). Given the importance of the Buddhist demography in Asia, it is reasonable to assume that the flourishing of Buddhism in China could influence Buddhists elsewhere in the region to adopt the view that their coreligionists thrive in China. Therefore, they may conclude that what is good for China is good for Buddhism (Zhe, Fisher, & Laliberté, 2019).

Internationally, Buddhism is seen as a convenient resource given that many Asian countries have a large number of Buddhists (Wuthnow, 2008). China's desire to use Buddhism as a soft power tool derives from the desire to maintain and expand its leadership role within the third world and reassure other states that its rise is non-threatening and that it is acting as a responsible, system-maintaining power (Wuthnow, 2008). It has used Buddhism to connect with smaller countries like Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Given the prominence of Buddhist communities in these countries, China has invoked Buddhism to identify itself as the most prominent Buddhist country in the world. The Chinese leadership may believe that it can sway public opinion through international religious networks and that Buddhism can play a role in promoting positive relations between China and Asian Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka.

Most importantly, connecting with Buddhist communities is viewed as a way of promoting the Chinese version of Buddhism and counterbalancing the influence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan cause outside China.

According to critics, China's single-most important motivation behind its Buddhist public diplomacy is to counterbalance the global popularity of the 14th Dalai Lama and the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism (Ramachandran, 2019). They emphasise that China has vilified the Dalai Lama as a "wolf in monk's robes" intent on "splitting up China and wrecking ethnic unity to exert strict control over Tibetan political, social, and even religious life" (Ai & Li, 2010; *Xinhua*, 2011).

That China has spread this message in Sri Lanka is an important aspect of China's Buddhist diplomacy. Sri Lanka has repeatedly clarified that it will not contradict China's position on the Dalai Lama. Despite the Dalai Lama being considered the most sacred spiritual leader for Buddhists worldwide, Sri Lanka has repeatedly refused his request to visit the Sacred Temple of Tooth-Relic in Kandy. The Dalai Lama was also not allowed to participate in the Buddha Jayanthi (the year commemorating the 2,600th anniversary of the Enlightenment of the Buddha) celebrations held in 2012. China in 2015 praised the Sri Lankan government for not allowing the Dalai Lama to visit the country (Press Trust of India, 2015). Even the Jathika Hela Urumaya, the country's only Buddhist-monk-driven political party, seems to ignore the question of inviting the Dalai Lama to Sri Lanka. The former leader of the party, Ellawela Medananda Thera, commented that "in any event, the Dalai Lama is from the Mahayana school of Buddhism, and not from the Theravada form practised in Sri Lanka" (Sunday Times, n.d.). Notably, Sri Lanka emphasises its Theravada identity in its engagement with the Dalai Lama but promotes and engages with Chinese monks who follow a different sect of Buddhism.

Conclusion

For China, engagement with Sri Lankan Buddhist monks and the community is a platform to build fraternity and brotherhood with other sects of Buddhism. The Chinese government understands that China's

Buddhist sect is less influential than Theravada Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism. For this reason, China may not be able to use its form of Buddhism alone as a tool of soft power.

The impact of this use of Buddhism as soft power is so far unclear. In general, the results of soft power influence cannot be seen immediately. In terms of dealing with the issue of the Dalai Lama, China has managed to convince the Sri Lankan government and the chief Buddhist leaders of its stance. Yet, it is unclear whether this has convinced the larger Buddhist community.

It is also unclear if the shared Buddhist identity has convinced the larger Sri Lankan Buddhist community that China is a benign power. In recent years, Sri Lankans have raised concerns and expressed displeasure over China's growing economic and political presence in the country, which is observable in the increased number of protests and opposition to Chinese projects (Shepard, 2017). This may prove that Beijing's Buddhist diplomacy has not been enough to attract, persuade, and appeal to the Sri Lankan community. However, the sources of soft power do not always produce attraction, persuasion, appeal, and emulation (Li, 2011). Culture, ideology, values, and norms also often result in resentment, repulsion, hostility, and even conflict, primarily if a country pursues an aggressive cultural policy (Li, 2011).

For China, using Buddhism as a soft power tool is a choice and a necessity at the moment. For years, Chinese diplomats saw religion as a problem due to the CPC's atheist policies. However, China now uses Buddhism as an asset to enhance relations. China's increasing engagement with the Sinhala Buddhist community will likely enhance its image to some extent. Yet, given how China's economic statecraft is unfolding in the country, its use of Buddhist diplomacy may also be viewed with some reservation.

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05

Neighbours but Aliens? The Struggle for the Communist Party of China's Party-to-Party Diplomacy in Nepal

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Abstract

Globally, party-to-party diplomacy has been an integral part of China's foreign policy since the 1950s, and, in recent decades, it has become more visible, especially in Nepal. China has been increasingly using party channels as vehicles of authoritarian learning, seeking ideological closeness with political parties that can influence state-to-state relations and provide ease of access for high-level decision-making. However, these attempts at collaboration with political parties, through ideological training, party exchanges, and visits with ideologically-aligned parties, have at times created turmoil among Nepali political elites. This chapter analyses the impact of party relations on Nepal's domestic politics and, subsequently, how Nepali political parties view their cooperation with China. This study features primary interviews with political party leaders, public intellectuals, and stakeholders along with a desk review of key events in party relations. The chapter concludes that party-to-party relations have helped expedite Sino-Nepal cooperation, however, failure of political parties to align their own interests with the national interest has not only led to disruptions in overall party-to-party cooperation but is also a source of domestic conflict.

Recommended citation:

Rajbhandari, A.R. & Khatri, R.S. (2023). Neighbours but Aliens? The Struggle for the Communist Party of China's Party-to-Party Diplomacy in Nepal. In Xavier, C. & Jacob, J. T. (Eds). *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools* (pp. 57-65). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/W7fn0hr>

Introduction

After establishing formal diplomatic relations in 1955, the relationship between China and Nepal has evolved to extend beyond a historical exchange of culture and religion to extensive economic cooperation and state-to-state relations. China's first assistance to Nepal was the funding of US\$ 12.6 million in support of its first five-year plan (1956–1960) (Pant, 1961). Since then, six decades of Sino-Nepal relations were limited largely to small-scale aid donations with public diplomacy outreach restricted to state-to-state relations. It was only in 2015 when India's unofficial blockade on the southern border drove Nepali political elites to favour China that Sino-Nepal engagements witnessed an acceleration. Not only was the Chinese humanitarian aid to Nepal after the 2015 earthquake the largest ever provided on foreign soil (Tiezzi, 2015), but other areas of public diplomacy, such as education, culture, and political exchanges, also saw greater cooperation. Around 114 political visits were recorded between Chinese and Nepali leaders and 15 party-to-party official visits between 2000 to 2017—the most by the Communist Party of China (CPC) among political parties of any country in the South and Central Asian region (Custer, et al., 2019).

China attempted to foster greater ideological closeness between the CPC and Nepali political parties—in particular the Nepal Communist Party (NCP)—through high-level meetings during the Chinese Peoples' Political Consultative Conference in 2016, and workshop on Xi Jinping thought for socialism with Chinese characteristics with 200 NCP leaders in 2019 (Bhattarai, 2019b). According to Pal (2021), China “clearly accords considerable significance to having an ideologically-aligned counterpart in Nepal's power structure” thus increasing overall Sino-Nepal engagement. It can also be seen as influenced by the ideological affinity of the two communist parties.

Globally, party-to-party relations have been an integral part of China's foreign diplomacy since

the 1950s, and in recent decades, this has only become more evident. Hackenesch & Bader (2020) argue that China increasingly uses party channels as a vehicle of authoritarian learning “by sharing experiences of its economic modernization and authoritarian one-party regime.” Yet, questions about the impact of party-to-party relations on Nepal's domestic politics, and how Nepali political parties view their inter-party cooperation with China, remain. These questions go beyond the normal understanding of bilateral state-to-state relations and, thus, open a new avenue to understand party diplomacy as an important tool in foreign policy cooperation.

By conducting 10 primary interviews with bureaucrats, leaders of political parties, journalists, and public intellectuals, along with secondary source analysis of key reports, news articles, journals, video interviews, and so on, this chapter attempts to fill the gap in our understanding of evolving inter-party relations as a key consideration in foreign policy, especially when examining China's global influence.

Party-to-party cooperation as China's foreign policy

Since the founding of the Communist Party of China in 1921, its foreign affairs department has played a key role in the development of the party and the nation. The department sought to cultivate “political party orientation and internationalisation”, which helped build the guiding principles and framework for the Party's foreign affairs work (Yang, 2021).

After 1949, the Party sought to establish foreign relations with Communist parties and left-wing organisations in socialist or non-socialist countries for “safeguarding nation's independence and sovereignty” (Zhong, 2007). The Party's increasing focus on integrating with state activities, with party secretaries playing a pivotal role, made it indistinguishable from the state (Brødsgaard, 2018; Thornton, 2021). Party-to-party relations, thus, became an integral component of China's overall foreign

policy—the CPC went on to establish relations with more than 400 political parties and organisations in over 160 countries around the world (*Xinhua*, 2021).

Party ties help strengthen state relations. In the case of China, it has helped bolster engagement with influential political actors in other countries, even more so if the political leaders are of the ruling party, allowing China to influence high-level decision-making. While the CPC is not keen on exporting its ‘China model’ overseas, it has been active in promoting it.

The mode of training largely involves capacity development of political leaders. Sun (2016) identifies three universal components of the CPC’s political party training programme: 1) lectures at Chinese institutions or universities, 2) field trips to local government(s) in China, and 3) cultural programmes promoting Chinese culture. In addition, attempts have been made by the CPC to train political elites abroad in ‘Xi Jinping thought’, highlighting the “virtues of strong centralized leadership” in developing countries and at various bilateral forums (The Economist, 2020; Li, 2019).

The focus is more on learning about the role of CPC’s governance in China’s development and then drawing inspiration to replicate such experiences in their own countries. Yet, does CPC maintain different kind of relationships with different political parties? Or are there common attributes to the CPC’s approach regardless of which party is in power? One way to understand the narrative is to focus on the CPC’s current leadership’s emphasis on party loyalty, and whether or not the same is expected of the coalition of parties it is building abroad.

Under President Xi, political loyalty has become an important aspect of diplomacy for party legitimacy, both domestically and with foreign political parties, which helps construct an international environment conducive to

the CPC (Rabena, 2021). China has become more assertive under Xi Jinping, yet it seeks to maintain a “peaceful” environment overseas by increasing its number of friends, i.e., political parties (Loh, 2018). This model of ‘peaceful’ development for shared prosperity while openly rejecting ‘Western-centric’ development is attractive for many countries’ political parties that seek to engage in long-term cooperation with China.

However, the factors affecting the longevity of party-to-party relations are not limited to ideology. They are profoundly dependent on the position of the ruling party in the governments of developing countries, coupled with various other geopolitical considerations. These components need to be considered when evaluating how a political party’s relationship with the CPC impacts economic and political cooperation, and development programmes.

Overview of Sino-Nepal party relations

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, and the establishment of democracy in Nepal in 1951, party relations played an important role in establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. In 1953, Gauri Bhakta Pradhan, a representative of the Communist Party of Nepal, left for Beijing, where he received 10 months of political and ideological training at the CPC headquarters (Baral, 2021). Party-to-party relations became a stepping stone in formalising diplomatic relations in 1955, when he facilitated Prime Minister Tanka Prasad Acharya’s official visit to China (Nepalpage, 2021). After King Mahendra’s panchayat regime in 1960, the CPC considered the monarchy a stable force and, thus, cultivated close ties with the palace.

While the CPC maintained occasional party exchanges,¹ it kept intact the policy of “non-interference” because of its concern

¹ Examples of such exchanges: In 1980, when the general secretary of CPN-UML, CP Mainali, led a delegation on the invitation of ID-CPC (See Devkota, 2021). Then in 1999, the general secretary of CPN-UML, Madhav Kumar Nepal, acted as a mediator between the Government of Nepal and the Chinese embassy to resolve speculations about the Dalai Lama attending a conference hosted by Nepal (Zeng, 2016).

for Nepal to maintain stable relations with India. According to Zeng, when the Nepali parliament delegation visited China in 1963, the former ambassador of China to Nepal, Chairman Mao told the Nepali delegation “When it came to external relations, you should also properly handle the relations with your southern neighbor” (2016). Yet, as Nepal’s relations with India deteriorated in 2015 after the blockade, the Nepali political elite sought to turn to China, which eventually broke India’s monopoly on trade with Nepal and provided China leverage while participating in Nepal’s political and economic developments (Giri, 2018).

Impact of the CPC and NCP party-to-party relations

Since Jana Andolan II, also known as the People’s Movement II, which led to the downfall of the monarchy, perhaps no other incident had united almost all major political parties of Nepal as India’s unofficial blockade imposed in 2015.² Popular Nepali sentiments reflected a disdain towards India’s foreign policy in Nepal as the blockade restricted the supply of essential goods to Nepali citizens. The dire fuel shortages resulting from the blockade prompted China to provide Nepal with 1.3 million litres of gasoline, thus winning some of the goodwill that India had lost (Wagle, 2016).

In stark contrast to Delhi’s high-handed approach towards Nepali politicians, China’s subtle diplomacy, which was respectful of Nepali sensitivities, won it several allies. This included the three major political parties, i.e., the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist-Leninist), Nepal Communist Party (Maoists), and Nepali Congress (Jha, 2021; Mulmi, 2021). This unity led to the NCP’s landslide victory in the 2017 elections. K. P. Oli was reinstated as the prime minister of Nepal, which became a stepping stone for CPC-NCP party relations.

Growing disdain against India led the Chinese to cultivate friendlier ties with all the major political parties. Qun & Wu (2017) propose that for non-communist parties, especially the Nepali Congress, developing friendly ties with the CPC would help “offset the pro-India color of the Congress party and win support of more voters in political process.” Yet, no relationship became as significant as the one between the CPC and the NCP — a communist ruling party on both sides allowed for enhanced cooperation.

The potential for a growing relationship was evident in the 2016 NCP feud between Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) and Oli, when the *Global Times* ran an op-ed saying that the Chinese were concerned about “being treated as a card only when Kathmandu’s relations with New Delhi are at low” (Xu, 2016). This was emphasised time and again indicating the CPC’s desire to maintain the stability of the ruling party in Nepal. The unity and victory of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN)-Maoist and Communist Party of Nepal United Marxists Leninist (CPN-UML) in the 2017 elections started an era where party relationships became a decisive factor in foreign policy and Nepal-China relations.

For instance, the decision to award the contract for the 1200 MW Budhi-Gandaki hydropower project to the China Gezhouba Group Corporation (CGGC) was changed four times during the reign of four prime ministers.³ In May 2017, under the leadership of CPN-Maoist’s Prachanda, the government decided to award the project to CGGC. However, in November 2017, the new prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba (Nepali Congress), revoked the contract to mobilise domestic resources. In 2018, Energy Minister Barsaman Pun (CPN-Maoist) expressed a desire to reinstate cooperation on the project with China, stating, “We are willing to

² The term is widely debated and controversial among Nepali and Indian scholars. There is consensus among Nepali politicians and scholars who saw the supply of essentials cut off from India, hinting at their strategic move. For Indian onlookers, according to former Ambassador Ranjit Rae in his book *Kathmandu Dilemma*: the blockade was undertaken by Madhesi protestors, hence, being a domestic issue.

³ The actual figure is three prime ministers, as Sher Bahadur Deuba was appointed first in 2017 and then again in 2021.

cooperate with China, whether it's through intergovernmental cooperation mechanism or accepting preferential loans from China" (Joshi & Pakar, 2018). The Chinese preference for the unification of the "left government" (Jha, 2016), along with Oli's electoral promise of awarding the contract to CGGC, do not indicate an alliance of two parties based on shared values or a common agenda but rather a move to consolidate votes that ultimately favoured the Sino-Nepal engagement (Adhikari, 2017). We asked Keshav Pandey, who is a member of parliament and previously the head of the foreign affairs department of the NCP, what he thought of CPC stressing the importance of NCP's stability. He stated:

"One thing I like about them (CPC) is that they do not wish to harm other neighbourhood parties. Instead, they see them as their own neighbour and always strive for peace and prosperity. Previously, the NCP were two political parties, and once they merged, it signalled a positive message to CPC and they have looked forward to more cooperation".

Yet others have put forward a different opinion. Hari Sharma, a prominent public intellectual of Nepal, argued that "Communist parties in Nepal have more of a fraternal relation — in terms of ideology. However, there is an unequal relationship between Nepali political parties and the CPC—it is mostly transactional as to who gets what."

The party-to-party relationship was more pronounced on the morning of September 24, 2019, as Prachanda and Oli were in a state of disagreement over power-sharing. Song Tao, head of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (ID-CPC), and Madhav Kumar Nepal, previous head of the foreign affairs department of the NCP, exchanged a bilateral agreement that formalised the relationship between the CPC and the NCP.

The CPC's relationship with the NCP deepened after its members were trained in "Xi Jinping thought", with more than 200 NCP and 40 ID-

CPC members participating in the workshop (Himalayan News Service, 2019). Thereon the Chinese pursued active engagement in Nepal's political atmosphere, which was new for Nepali politicians as well as across public discourse. CPC saw the communist alliance, bolstered by party unification, as conducive to the future of bilateral relations, a sentiment that only added to New Delhi's anxieties (Upadhyaya, 2021).

The alliance received mixed reactions. Regarding the training workshops, some analysts were quick to argue that such an engagement "is likely to deprive Nepal of its independent and free decision-making" (Kaphle, 2019). Initially, the Nepali Congress objected to the training on the grounds that it would interfere with Nepal's sovereignty and the Nepali Congress deemed the training program as irrelevant. Shekhar Koirala, a key figure in the Nepali Congress party, and a relative of B. P. Koirala, emphasised the need for party-to-party cooperation but warned Nepal to carefully guard itself against foreign policy fallacies and maintain a fine balance (Paudyal & Koirala, 2019). Raj Kaji Maharjan, a provincial member of the parliament and a member of the NCP, argued that such training was important for strengthening the party vision and was a system that works well. When we asked him what the implications of such exchanges could be, he said:

"The future of party relations also depends on mutual understanding and respect for each other. If you have a party that does not understand China or the governance of China, then there will be further challenges. CPC's cordial relations with the NCP are a sign of a deeper connection, there are greater prospects for development and cooperation in future".

The CPC-NCP relation cemented the importance of developing Sino-Nepal economic cooperation and development through party ties. This was made clear in 2020 when the NCP was on the verge of splitting again, and the ID-CPC sent its vice-minister, Guo Yezhou, to Kathmandu to conduct several meetings after Oli dissolved the parliament.

His visit reaffirmed the “belief that China had preferred a government under a unified NCP; with new political calculations, however, China is now keen that it remains assured of its key interests in Nepal” (Giri, 2020b).

Although it is a party-to-party relationship, the CPC-NCP forms a part of the larger bilateral web between the countries. In one of the informal discussions, we were reminded that the Chinese ambassador to Nepal takes part in NCP meetings as a CPC representative. All of this has led to the elevation of ties between the two parties. While the CPC advocates for uniformity in its relationship with political parties, its NCP tie-up has raised eyebrows among other politicians. The two communist parties’ tie-up in 2019 was viewed by the Nepali Congress as a way of dismantling Nepal’s ‘non-alignment’ policy and even gave rise to speculations that NCP would fully incorporate the CPC’s model of governance (Poudel, 2019a). The situation escalated to the point that the then general secretary of the NCP, Madhav Kumar Nepal, had to provide assurances that it was a mere fraternal relation and that the NCP did not aim to copy the CPC’s governance style (Poudel, 2019b).

In the case of China’s foreign policy, developing countries that have strong party-to-party relations with China are better able to promote their foreign policy interests. When President Xi met with the NCP co-chairman Prachanda during his official visit to Nepal in 2019, both leaders emphasised strengthening party building and state governance for a long-term relationship to “help Nepal achieve national development and prosperity” (*Xinhua*, 2019). From the CPC’s perspective, “as the governing party, the interest of the CPC’s is identical with those of the state” (Zhong, 2007). In this sense, party relations can reinforce government ties: they provide additional means to achieve the same ends (Hackenesch & Bader, 2020).

To understand how the ruling party maintains a balance between party-to-party and government-to-government relations, we talked to the then finance minister of Nepal

in 2020, Bishnu Poudel, who is also the general secretary of the NCP, on the difference between party-to-party and state-to-state cooperation for the ruling party in a multiparty democracy like Nepal. He answered:

“Party-to-party relations impact the overall state-to-state relations. We should keep sharing our experiences and maintain friendly relations between the NCP and the CPC. Being the ruling party, the NCP and CPC party as well as government relations have been moving forward smoothly. However, for party relations, we intend to take it through the party-to-party channel and do not link it too much with the state-to-state channel, as the state has its procedures”.

He emphasised that while state-to-state relations are crucial in encouraging investment flows and ensuring the sustainability of projects, it is the party-level diplomacy in Nepal that helps in sharing experiences and creating an enabling environment to promote such cooperation.

Yet, Rajan Bhattarai, who was the chief foreign policy advisor to the prime minister from 2018 to 2021, argues that party-to-party relations are a part of people-to-people relationships. According to him, in countries where people-to-people relations are better, its positive impact is reflected in state-to-state relations. In the context of China, he argues that party relations help support state relations, and if all political parties of Nepal can build a consensus on how to maintain relations with China, then there will be no issues in dealing with China, regardless of who is in power.

Nepali politicians, particularly those of the NCP, have oriented themselves to learning from the CPC and its governance. In 2019, a 15-member team of the NCP, led by Dev Gurung, visited China at the invitation of the CPC, where Chinese leaders shared their experience of “winning the hearts and minds of people and strengthen party’s organizational base” (Bhattarai, 2019b). Similarly, the CPC argues that for China to build even a moderately prosperous society, it must, firstly,

establish friendly relations with political parties abroad and institute friendly dialogues.

The CPC, thus, projects itself as a reliable friend, ready to assist in times of need but mostly aiming to fulfil economic objectives. For instance, in 2020, the CPC and major Nepali political parties established a consultation mechanism for political parties on the Trans-Himalaya Connectivity network, an initiative to strengthen practical cooperation in the fields of “agriculture, economy, trade, tourism and culture and jointly promote the Belt and Road Initiative” (Ma, 2020). Party relations, thus, transcend beyond strengthening economic cooperation.

This notion was also shared by Yashoda Gurung (Subedi), a member of parliament and central committee member of the CPN-Maoist, who described the importance of party relations in government activities as:

“the party is the brain/mind and the government is the hands and legs. This is what we have to learn from China. It is not an individualistic concept as the government is governed by a party, not by a party member. CPC and NCP can help each other as they have ideological and emotional connections but we [NCP] can utilise the opportunity for building better party relations as well”.

However, party-to-party relations also come with challenges. As both are ruling parties, if the NCP and CPC relations do not reflect Nepal’s national interests, it will be difficult for relations to prosper. Krishna Khanal, former foreign policy advisor to late former Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala in 1999, recounts the experience of the former ambassador to China, Yadunath Khanal, who said:

“It is hard to understand Chinese’s reaction⁴ towards political development in Nepal. It could be mostly due to Nepal’s political instability and the unstable system makes it complicated for the Chinese to maintain such relations”.

If the parties do not realign their party relationship with national interests, it will result in the downfall of the overall party-to-party relationship. As CPC seeks to maintain good working relations with all the political parties, it is also important for the ruling party to promote national interests in attaining its foreign policy goals.

Conclusion

Party diplomacy in Nepal has produced mixed results. Despite CPC’s ‘quiet diplomacy’ in Nepal, which exposed its preference for ties with the NCP, it will continue to undertake party relations to maintain unity among the communist parties of Nepal. Yet, it also presents an opportunity to create ripple effects as other political parties will be tempted to expedite their party relations with foreign political parties, which can bring innumerable challenges. In our final round of interviews with former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in 2020, when he was President of the Nepali Congress, he stated that without adequate preparation and clarity in identifying needs concerning national interests, party interactions will not yield adequate results.

For China, party relations constitute an important component of overall bilateral state relations. Previously, the CPC’s relation with foreign parties was mostly to learn from advanced democracies, while power politics and propaganda were considered supplementary (Shambaugh, 2007). But China has grown stronger over the years abandoning its ‘quiet diplomacy’, and, hence, elite party relations and politics have become an integral component of the CPC’s foreign policy. The challenge remains as to whether, in China or Nepal, a particular political party can adequately promote national interests in bilateral engagements with the political parties of other countries, and whether engagements such as those promoted and developed by the ID-CPC supplement overall state-to-state relations or only end up serving a political party’s interests.

⁴ Implying the language barrier and lack of cultural understanding, which leads to a gap in being able to interpret Chinese reaction.

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06

The Communist Party of China and Its Political Influence in Sri Lanka under the Gotabaya Rajapaksa Regime

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Abstract

The International Department of the Communist Party of China has spread its reach to many developing nations, including Sri Lanka. It provides policy suggestions to Sri Lankan think tanks and political parties to encourage them to embrace and emulate China's model of reforms. The global pandemic has accelerated such soft power projections. This is evident in how China is openly pursuing its dual approach of economic diplomacy coupled with the Communist Party of China's activities and involvement in Sri Lanka. The close relations between the political party led by the Rajapaksas, the Sri Lanka Podujana Party, and the Communist Party of China is evident. The chapter will discuss the International Department of the Communist Party of China's strategies of engagement in Sri Lanka. The analysis will explore the limitations of China's political reforms arising from its Leninist political structure, which is causing tension within China between the reformists and power hawks. With the present politico-economic crisis, and in the post-Rajapaksa regime of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, how will China's approach fit in? What are the possible long-term implications?

The author thanks Shruti Jargad for developing the table, "Exchanges between CPC and Political Parties in Sri Lanka."

Recommended citation:

Abeyagoonasekera, A. (2023). The Communist Party of China and Its Political Influence in Sri Lanka under the Gotabaya Rajapaksa Regime. In Xavier, C. & Jacob, J. T. (Eds). *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools* (pp. 67-83). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/4h8VLtV>

Introduction

The “peaceful rise of China” was a phrase coined by Zheng Bijian, chair of the China Reform Forum and former executive vice-president of the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China (CPC), in 2002. Zheng’s view was that China’s rise to prominence in the international arena would come with a commitment to protect global peace and sustainable prosperity through the projection of soft power. China’s trajectory between the tenures of General Secretary Hu Jintao and General Secretary Xi Jinping reflects a strong commitment to this view. The country has followed a strategy of leveraging soft power, which has led to the International Department Central Committee of the CPC (IDCPC) establishing its presence in many nations, including Sri Lanka. The IDCPC provides policy suggestions to think tanks and political parties in Sri Lanka to encourage them to embrace and emulate China’s model of reforms.

Such soft power projections have accelerated during the global pandemic. This is evident in how openly China is pursuing its dual approach of economic diplomacy coupled with CPC activity in developing nations such as Sri Lanka. The island nation’s ruling political party, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) led by the Rajapaksas, maintains a close relationship with the CPC. Joint seminars by the SLPP and the IDCPC demonstrate this close political collaboration and how the CPC is perceived as a possible model to be emulated (IDCPC 2020). Further, Sri Lankan policymakers and certain sections of the general public have expressed acceptance and praise of the Chinese model of development. These sentiments, expressed by those in the higher echelons of Sri Lankan politics, count among several factors that could weaken democratic governance in Sri Lanka.

The chapter will discuss the CPC’s strategies of engagement in Sri Lanka. It suggests that the nature of China’s political system and its involvement in Sri Lanka create a conflict within the island nation—a tendency towards centralisation of power rather than

accountability to and oversight by parliament. With the present politico-economic crisis, and despite Mahinda Rajapaksa’s exit as prime minister, the CPC can be expected to play a more prominent role in the country’s political affairs.

China’s political model

Under its Leninist structure, members of the CPC are engaged in running the state and are also part of private-sector institutions and businesses. This tight control allows the Party to keep the communist model intact while calibrating reforms. Stephen Kotkin’s work shows how communist regimes that open their economies inevitably become more autocratic regimes (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020). This points to the danger in emulating China’s political model.

When China opened up its economy in 1978, it invited greater exposure to ideological influences from outside that could challenge the CPC’s control. Deng Xiaoping famously quoted, “If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in” (Punyakumpol, 2011). The CPC foresaw that opening up the economy would greatly benefit China’s economic trajectory but would also potentially cause a colour revolution in society. To prevent this ingress of liberal, democratic values, the CPC developed a centralised power structure and now oversees a surveillance state (Albert, Maizland, & Xu, 2021). Further, to counter ideas that oppose China’s political status quo, it exports its political vision through several means.

One such tool is the expansion of infrastructure diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across many continents. With its aggressive ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ during the pandemic, the CPC has also taken a step toward engaging with developing nations and power centres in a more assertive manner (Balachandran, 2021). Several direct comments by the Chinese embassy in Colombo to the US ambassador signal this interventionist cum confrontational mode of engagement (*Colombo Gazette*, 2020a). A key part of this

agenda is promoting the China model as a substitute for the liberal democratic model.

The dual challenge facing China is keeping the CPC Leninist structure intact while influencing developing nations to engage in an alternative model. In a report on the CPC's influence on Europe, scholars from Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) identified that China's authoritarian ideals pose a significant challenge to liberal democracy as well as Europe's values and interests. The same report explains the CPC's use of various tools to achieve its goals (Benner et al., 2018). The same can be said of developing nations, particularly Sri Lanka, which has a significant Chinese sphere of influence due to its debt burden.

According to David O. Shullman (2019), "CPC conducts large-scale training of foreign officials about its development methods and provides increasingly sophisticated technology to authoritarian governments." Further, he explains that "Chinese information efforts have factored into election campaigns in numerous developing countries across continents, including Zambia, Peru, Sri Lanka, and Nepal."

According to Ambassador Shivshankar Menon, it was clear that China chose its preferred candidate, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, before the 2019 presidential elections, which is a clear indication of Chinese intervention in the domestic politics of Sri Lanka (*ISAS Events*, 2020). This comes after a previous accusation of China funding Rajapaksa's political campaign (Abi-Habib, 2018). This could be seen as a political investment by China to secure its influence in the island nation.

China completely denies this assessment of internal political interference, claiming that it follows a non-intervention policy (Lo and Zhou, 2018). Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's comment that "China will stick to the principle of not interfering" (Lo and Zhou, 2018) even during Sri Lanka's constitutional crisis does not hold water due to China's preference for the Rajapaksa regime.

IDCPC and the promotion of the Chinese model of governance

The International Department Central Committee of the CPC (IDCPC) has in recent years played an active role in the Sri Lankan political landscape (Table 1). The seminar held by the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), belonging to the Rajapaksa brothers, and the IDCPC on November 4, 2020, is a prime example of this (IDCPC, 2020). It was reported that the seminar was the result of a consensus reached between President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and President Xi Jinping and was held to promote regular engagement between the two and share in-depth insights on their governance experiences (Hui, 2020c).

This illustrates two visible political trends. First, CPC-affiliated organisations are increasingly promoting the Chinese model of governance in nations such as Sri Lanka. Second, political actors in such nations are willing to explore opportunities offered by the Chinese model of governance at the cost of liberal democratic values. The close monitoring of these two trends is essential to the discourse on the expanding influence of the CPC.

At the seminar, Song Tao, then Director of the IDCPC, stated that "expanding bilateral Belt and Road cooperation will boost the economic development of the two countries and bring more benefits to the two peoples", while noting that Sri Lanka is an important partner for China in the construction of the BRI (Hui, 2020a). Further, Sri Lankan ruling-party policymakers — including Basil Rajapaksa, President Rajapaksa's brother and political strategist of the SLPP — have accepted and praised the Chinese model of development (*NewsWire*, 2020). These are clear indications of an expanding Sino-Lanka political relationship.

Opposition, trade unions, and China

The socialist essence of the Rajapaksa coalition stems from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and coalition partners such as the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL). Many coalition members, including CPSL leader Dew Gunasekera, are strong old-school advocates of the Chinese model and promote a strong Sino-Lanka relationship (*Daily News*, 2020a). The political push from these coalition partners has a significant impact on the higher committee levels of government. Sri Lanka's ability to assess the 'Chinese sphere of influence' is thus adversely impacted. Such a poor assessment of the Chinese sphere of influence by the political leadership might have cost the nation important strategic projects such as the East Container Terminal (ECT) public-private partnership with India, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact grant from the US, and the Japanese-funded Light Rail Transit (LRT) project. Such a lack of strategic foresight has further affected Sri Lanka's bilateral relationships with these nations, with both economic and diplomatic costs.

During Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Sri Lanka in early 2022, a few important areas of concern for Indo-Lanka relations were discussed. The devolution of power, Tamilian grievances taken up at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and the stalled ECT development agreement were at the top of his agenda during discussions with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Mohan, 2021). A few days after the visit, a weekend newspaper called *The Sunday Times* claimed that Chinese intelligence was behind the delay in the execution of the ECT port agreement with India (*The Sunday Times*, 2021). Whatever the veracity of such claims, the newspaper did observe a broader Chinese geopolitical push into Sri Lanka's strategic decision-making process.

The ECT, a tripartite agreement with India, Japan, and Sri Lanka, which was secured during the previous Sirisena-Wickramasinghe regime, was cancelled due to a massive trade-

union protest in Colombo Port. The port trade unions threatened to stop all operations in the port if the government agreed to the development of the ECT under a public-private partnership (PPP) agreement with an Indian developer/port operator. The government bowed under this pressure, and the ECT contract was denied to the Indian company, Adani Group, on grounds of national interest. However, the Sri Lankan Cabinet of Ministers decided to award a USD 12 million renewable energy joint venture project to China MS/Sinosar-Etechwin at the same time (Rubatheesan, 2021). This was a national security concern for India due to the geographical proximity of the energy project to the Indian shoreline. With New Delhi now pushing its security concerns in turn, this latter project was eventually terminated by the Sri Lankan government (Bagchi, 2021).

Importantly, geopolitics was the unusual agenda for the protest against the ECT by trade-union leaders. Sanjaya Kumara Weligama, president of the Progressive Workers Association for Commercial Industry and Services, in a statement with the 23 unified trade unions belonging to the Colombo Port said that "none of the patriotic forces in the country wants to overthrow the Government but help direct the Government on the right path" (*Daily News*, 2021). Their effort was portrayed as protecting the nation's strategic assets. However, patriotism of such magnitude was not seen when the Hambantota port was leased in a 99-year agreement to China. Compared to the Chinese Hambantota lease, the ECT tripartite agreement had no geopolitical concerns nor did it threaten the sovereignty of the nation. On the contrary, the development of the ECT with an Indian partner would have brought Sri Lanka substantial economic returns since "around 70% of Colombo Port's transshipment business is India-related" (Sri Lanka Export Development Board, 2019).

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's earlier wish to proceed with the ECT for a 51/49 per cent government majority share was on the right path to achieving an important PPP

with two key strategic partners—India and Japan. Therefore, the opposition to the project was driven by deceitfully orchestrated fear instigated by trade unions who weaponised nationalist sentiment. According to a media report, the “Indian diplomatic sources, said India is of ‘strong view’ that Chinese agencies were funding some protests against the ECT deal” (South Asia Monitor, 2021). Further a Sri Lankan popular newspaper reported that the “ECT initiative was promoted by Chinese Intelligence, with the objective of having it blocked” (*Sunday Times*, 2021). It can therefore be surmised that the protests had clear support from an internal political force backed by China.

The contrived fear that certain external powers will take over Sri Lanka’s strategic assets, hyped up by ultra-nationalists, further dragged the ailing economy into a narrow corridor of maligned mercantilism with very few opportunities (Abeyagoonasekera, 2021). The incessant displeasure with, and rejection of, agreements from western quarters such as the MCC grant (*ColomboPage*, 2020a), Status of Forces Agreement with the US (Gunasekara, 2019), Japan’s LRT (*Reuters*, 2020), and India’s ECT (Janardhanan, 2021) indicate the Sri Lankan government’s political allegiance towards China. China’s strong influence in Sri Lanka was cultivated by bribing and financing the policy circle, the elites, and other influence groups, including political parties (Pal, 2021).

The heavy Chinese influence could drag Sri Lanka toward a different economic and political model—from the existing free-market model, which promotes liberal values, to a malignant protectionist model with a semi-controlled economy. The recent market interventions and import bans by the government illustrate that this shift has already begun (Nordhaus & Shah, 2022). The ailing economy, with further borrowings such as the March 2021 currency swap deal of USD 1.5 billion, shows that the Gotabaya presidency prefers China as the most trusted partner for borrowing, akin to the administration of his brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015). The Colombo Port City Project by China,

with its reclaimed seafront sitting next to Colombo Port, was given full clearance by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s regime to operate a special economic zone with extra-jurisdictional rights. These are clear signs of the regime amalgamating the Chinese development model. Member of Parliament Wijedasa Rajapaksa compared the Port City acquisition to the Hambantota Port lease, adding that “the 1,100 acres reclaimed do not belong to Sri Lanka, the Western Province or the Colombo District. Through the bill, a commission will be set up to regulate that land. The Commission acts in accordance with the requirements of the Chinese company ... this land has been released from all 14 tax acts including the Inland Revenue Act. Even Parliament cannot deal with this and its salaries are paid in foreign currency. If we go there and buy something, we have to pay taxes for it. This is completely similar to any other country” (*ColomboPage*, 2021).

China’s economic grip on Sri Lanka could have significant consequences for the Sri Lankan political model and political parties, especially the ruling SLPP. With the SLPP’s two-thirds parliamentary majority, and the October 2020 constitutional reforms transferring power to the executive, the country appears to be on a clear path toward authoritarian rule. “China does not necessarily advocate, much less force, other states to adopt one-party authoritarian rule for themselves. Instead, China wants to quash opposition and criticism of Chinese Communist Party rule abroad and ensure Chinese access to markets and natural resources” (United States Institute of Peace, 2020). From the inception of BRI in 2013, China has strategically managed to quash criticism in Sri Lanka by winning over policymakers who even promised the public that they would investigate Chinese projects for corruption (*Daily Mirror*, 2015).

Another area that Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar highlighted was the long unaddressed minority community grievances and human rights concerns in Sri Lanka. A recent report by Human Rights Watch highlights serious challenges for Sri Lanka

internationally, which can only be resolved through multilateral support and diplomacy. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has warned that the council will reach a “critical turning point” in its dealings with Sri Lanka at the upcoming session due to Sri Lanka’s long unresolved commitments and the present unfavourable developments, especially the country’s recent militarisation (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

In contrast, this is of no concern for China as it reflects the central command model of the Chinese government. As the Sri Lankan government is challenged internationally for failing to resolve domestic issues concerning reconciliation, accountability, and the grievances of minority communities, it will expect more support from China, especially at the UNHRC. China has stood with Sri Lanka in the past, defending it at the UNHRC and against human rights concerns raised by the West (*Tamil Guardian*, 2022).

This indicates a space of uninterrupted political growth for China to expand its influence in Sri Lanka. It is also reflective of Sri Lanka’s dangerous multi-dependency on China for diplomatic, economic, and governance-related activities. Therefore, in the Gotabaya presidency, we see a strong departure from Sri Lanka’s liberal democratic values toward a China-centred value system in a geopolitical landscape where China’s influence has further expanded.

Militarisation in Sri Lanka

The increasing militarisation of different sectors under the Gotabaya presidency shows its affinity toward the China development model (Pereira, 2020; *ColomboPage*, 2020b). Nations with semi-autocratic majoritarian governments, weak democratic indicators, a lack of rule of law and respect for basic human rights, provide ideal sites for experiments with the Chinese model. Myanmar, with its recent coup, and Sri Lanka have drifted from democratic models toward a more military-centric, semi-autocratic model (*The Economist*, 2020). In both scenarios,

China has been a key strategic partner who has defended the countries’ human rights agendas and backed the ruling regimes at international forums. In both these nations, China has a large infrastructure development agenda through the BRI and also direct political influence and interest.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is a former military officer and has appointed other former military officers to bring in their expertise and discipline to form a highly inefficient system of government. The new majoritarian regime of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, with its 28 military appointments to various state sectors such as banks, health, aviation, and agriculture, has been negatively perceived by the western democratic front (Human Rights Watch, 2021; *Tracking Militarization in Sri Lanka*, n.d.). For example, Human Rights Watch, in its latest country report, highlighted militarisation as a threat to a democratic society.

This is the first time that Sri Lanka is undergoing such broad militarisation of government processes (Sri Lanka Army, n.d.; *EconomyNext*, 2021), which has had a strong impact on civil servants and the business community. One fifth of the presidential task force in Sri Lanka, responsible for formulating the country’s post-COVID economic response, was from the armed forces. Sri Lanka’s credibility as a free and open society has also been affected (*Tracking Militarization in Sri Lanka*, n.d.).

This model is reflective of the CPC model of centralised command control. In April 2021, a Military Assistance Protocol was signed during Chinese State Councillor and Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe’s visit to Sri Lanka (Ministry of Defence Sri Lanka, 2021). During the visit, President Rajapaksa expressed his interest in “governing experience from the Communist Party of China on poverty alleviation and rural revitalization” (CGTN, 2021). The multiple bilateral defence agreements between Sri Lanka’s military and the People’s Republic of China is a clear indication of the latter’s deepening influence on the civil-military balance in Sri Lanka.

China's influence on Sri Lanka's foreign policy

The “balanced and nonaligned” foreign policy of Sri Lanka, articulated in President Gotabaya’s election manifesto (Rajapaksa, n.d.), is struggling to maintain a balance due to the growing Chinese sphere of influence. The government’s earlier position that it will revisit the Chinese Hambantota port 99-year lease agreement was mere rhetoric that never materialised (Bloomberg, 2019). In reality, the government prefers to hedge, executing two contradictory policies simultaneously hoping for one to materialise support. The decision to hedge with China and India while being rhetorically neutral can have serious policy consequences, including the erosion of the country’s principal values and commitments to international law, democracy, and human rights due to the acceptance of an alternative to the existing democratic liberal model.

The CPC is busy making inroads into Sri Lanka, influencing Rajapaksa’s SLPP as well as think tanks such as Pathfinder Foundation in Colombo. In 2020, Pathfinder Advisory Services signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Chinese telecom provider Huawei to establish a framework to jointly develop ICT solutions for ports, airports, education, and agriculture in Sri Lanka (Daily FT, 2020). At the conference of the ‘China-Sri Lanka Political Parties Belt and Road Consultation Mechanism’ on June 11, 2020, Pathfinder Foundation recommended a book titled *Prevention and Control of COVID-19* by Dr. Zhang Wenhong to the health sector of Sri Lanka to explain the “health procedures recommended by the book are beneficial for more than just coping with COVID-19, but are also essential in sustaining a healthy Sri Lankan society” (Hui, 2020b).

The strategic community is being led by a China-favouring group of public intellectuals who continue to support China’s growing influence (Daily News, 2020b; Xinhua, 2021). There are clusters of such public intellectuals who are being given more prime time and have significant media coverage. Their arguments

have helped sway public opposition against the development of the ECT and have fanned growing anti-India sentiments.

Thus, Sri Lanka has shifted from a balanced policy with India toward a hedging foreign policy with China. Seen as a strong future power in the region, it is departing from a balanced foreign policy. The above-described public intellectuals support such a deviation. This raises reasonable questions as to whether their activity is linked to CPC-related initiatives. As Stephen M. Walt points out in his work *The Origins of Alliances*, “the weaker the state the more likely it is to bandwagon rather than balance” (Walt, 1987). Deteriorating economic conditions, with multiple miscalculated strategic choices and the continued militarisation of government functions, will further reduce Sri Lanka’s options, creating greater opportunities for the CPC to expand its influence within the Sri Lankan sociopolitical network.

With the present political crisis, where three cabinets were appointed in two months in April and May 2022, there is a direct impact on Rajapaksa’s semi-autocratic political model and foreign policy, especially toward China (Gupta, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2022). The proposed structural adjustment to the Constitution, the 21st Amendment, which will revise the earlier 19th Amendment and shift power toward the legislature, will help redemocratised the political environment (PTI, 2022).

Push and pull factors

Chinese push factors for a CPC model in Sri Lanka are evident from high-powered delegation visits such as the seven-member delegation led by Yang Jiechi, Politburo member of the CPC Central Committee, in October 2020 (ColomboPage, 2020c). China is using its already well-established diplomatic relationship with the Rajapaksa regime to accelerate BRI projects with more loans and by supporting the ailing economy and pushing its CPC political model (Srinivasan, 2021).

The Chinese embassy in Colombo plays a critical role in this strategy, actively engaging on social media and promoting an alternative model in Sri Lanka. China's endorsement of a particular kind of regime in Sri Lanka is clear; supporting the militarised model and voting in favour of Sri Lanka at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution in Geneva are clear push factors from China. China is clearly pushing for an alternative political model, accelerating with the CPC centenary and founded on close historical and present associations at the political party level. China will also push at different government levels, including at the public sector and bureaucratic levels, on training for public sector efficiency (Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration, n.d.). Another evident push factor of the Chinese political model involves media personnel, academia, and think tanks (*Colombo Gazette*, 2020b; *Daily FT*, 2018). According to a Chatham House report, Chinese State-Owned Enterprises have been actively involved in shaping Sri Lankan policies in labour, environment, and local institutions (Wignaraja, et al., 2020).

After China backed Sri Lanka by voting against the UNHRC resolution, Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary Jayanath Colombage, clearly expressed that the resolution was a "Western conspiracy" against the nation (*Tamil Guardian*, 2021). This assessment has accelerated a pull from the Sri Lankan government to adopt the Chinese model. The telephonic conversation between President Xi and President Gotabaya Rajapaksa after the UNHRC resolution provides a clear indication of this—President Rajapaksa thanked China for its support at the UNHRC and further explained, "The eradication of poverty is my prime concern for which we can take a cue from China." The Chinese development model is to be emulated in the provincial areas of the country to bring development (*Daily News*, 2021), perhaps to support President's 'Gama Samaga Pilisandara' (Direct Dialogue with the Village) initiative (*Daily News*, 2020c).

This strong pull factor will go beyond existing infrastructure diplomacy. Hambantota Port and Port City and their new laws are clear indications that China intends to stay on the island for a long time. The current development model in Sri Lanka, including its important component of majoritarian militaristic politics, shows a growing inclination towards the CPC's development model and politics.

Conclusion

The strongly majoritarian government elected in Sri Lanka in 2020, comprising President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, promised political reform, ranging from constitutional change to moving power from the legislature to the executive. Unsurprisingly, the political influence of the CPC in Sri Lanka has accelerated since then. The IDCPC has played a considerable role in the administration of Sri Lanka by President Rajapaksa and the ruling political party, SLPP. The partnership and strategic positioning of the SLPP and IDCPC have created an active affinity to adopt China's political and economic development model.

There have been changes in Sri Lanka's foreign policy, from a balanced foreign policy to a hedging one with China. The heavy militarisation of government functions, and the weaponisation of trade unions against multilateral development projects with India, Japan, and the United States, are all symptoms of this trend.

These symptoms indicate a growing domestic shift toward a more centrally controlled form of government, contrary to democratic principles, in a semi-autocratic model accepted by China. This political shift toward a semi-autocratic model has had significant consequences for Sri Lanka and the region. Under the Rajapaksas, the CPC's approach fits well and will have long-term implications for the nation's already frayed democratic fabric. How far this trend will continue will depend on the domestic political climate.

Table 1: Exchanges between CPC and political parties in Sri Lanka

Date and Event	Attended by	Remarks
22 to 27 December 2015: Sri Lankan officials visit China for 'Belt and Road' government training, co-sponsored by the Ministry of Public Administration and Management of Sri Lanka, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and China Merchants Bureau Shekou Industrial Zone Holdings Co., Ltd.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 bureau-level officials from Sri Lanka 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The visit includes classroom lectures, government exchanges, and field research. • Chinese experts give presentations on China's political, economic, cultural, ecological and international relations (<i>Xinhua</i>, 2015).
12 to 15 December 2017: Visit to Sri Lanka by a delegation of the 19th National Congress of the CPC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wang Yajun, assistant minister of the IDCPC • Ranil Wickremesinghe, prime minister of Sri Lanka • Kabir Hashim, general secretary of the United Nationalist Party • Mayantha Dissanayake, general secretary of the Liberal Party • Leaders of United Nationalist Party and left-wing political parties of Sri Lanka 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wickremesinghe and others praise the fruitful results of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, and express their expectations to further strengthen exchanges and cooperation between Sri Lanka and China (IDCPC, 2017).
26 May 2018: Special meeting of the High-level Dialogue between the Communist Party of China and the World Political Parties and the SCO Political Parties Forum held in Shenzhen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the Foreign Liaison Department of the CPC Central Committee • Deputy general secretary of the Sri Lankan Liberal Party and adviser to the president 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The two sides exchange views on the development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the relations between the two parties (IDCPC, 2018a).
2 August 2018: Guo Yezhou meets with delegation of officials of the United Nationalist Party of Sri Lanka in Colombo, Sri Lanka.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the IDCPC • Ranil Wickremesinghe, prime minister of Sri Lanka and leader of United Nationalist Party 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wickremesinghe states that exchanges between the two governments and political parties should continue to be strengthened, cooperation under the Belt and Road framework should be deepened, and bilateral relations should continue to be enhanced. (IDCPC, 2018b).

Date and Event	Attended by	Remarks
10 October 2018: Meeting between Guo Yezhou and Mahinda K. Samara Sinha, vice chairman of Sri Lanka's Liberal Party and minister of Ports and Shipping in Beijing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the IDCPC • Mahinda K. Samara Sinha, minister of ports and shipping and vice chairman of Liberal Party in Sri Lanka 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The two sides exchange views on China-Sri Lanka relations, bilateral exchanges, and China-Sri Lanka "Belt and Road" cooperation (IDCPC, 2018c).
25 June 2019: Meeting between Guo Yezhou and Mayantha Dissanayake, party leader and chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the parliament in Beijing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the IDCPC • Mayantha Dissanayake, party leader and chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guo Yezhou speaks of the progress made in China-Sri Lanka relations, and the cooperation on major projects between the two sides under the framework of the "Belt and Road." • Guo Yezhou introduces China's position on the issue of Sino-US economic and trade frictions. • He states that China will firmly stand with the Sri Lankan government and people and support Sri Lanka's fight against terrorism. • Mayantha Dissanayake similarly expresses support for China on the international stage (IDCPC, 2019a).
18 September 2019: Sirisena meets with Chen Min'er in Colombo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chen Min'er, member of the Politburo and secretary of Chongqing Municipal Committee • Other delegates from CPC • Maithripala Sirisena, president of Sri Lanka. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The visit involves inspection visits to the Colombo Port City, the Colombo International Container Terminals and other projects, and also a visit to the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (IDCPC, 2019b).

Date and Event	Attended by	Remarks
18 December 2019: Song Tao meets with Karu Jayasuriya, UNP leader and speaker of Parliament of Sri Lanka in Beijing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song Tao, minister of the IDCPC • Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the IDCPC • Karu Jayasuriya, leader of United Nationalist Party and speaker of Parliament of Sri Lanka 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both sides discuss the positive bilateral relations between China and Sri Lanka and promote inter-party exchanges between CPC and UNP on party governance and state administration. Both sides also agree to strengthen cooperation to promote development in Sri Lanka (IDCPC, 2019c).
11 June 2020: Establishment of the China–Sri Lanka Belt and Road Political Parties Joint Consultation Mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song Tao, minister of the IDCPC • Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the IDCPC • Relevant principal officials from the National Development and Reform Commission and the National Health Commission, China. • Leaders of the People’s Front, United National Party, Sri Lanka Freedom Party, and People’s United Front of Sri Lanka • Members from think tanks and the business communities of Sri Lanka and China. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The meeting aims to strengthen the exchange of experience in state governance and consolidate political and public support for China–Sri Lanka relations. • Both sides agree to promote bilateral cooperation in all areas and contribute to the political strength of the high-quality Belt and Road cooperation. The major themes include the pandemic and development (IDCPC, 2020a; Hui, 2020a).
26 August 2020: Online video talks between senior leaders of the IDCPC and the ruling party of Sri Lanka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the IDCPC • Song Tao, minister of the IDCPC • Basil Rajapaksa, founder and national organiser of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) • G.L. Pieris, minister of education and chairman of the SLPP • Sagara Kariyawasam, general secretary of the SLPP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The meeting is held in the context of the post-election victory of the SLPP. • It introduces the third volume of Xi Jinping: The Governance of China. The CPC’s experience in party building and philosophy of state governance are of significant interest to the SLPP (IDCPC, 2020b; Hui 2020b).

Date and Event	Attended by	Remarks
4 November 2020: Seminar on Governance Experience held online via video link between CPC and People's Front of Sri Lanka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the IDCPC • Song Tao, minister of the IDCPC • Liu Cigui, secretary of the CPC Hainan Provincial Committee • Sun Dahai, member of the Standing Committee of CPC Hainan Provincial Committee and Secretary General of CPC Hainan Provincial Committee • Qi Zhenhong, Chinese ambassador to Sri Lanka • Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena, speaker of the Parliament of Sri Lanka • G. L. Peiris, chairman of the People's Front and education minister • Namal Rajapaksa, leader of the People's Front Youth and sports and youth affairs minister • Ramesh Pathirana, Minister of Plantation of Sri Lanka • Sagara Kariyawasam, General Secretary of the People's Front • Other senior leaders of the People's Front, cabinet ministers and state ministers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chinese side share outcomes of the 19th Congress. • The Chinese side expresses that Hainan province is willing to strengthen cooperation with Sri Lanka in the fields of tropical agriculture, economy and trade, people-to-people engagement, education, and tourism through inter-party channels, and work with Sri Lanka to make new contributions to the construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (IDCPC, 2020c).

Date and Event	Attended by	Remarks
<p>15 June 2021: CPC Centennial Celebration organised by the political parties of Sri Lanka along with the IDCPC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song Tao, minister of the IDCPC • Qi Zhenhong, Chinese Ambassador to Sri Lanka • Chen Zhou, vice minister of IDCPC <p>Main leaders of 12 major political parties in Sri Lanka, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mahinda Rajapaksa, leader of the People's Front Party and prime minister of Sri Lanka, • Maithripala Sirisena, head of Freedom Party and former president, • Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the United National Party and former prime minister, • Dr J. Weerasinghe, general secretary of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka. • Dinesh Gunawardena, leader of party of the People's United Front and foreign minister of Sri Lanka • Other cabinet ministers and members of parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chinese side expresses the CPC's willingness to work with political parties in Sri Lanka to strengthen communication and mutual learning in party building and administration, deepen the integration of national development strategies and policies, and promote cooperation between the two countries in anti-epidemic, poverty alleviation and the joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative for new results through consultation platform. • The Sri Lankan side expresses that all political parties in Sri Lanka attach great importance to developing friendly relationship with the CPC, and are willing to further implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two parties and countries. They are willing to continuously deepen political mutual trust, promote cooperation between both countries in local regions, and strengthen international cooperation with China (IDCPC, 2021).

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Communication Strategies

07

Charm Offensive: Shaping Chinese Perceptions in Nepal

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Abstract

In recent years, much of the focus of China's new engagements in Nepal has been on converging interests or increasing Chinese economic and political influence in the country. But little attention has been devoted to analysing China's cultural diplomacy, which seeks to reinforce a positive image of China in Nepal, and how it shapes public narratives in the country. This chapter carries out a qualitative analysis of China's soft power influence to show how Beijing positions itself as a 'good neighbour' to Nepal. It uses select case studies to analyse China's preferred semiotics and visible public diplomacy in the years since 2008. In doing so, this chapter explains how China has attempted to forge a favourable narrative in Nepal that upholds its interests.

Recommended citation:

Mulmi, A.R. (2023). Charm Offensive: Shaping Chinese Perceptions in Nepal. In Xavier, C. & Jacob, J. T. (Eds). *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools* (pp. 87-99). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/81RR0dB>

Introduction

China's increasing political and economic influence in Nepal has been the subject of several studies in recent years, especially following the undeclared 2015 Indian 'blockade', Nepal joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017, and the proposed trans-Himalayan railway network connecting Tibet to Kathmandu. However, a wider study on how China is perceived in Nepal, and how it shapes public narratives in the country via its diplomatic mission's public outreach programmes, has not yet been conducted.

In this chapter, using select qualitative case studies, I argue that China has expanded its soft diplomacy efforts in Nepal since 2008 in a bid to create a narrative that is favourable to its goals. Similarly, the semiotics around China's definition of bilateral ties inform us of its efforts to include Nepal within its international narrative. Finally, China's outreach programmes in Nepal with respect to Tibet seek to emphasise its position in and sovereignty over Tibet in a neighbouring country with a large number of Tibetan exiles (and which has previously witnessed large-scale demonstrations by such exiles). Seen together, these soft diplomacy efforts intend to promote a positive image of China in a country that only became an immediate neighbour in 1950. As such, these efforts must be regarded as complementary to China's wider influence in Nepal.

A focus on cultural outreach

In an interview in June 2007, the then Chinese ambassador in Kathmandu, Zheng Xianglin, began by saying, "China doesn't speak out regularly about Nepal's politics, but when it does, it does not mince its words". One of the questions put to the ambassador was, "Why does China conduct a low-profile diplomacy in Nepal as compared to other influential

nations?" (Sharma, 2007). In 2021, such a question would elicit extreme surprise. In 2020 alone, the current ambassador, Hou Yanqi, gave at least six interviews to the Nepali press¹ and wrote at least five articles for Nepali newspapers.² Chinese diplomacy in Nepal is no longer regarded as low profile, especially since the ambassador's visits with Nepali political leaders during the crisis in the Nepal Communist Party in 2020 were widely covered by both domestic and international media.

Ambassador Hou's term, which began in December 2018, is marked by a new scrutiny arising from China's perceived influence on Nepali political actors and institutions as well as Kathmandu's professed policy of non-alignment. Such scrutiny is natural. The global US–China contest has left its mark on Nepali internal politics, giving rise to much discussion on the US' Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact and Nepal's involvement in China's BRI. Similarly, high-level Indian authorities have alleged that Nepal's protests against a new Indian road in the contested territory of Kalapani were encouraged by China, especially because Nepal has been perceived as growing closer to China since the 2015 'unofficial' Indian blockade.

Prior to 2020, however, Ambassador Hou's public presence was distinguished by her activities in the sphere of cultural diplomacy. In March 2019, on International Women's Day, the ambassador and her colleagues danced to a Nepali song while wearing traditional Nepali attire (Hou, 2019b). In December 2019, she asked Nepalis to follow her and retweet her post about a Chinese film festival to win free tickets (Khabarhub, 2019). Then, on the last day of 2019, she posted several pictures of herself at various tourist sites in Kathmandu to promote the Visit Nepal Year 2020 campaign. She wrote, "Beautiful Nepal with history, diversity and nature deserves a visit" (Hou, 2019c). On Dashain, Nepal's biggest festival, the ambassador released a video of her and

¹ The ambassador's interviews were carried by the *Naya Patrika*, *Annapurna Express*, *Online Khabar* (in both English and Nepali), *Gorkhapatra*, ABC Television, Nepal Television, and Radio Nepal.

² In *Republica*, *Annapurna Post*, *Naya Patrika*, and twice in *Gorkhapatra*.

her colleagues singing the popular Nepali folk song, “Resham Firiri” (see Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2020).

Ambassador Hou’s push for cultural initiatives is, in many ways, a continuation of earlier Chinese moves towards cultivating soft power in Nepal. Her predecessor, Ambassador Yu Hong, had similarly launched books (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018b), attended a Nepal–China literature seminar (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018c) and the launch of the Nepal Tourism website in the Chinese language (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018e), and joined the opening ceremony of a Chinese language training course (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018d). As Yu wrote in August 2018,

“China held seven China Festivals and eight China Education Fairs successfully in Nepal. The exchanges of literature, publication, music and fine arts between the two countries are frequent... The Governance of China (Volume I) written by President Xi Jinping was translated into Nepali language and widely welcomed in Nepal”. (Hong, 2018)

Such public diplomacy comes into renewed focus with President Xi Jinping’s emphasis on cultural cooperation and people-to-people exchanges as a key element of Beijing’s foreign policy, especially in neighbouring countries. In 2013, Xi said,

“We should well introduce China’s domestic and foreign policies to the outside world, clearly tell China’s story, spread China’s voice, and integrate the Chinese dream with the desire of the people of the neighbouring countries for a good life, and with the prospects for regional development, letting the awareness of community of common destiny take root in the neighbouring countries”. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2013)

With respect to Nepal, Chinese public diplomacy emphasises the shared histories of the two countries and places the overall bilateral relationship within a framework of mutual respect, while also underlining the

importance of Nepal in Beijing’s worldview. Chinese diplomacy makes itself visible to the common Nepali through cultural diplomacy tools and raises Nepal’s prestige via efforts such as choosing Nepal to be the theme country at the Beijing International Photo Exhibition in October 2020 (RSS, 2020).

Such public outreach tools have increasingly been used by the Chinese mission in Nepal since 2008, when Kathmandu witnessed months-long protests against the Beijing Olympics by Tibetan exiles. This was also a year when China lost its “permanent friend” in the country—i.e., the monarchy—after Nepal became a republic (for more on this, see Mulmi, 2021). The then ambassador, Zheng Xianglin, urged the interim Nepali government under Girija Prasad Koirala to “honestly carry out its commitment and not allow these anti-Chinese activities to happen so rapidly in Nepal” (cited in Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 58). While China has engaged widely with political and security establishments via aid and agreements, its efforts to change the way Tibet is viewed in Nepal have not been studied much.

In 2009, the *Tibet of China: Past and Present* photo exhibition was organised in Kathmandu on the “50th anniversary of democratic reforms” to show “the process of Tibet from darkness to brightness, from poverty to prosperity, from autocratic rule to democracy, and from self-seclusion to opening up” (Sitaula & Zang, 2008). The exhibition was among the first of its kind and sought to shift the narrative on Tibet to align more closely with Beijing’s views. The then Nepal minister for information and communications, Shankar Pokharel, said that the exhibit “unveiled the bitter truth of past as well as glimpse of prosperous present of Tibet” (Sitaula & Zang, 2008). Thereafter, although the scope of exhibitions has widened to include Chinese book fairs (in 2014), intangible culture (in 2017), and Tibetan embroidery and arts (in 2017), the emphasis has been on Xi Jinping’s new neighbourhood policy push for cultural cooperation as well as the need for China to promote its own narrative in Nepal.

These select instances, and an analysis of the semiotics of China in Nepal, allow us to grasp the Chinese view of Nepal and China's success in shaping a positive perception of Beijing in the country. As former Nepali ambassador to China, Leela Mani Paudyal wrote in July 2020 on the 65th anniversary of Nepal–China diplomatic ties,

A prosperous China is an opportunity for Nepal. The two countries maintain similar views on almost all regional and international issues, and cooperate on matters of world peace and regional stability. Because of growing ties and trust in each other, Nepal and China share an unbreakable bond, and are today trustworthy and excellent friends among neighbours. (Paudyal, 2020a, translation mine)

The former ambassador also hailed the elevation of ties to a “strategic partnership” during Xi Jinping’s short but effective state visit in October 2019 as “historic”: “The strategic partnership will address contemporary needs. As a rising global economic power, China will fully assist the Nepali people’s aspirations for development and prosperity” (Paudyal, 2020a, translation mine).

Further, bilateral ties between the two countries are posited as “problem-free” and “everlasting” by Nepali diplomats; the countries are dubbed “good neighbors with mutual political trust” by Chinese envoys (see Maskey, 2020; Hou, 2019a).

A former Nepali ambassador to China, Mahendra Bahadur Pandey, even went so far as to call reports suggesting that Nepal and China do not share good relations any more “fake propaganda”. In his words, “We don’t have any reason not to have very good relations with China... We have different political culture[s], but we still share many similarities” (Xie & Bai, 2020). China is regarded as a “true friend at the time of need” (Maskey, 2020), and Chinese aid is seen by Nepali diplomats as being implemented “without strings of political covenants and policy interventions” (Paudyal, 2020b). Such conceptions of the relationship, and the possible benefits Nepal can derive from growing closer to China, shape the narrative in distinctive ways, allowing China to be seen as a “good neighbour”. This positioning contrasts Nepal’s relations with other powers such as the United States (US) and India.

In recent years, Chinese foreign missions have become increasingly active on social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter, although both are not officially allowed in China. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@MFA_China) joined Twitter in October 2019 and Ambassador Hou Yanqi joined in June 2019 (@PRCAmbNepal). The mission in Nepal joined Twitter in December 2021 (@PRCSpoxNepal). An Associated Press investigation revealed that “Chinese diplomatic accounts have more than tripled on Twitter and more than doubled on Facebook since mid-2019” (Kinetz, 2021).

In a developing country like Nepal, where internet penetration is rapidly rising, social media channels allow foreign missions to convey their ideas directly to the population. At least 24 million Nepalis, or 82.79% of the population, have access to the internet today (RSS, 2021). Around 60% of users access the internet via mobile networks. While accurate statistics on social media usage are difficult to come by, a report suggests that 13 million Nepali users are active on various social media channels, with this number growing by 30% annually (Kemp, 2021).³

The number of followers of various diplomatic social media pages is as follows [dated 16 May 2022]:

Facebook

- Chinese Embassy in Nepal: 20,000 followers (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2020)
- US Embassy in Nepal: 4.4 million followers (US Embassy, Nepal, 2010)
- Indian Embassy in Nepal: 4.4 million followers (India in Nepal (Embassy of India Kathmandu), 2011)
- UK Embassy in Nepal: 85,000 followers (UK in Nepal, 2011)

Twitter

- US Embassy in Nepal [@USEmbassyNepal]: 439,445 followers (US Embassy Nepal [@USEmbassyNepal], 2009)
- Ambassador Randy Berry [@USAmbNepal]: 244,895 followers (Ambassador Randy Berry [@USAmbNepal], 2015)
- Indian Embassy in Nepal [@IndiaInNepal]: 85,370 followers (Indian Embassy in Nepal [@IndiaInNepal], 2012)
- Ambassador Hou Yanqi [@PRCAmbNepal]: 65,430 followers (Ambassador Hou Yanqi [@PRCAmbNepal], 2019)
- Chinese Embassy in Nepal [@PRCSpoxNepal]: 1,530 followers (Chinese Embassy in Nepal [@PRCSpoxNepal], 2021)
- UK Embassy in Nepal [@UKinNepal]: 38,930 followers (UK Embassy in Nepal [@UKinNepal], 2012)
- Ambassador Nicola Pollitt [@NicolaPollittUK]: 12,419 followers (Ambassador Nicola Pollitt [@NicolaPollittUK], 2019)

³ The total number of users may not correlate with the number of unique individuals because of the existence of multiple accounts and pages.

The semiotics of China in Nepal

In October 2019, before Xi Jinping visited Kathmandu, his essay highlighting areas for future cooperation was published in several Nepali newspapers, both in English and Nepali. China, he wrote, wanted to “deepen strategic communication”, “broaden practical cooperation”, “expand people-to-people exchanges”, and “enhance security cooperation” with Nepal. The op-ed cited the historical and cultural linkages between the two countries centred around Buddhism as examples of “lasting friendship between our peoples” (*Xinhua*, 2019). Xi called the growing bilateral relationship an example of “good brothers who always stand alongside each other”, listing the aid and effort provided by Nepal in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the rescue, relief, and reconstruction provided by China after the 2015 Nepal earthquake as “shining examples of how China and Nepal look out for each other like brothers do”.

By framing its policy to include Nepal within the ambit of kinship ties, and by subsequently creating an imagined community, Beijing allows for a closer—but more hierarchical—imagination of the relationship. The semiotics associated with China’s presence in Nepal, although yet to replicate the “gift of development” vocabulary seen in Tibet, emphasise the long-lasting friendship between the two nations. Geographer Emily Yeh (2013) documents this relationship as “a series of acts of altruism and generosity, bringing benefit and generating positive sentiment” (p. 14). This shared goodwill has been further cemented in the form of the Kalanki underpass built as part of the Kathmandu Ring Road expansion, a Chinese aid project that cost NPR 5.13 billion (Ojha, 2019).

In a November 2020 op-ed, amid reports of Chinese border encroachment in the far-west district of Humla and restrictions on cargo traffic at the two land border points of Rasuwagadhi and Tatopani, ambassador Hou acknowledged the Nepal–China border as bearing “testimony to peace and friendship between the two countries” and “a bond for

win-win cooperation” (Hou, 2020). Suggesting that China had operated freight functions at the land border-crossings “to our best”, the ambassador ended the essay by calling for the border to become “a bond to build a shared bright future for China and Nepal”.

A description of the border as “a bridge for mutual assistance” gains significance when viewed within the context in which the op-ed was published. Several reports have highlighted, and continue to highlight, the erratic and unilateral disruptions to the movement of cargo traffic due to China’s concerns about Nepal’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and traders equating the situation to an “undeclared blockade” (Prasain, 2021). Further, the ambassador described Chinese infrastructural developments in the Himalayan regions as benefiting Nepalis across the border. This was also repeated in the Chinese Embassy’s letter to the Nepali Congress after claims of border encroachment by a Congress MP from Humla (Basnet, 2020). In a February 2021 interview, ambassador Hou refuted all claims of an “undeclared blockade” and compared the ties between the two countries to “sailors in the same boat” (Pandey, 2021, translation mine). When asked why the passage of goods from China had become erratic, the ambassador cited the Covid-19 pandemic and the geology of the region, stating that China had never imposed a blockade on Nepal in the past or present and would not do so in the future either—here, the subtle reference to China’s position in contrast to India’s was not lost.

Beyond these superlatives, however, one of the most important takeaways from official Chinese semiotics in Nepal has been the pivot to the north, especially in terms of connectivity and economic worldview. During his 2019 visit, Xi Jinping said: “[China] will help Nepal realize its dream of becoming a land-linked country from a land-locked one” (Sharma, 2019). Beyond addressing Nepal’s insecurities of being a “land-locked” nation that is economically reliant on India, the Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network, as posited under the BRI, will also open up new

vistas for Nepali policymakers. As former ambassador Paudyal wrote in April 2019:

“Nepal can take advantage of the BRI to join the global economy via China and the latter’s growth in tourism. We have an opportunity to make our economy globally competitive by utilising China’s rapidly growing foreign investment in our infrastructure development, modernising agriculture, and enhancing industrial and services production and productivity... Nepal can take advantage of the recently inked transit agreement and China’s extensive rail network from Southeast Asia to Europe to connect it to the global economy and diversify our foreign trade”. (Paudyal, 2019, translation mine)

While the train from Tibet is one of the most discussed markers of this proposed network, smaller projects such as the optical fibre network from China, which became operational in January 2018, are also viewed as part of the connectivity network and as reducing Nepal’s dependence on India (Nepal was solely reliant on India for its internet bandwidth until then). Further, the imagination of Nepal as China’s gateway into South Asia via these connectivity projects looms large. As Xi wrote, “a trans-Himalayan connectivity network will serve not just our two countries but also the region as a whole” (*Xinhua*, 2019).

“Friendship across the Himalayas”: Nepal joins the Beijing narrative

Following Xi Jinping’s statement about the bilateral relationship being a “friendship across the Himalayas”, Chinese officials have increasingly begun to refer to Nepal–China ties as a “friendship across Mt. Zhumulangma”, the Sinicised name for Mount Everest,⁴ as Ambassador Hou did in her November 2020 op-ed. After the joint announcement of the new height of the peak in December 2020,

the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson referred to the height as “a new milestone for China–Nepal friendship”, the “new height of China–Nepal cooperation”, and a “new level of human spirit”. Further, in connection to the Covid-19 pandemic, the spokesperson also said,

“No matter how high Mt. Qomolangma is, it can be climbed. No matter how great the difficulty is, it can be overcome... As long as countries work together in good faith as China and Nepal do, we will finally defeat the virus”. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2020c)

China’s quest for driving the narrative on Everest—which it calls Qomolangma, a variation of the indigenous Tibetan name for the peak—began in the early days of its relationship with Nepal. The naming of the peak after the British surveyor-general George Everest is “unacceptable” to China, which regards the name “Everest” as a colonial relic (*China Daily*, 2002). It cites a 1958 paper by Lin Chao titled “The Discovery and Name of Qomolangma” which highlighted the Qing dynasty surveys in Tibet in the eighteenth century:

“Those who discovered Mount Qomolangma first were Tibetans living in southern Tibet and they so named it. And those who first recorded the peak on a map using scientific methods were Chinese surveyors Shengzhu, Churbizanbo and Lanbenzhanba, who conducted the survey in Tibet between 1715 and 1717”. (*China Daily*, 2002)

The mapping of the peak, according to China, precedes British attempts by at least 130 years. “The British approach to the name of Qomolangma was to insist on calling it Everest despite the fact that it had already had a Tibetan name. This was ridiculous” (*China Daily*, 2002; also see *Xinhua*, 2020).

⁴ Also spelt “Qomolangma” and “Chomolangma”.

Chinese insistence on the name was also evident during the 1960 border discussions between the then Nepali prime minister, B. P. Koirala, and Mao Zedong. When China claimed Everest entirely, Koirala countered Mao's assertions. Mao replied, "But you do not even have a name for it in your language, and you call it Mount Everest". Koirala writes,

"I remembered at that time, or someone had reminded me, that it was known as 'Sagarmatha'. Even though I was new to that term, I replied, 'You do not have a name for the peak either. 'Chomolongma' is a Tibetan name'. Mao replied, 'Tibet is China'". (Koirala 2001, p. 227)

Eventually, in 1961, a political decision was reached to share the summit as an international boundary line between the two countries.

The recent joint announcement of the new height was the culmination of a 15-year quest from the Chinese side. In 2005, Chinese surveyors measured the peak at 8,844.43 m. Nepal disagreed; it considered the height to be 8,848 m. In 2017, the Nepali Department of Survey began its own measurements, but it could not announce the results because the joint statement issued after Xi Jinping's 2019 visit to Kathmandu declared that both countries would announce the height together. The department had not been informed of the agreement (Giri, 2019). In December 2020, the new height was jointly announced by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Nepali counterpart, Pradeep Gyawali (evidently, the peak had risen by 86 cm).

Gyawali called it a "special moment" and said that the Nepal-China relationship "will develop further as high as Mount Qomolangma"; his Chinese counterpart said the new height "not only represents the significant importance to the development of China-Nepal relations attached by both sides, but also the traditional friendship and mutual strategic trust between the two countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020b).

China's insistence on the joint announcement is part of its quest to shape its own international narrative, which it believes is not favourable. As noted by researcher Nadege Rolland, the phrase "huayuquan", translated as "speaking rights" or "international speaking rights", "reflects Beijing's aspirations not only to have the right to speak on the international stage but also to be listened to, to influence others' perceptions of China, and eventually to shape the discourse and norms that underpin the international order" (Rolland, 2020, p. 7).

China seeks to establish its position in the international discourse around the peak, by insisting, since at least 2012 according to a report, that both countries agree on the height of Everest and that the name be internationally rejected in favour of the Sinicised Tibetan name (Khadka, 2020). China's need to shape international discourse was most pressing during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the US accused China of mishandling the pandemic.

As international opinion on China grows more partisan, China's response to the US's accusations suggests that it will ask its bilateral partners to endorse China's positions publicly. As with Everest, Nepal has joined the Beijing narrative on other issues. As early as April 2020, Nepal congratulated China "for successfully containing the spread of Covid-19", and said that "China's efforts and progress in outbreak control have set a fine example for the world" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020a).

In July 2020, at a meeting between the foreign ministers of China, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, China announced that the four countries would "reject politicizing the pandemic", a direct riposte to American charges; this statement was also repeated at the April 2021 meeting of the five ministers (Ministry of Foreign of the People's Republic of China, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2021). Nepal further supported the new Hong Kong security laws (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2020) and was among

the 50 signatories to a letter supporting China's policies in Xinjiang at the United Nations in July 2019 (Putz, 2020).

Imagining cultural ties: Tibet, China, and Nepal

In November 2019, I visited China's Tibet Trade Fair in Kathmandu, where Tibetan and Chinese sales representatives were selling bottled mineral water from a glacier below Everest (on the Tibetan side), pitching real-estate construction projects, and selling various herbal medicines. The emphasis on "China's Tibet" was immediately perceptible. That Tibet is an inalienable part of China continues to be a core feature of the One China policy, and Nepal's adherence to this is repeated in every joint statement by the two countries. Taken together with other cultural diplomacy efforts such as the March 2019 photo exhibition in Kathmandu marking the 60th anniversary of democratic reforms in Tibet, these public exhibitions seek to explicitly underline China's sovereignty over Tibet and to showcase a narrative on Tibet that is entirely different from that led by the Tibetan government-in-exile, especially after the 2008 protests by Tibetan exiles in Kathmandu.

While China's outreach to the political and security establishment after the 2008 protests drove home its primary interest in securing the border to curtail the passage of Tibetans into Nepal and prevent any Tibetan political expression within the country, its cultural diplomacy efforts intended to take its message, in line with the earlier quoted mission of "huayuquan", to the larger population. In March 2009, an exhibition in Beijing sought to dispel the "western fabrications" around Tibet. The then Nepali ambassador, Tanka Prasad Karki, who was among the 150 diplomats who visited the exhibition, said,

"Tibet has undergone a massive transformation for the better. You cannot believe that so much transformation has already taken place in such a short period of time. The life of Tibetan people has already changed so much for the better".

(National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2009)

The 2009 *Tibet of China: Past and Present* photo exhibition in Kathmandu, one of the first such outreach programmes after the 2008 protests, aimed to show that "Tibet is in its best period of historical development after its 50-year reform" (Sitaula & Zang, 2008). A Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) leader said, "The old picture of Tibet has changed now" and that Nepal "should not be the playground to plot anti-China activities". The official China Central Television (CCTV) report also quoted a Grade 12 student who said, "[A]fter visiting this exhibition I came to be informed about the drastic change in Tibet socially as well as economically" (Sitaula & Zang, 2008).

Similarly, in 2014 and 2016, Nepali delegates were part of the Forum on the Development of Tibet, China. In the Lhasa Consensus document released after the 2014 forum, the emphasis on steering the narrative on Tibet closer to Beijing's version was clear (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2014). In 2018, the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu held a reception to celebrate the Tibetan Losar New Year. During this event, Ambassador Yu Hong said the "support of the patriotic overseas Tibetans in Nepal contributes a lot to the development of China–Nepal relations" (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018a).

What is most noticeable in these cultural outreach programmes is the absence of the Dalai Lama and any elements associated with him. These exhibits are grounded in China's quest for sovereignty over the Tibetan plateau. It is also evident that while the Tibetan geography shapes contemporary discourse via infrastructure projects that intend to connect Tibet with Nepal, and that ancient Tibetan history with Nepal is recalled to give continuity to bilateral relations, the emphasis on "China's Tibet" ensures that these exhibits—and other cultural diplomacy efforts—are in line with Beijing's version of Tibet. Thus, China shapes its relations with Nepal via the ambit of Tibetan geography and history, but not via the Tibetan identity.

Conclusion

Much of the recent focus on the Chinese influence in Nepal has centred on its rising strategic, political, and economic clout in the country, contrasted with Nepal's geopolitical sandwiching between its two giant neighbours and its immediate tensions with India since the 2015 blockade. However, a study of China in Nepal only along these lines misses the crux of the matter: China's rising influence in the country is predicated—unlike in other developing nations—not on its economic investments (which are still fewer and smaller in value compared to those in other South Asian nations) but on it offering a greater political counterweight to India.

Bilateral ties, as we have seen, are regarded as problem-free, and China has been called an “all-weather friend” by Nepali leaders (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Liberia 2021; *The*

Kathmandu Post, 2017). The Trans-Himalayan Connectivity Network is posited as being replete with opportunities for development and investment for Nepal and as being a pathway to reduce Nepal's economic reliance on India by shifting its focus north. At the same time, China is equally keen to win the hearts and minds of the Nepali people, as its semiotics in the country clearly reflect. China positions itself as a neighbour that respects Nepal's sovereignty; moreover, its insistence on an international narrative that claims Nepal as a partner strengthens its position in the global contest for influence while according Kathmandu respect. At the same time, Beijing's cultural outreach programmes emphasise Chinese sovereignty over the Tibetan plateau, manifesting its insecurities even as it tries to draw attention away from them. Above all, such efforts in the public sphere create an imagination of China that is distinctive from how Nepal views its relationships with other countries.

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08

New Messengers: The Role of Traditional and New Media in China's External Messaging During India–China Border Crises

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the evolution of the Communist Party of China's external messaging targeting Indian audiences on traditional and new media platforms, including prominent, global social media, during the recent India–China border crises in 2017 and 2020. Following a push by President Xi Jinping in 2013 to “tell China's story well”, the country's state media outlets have launched ambitious efforts to boost China's messaging among Indian audiences. These efforts include advertorials published in Indian newspapers, fellowship programmes to host Indian journalists in China, and reaching out directly to Indian audiences through global social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. By embracing new media platforms, the Communist Party is now able to reach out to audiences in India directly as well as insert itself into domestic political debates—as seen during the border crises. This media strategy involves close coordination between traditional and new media. While the latter largely follows the narrative set by the traditional Party media, it has been given some space to refine the message to appeal to a foreign audience. However, broadcasting the official message abroad has invited new challenges for China, as it wrestles with the tension between domestic propaganda goals aimed at building support for the Party at home and external-messaging efforts to boost its image abroad. As China's messaging efforts during the crisis in Doklam in 2017 and following the Galwan Valley clash in 2020 showed, resolving this tension between domestic and foreign audiences remains a key challenge for the nation.

Recommended citation:

Krishnan, A. (2023). New Messengers: The Role of Traditional and New Media in China's External Messaging During India-China Border Crisis. In Xavier, C. & Jacob, J. T. (Eds). *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools* (pp. 101-110). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/RnQedXr>

Introduction

New media has emerged as a powerful platform for the Communist Party of China's (CPC) messaging, both at home and abroad. This chapter explores how global social media platforms are being used to amplify the message of traditional Party media outlets in the context of India–China relations, specifically, during the border crises in 2017 and 2020. Global social media platforms such as Twitter have become important information battlegrounds to sway narratives and influence public opinion.

One such battle played out on social media during the India–China border crisis of 2020, particularly in the wake of the clash on June 15, 2020, in Galwan Valley, which marked the most serious violence on the India–China border since 1967. Still, the 2020 crisis was not the first instance where social media played a prominent role. The 2017 border stand-off in Doklam, along the India–China–Bhutan trijunction, was a seminal moment for China in testing out a new information strategy. As the PLA's Western Theater Command put it following the stand-off, the strategy combined radio, TV, newspaper, and social media messaging to push China's narrative at home as well as abroad (Tu & Ge, 2018).

This chapter will assess the evolution of China's external messaging aimed at Indian audiences by examining its strategy across traditional and new media. By 'traditional' media, this chapter refers to Party-run newspapers and television. 'New' media refers to the use of digital platforms. However, the two categories are not distinct, considering that the most prominent users of Twitter and Facebook in China are Party-media organisations that are permitted to use platforms that are otherwise banned in China.

By embracing new media platforms, the Party is now able to reach out to audiences in India and around the world directly, which has enabled it to insert itself into domestic political debates. This evolving media strategy involves

close coordination between traditional and new media, wherein the latter largely follows the narrative set by traditional Party media, but it is given some space to refine the message to appeal to a global audience.

Delivering domestic messaging to foreign audiences has created new challenges for China, as it wrestles with the tension between domestic propaganda goals that are aimed at building support for the Party at home and external messaging efforts to boost China's image abroad. These two goals, as the India–China border crises showed, are not always aligned. Resolving this tension between domestic and global audiences remains a key challenge for China's external messaging.

Telling China's story well

The increasing importance of social media in the context of India–China relations was felt during the 2017 stand-off in Doklam. However, the rise of social media in China had dramatically altered the media landscape years before Doklam with the launch of the microblogging platform Weibo by the Internet giant Sina in 2009—the same year that China banned Twitter and YouTube in the aftermath of the riots in Xinjiang (July 2017). This was followed by the launch of WeChat by Tencent in 2011, which is an extraordinarily broad platform that spans instant messaging, a Facebook-like social network, along with an online payment system and e-commerce.

Social media was initially seen as a threat to the Communist Party's monopoly over information, allowing Internet users to post information that would ordinarily be censored by state media, triggering a tug-of-war between Internet users and the state. The CPC, however, became increasingly adept in asserting its control over this new domain through a combination of censorship and the use of sophisticated approaches to steer the conversation (Qin, Strömberg & Wu, 2017). Chinese social media platforms emerged as a useful outlet for authorities to not only monitor local issues and protests

and gauge public sentiment but also to disseminate propaganda through a layered apparatus, comprising official government accounts, official media, individual journalists, and a network of tens of thousands of pro-government accounts that are sometimes disparagingly called the ‘50 cent party’ in China, as that is the amount they are supposedly paid per post (Qin, Strömberg & Wu, 2017).

In this new social media landscape, the focus of China’s information strategy evolved from merely restricting information that is deemed sensitive to a more sophisticated approach of ‘guiding public opinion’. This applied to both internal and external messaging. As Xi Jinping put it in an ideology work conference in 2013, China’s media needed to prioritise “telling China’s story well” while “meticulously and properly conducting external propaganda, innovating external propaganda methods, working hard to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate the Chinese and the foreign, telling China’s story well, and communicating China’s voice well” (Bandurski, 2020).

China's external messaging in India: Traditional platforms

The 2013 ideology work conference was a major turning point in China’s external messaging efforts, heralding changes in China’s external propaganda on traditional as well as new platforms. With a more ambitious plan backed by a flood of funding, the conference accelerated traditional Chinese broadcasters’ efforts to go global. Two new global hubs of CGTN or the *China Global Television Network*—a rebranding and expansion of China Central Television’s English-language channel—were launched in Kenya and the United States.

China’s ‘big four’ Party media—China Central Television (CCTV), People’s Daily (includes *Renmin Ribao*, the flagship Chinese newspaper; *People’s Daily*, an English-

language website, and the Chinese and English editions of *Global Times*, or *Huanqiu Shibao*), *Xinhua News Agency*, and China Radio International (CRI)—all play key roles in external messaging. CGTN has had to rely on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook to grow its footprint as it faces regulatory hurdles in securing broadcast rights in many markets, for instance, in the UK and Australia (Tobitt, 2021). The channel is not widely available in India as well. However, it has grown its footprint on YouTube and has 2.82 million subscribers as of May 2022 (CGTN, n.d.). As part of its effort to go global, as well as to reach more Indian viewers, CGTN has hired international editors to refine its message and has sought out Indian journalists to help further its reach in recent years. As of August 2022, the channel employed at least four senior Indian editors in its headquarters in Beijing, all of whom had previously worked on Indian television channels.

CGTN is not alone in recruiting Indian journalists. *China Daily*, the official English-language newspaper of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, employs at least three senior Indian editors. Journalists from India have been sought not only for their English-language skills but to help engage an Indian audience, which has emerged as the most significant source of traffic for English-language Chinese media after the US.¹ China Radio International (CRI), the most prominent official radio station, operates Hindi, Tamil, and Bangla stations, which employ Indian journalists. According to CRI, which also runs a network of listeners’ fan clubs in India and arranges for listeners to travel to China, its Tamil station is the most popular among its 53 international channels. The content focuses mostly on cultural issues, such as the history of China and the historical and civilizational links between India and China (Krishnan, 2013).

Another part of the effort to “tell China’s story well” is China’s purchase of advertorials in major foreign newspapers around the world, including those in India (Lim & Bergen, 2018).

¹ Interview with an employee at a Chinese-state media organisation, Beijing, August 2018.

In 2020 and 2021, *China Daily* purchased several advertorials in Indian newspapers. Labelled ‘China Watch’, the advertorial included several pages of content that resembled news articles. A small label saying ‘advertorial’ in the corner of the first page was the only marker of it being paid content (Bagree, 2021; Deb, 2021). The Chinese Embassy in India also purchases advertorials in major Indian newspapers separately, a practice that predates the more recent launch of ‘China Watch’, to mark political anniversaries or showcase examples of China’s development, such as a 2019 advertorial headlined “Nathula: A Gateway of Friendship Where Hearts Meet” that detailed the efforts made by Chinese authorities to welcome Indian pilgrims on the Kailash pilgrimage as well as “Tibet Day” supplements to mark the anniversary of what China calls its ‘peaceful liberation’ of Tibet in 1951.

In terms of shaping Indian newspapers’ coverage of China, the most significant initiative in recent years was the launch of the South Asia Press Center in Beijing in 2015. The centre is run by the China Public Diplomacy Association, controlled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Starting in 2016, the MFA has hosted around 100 foreign journalists from leading media houses in Asia and Africa. As part of an arrangement between the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi and the Indian media, reporters live in Beijing for 10 months, are paid monthly stipends, and are taken on all expenses-covered tours twice every month to different Chinese provinces. The first two cohorts of the programme were also awarded degrees in International Relations from Renmin University in Beijing, although this was subsequently discontinued (Krishnan, 2018).

The programme is modelled on fellowships hosted by the US State Department and other foreign governments and is the first of its kind for China. It was first launched for African journalists when Beijing set up a China Africa Press Center. After a successful test run, the China South Asia Press Center and the China Southeast Asia Press Center were launched. The journalists who are part of these programmes

are accredited with these press centres and not their respective media outlets—an important distinction that limits the scope of their coverage and travel in China. Thus, the journalists are not stationed as correspondents of their newspapers but on visas hosted by the MFA. During the 10-month stay, they cannot undertake individual reporting trips unaccompanied by government minders as they are not independently accredited and, hence, are limited from reporting on issues deemed ‘sensitive’—from human rights to Tibet and Xinjiang. There have been three cohorts since the programme was launched. The Indian media organisations that participated in the programme include the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS), *Jansatta*, and *The Indian Express* (Krishnan, 2018).

The programme, which resumed in 2022 after a two-year gap on account of China’s COVID-19 travel restrictions, is a key element in the effort to “tell China’s story well” by overcoming the credibility gap suffered by Chinese organisations. Here, China’s story is being told well by foreign voices on their platforms. All three Indian organisations involved in the programme published reports from their correspondents without mentioning that their reports were on a Chinese government-hosted fellowship. When the programme was launched in 2016, none of these organisations had bureaus in China. The only Indian organisations present in China were the Press Trust of India, *The Hindu*, *India Today*, *Hindustan Times*, and *The Times of India* (IANS subsequently opened a bureau, which it has now discontinued). For the organisations, this presented a cost-effective way to cover China without spending on correspondents. The *Indian Express* said it did not see any conflict of interest in this arrangement, noting that, “The Chinese Embassy fellowship does provide a stipend but the journalists in the programme are paid their full salaries by *The Indian Express* for the entire duration of the programme. Just like all programmes, *The Indian Express* reporters participate in, there are no terms or conditions, no caution or advisory imposed on what they report from there. The work the fellows have done from Beijing speaks for itself” (Krishnan, 2018).

The rise of new media

While traditional media platforms remain an important platform for China's messaging, social media has emerged as an information battleground. Media outlets are increasingly focusing on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, all three of which are banned in China. A presence on social media is the most effective route to Indian audiences. For example, *CGTN* relies on YouTube to reach foreign audiences. Similarly, the *Global Times* (English) and *People's Daily* (English) use Twitter and Facebook and have 1.8 million and 6.8 million followers on Twitter, respectively. *People's Daily* is particularly active on Facebook and has 86 million followers. In comparison, *The Times of India*, India's biggest media outlet, has 10 million followers on Facebook.

The use of global social media is not limited to Chinese media. The MFA and its diplomats are increasingly active on Twitter as well. According to a study by The Associated Press and the Oxford Internet Institute (Kinetz, 2021), as of early 2021, at least 270 Chinese diplomats in 126 countries are active on Twitter and Facebook. The same study found that they posted close to one million times across 449 official accounts on Twitter and Facebook between June 2020 and February 2021. These posts were shared more than 27 million times. The study found that three-quarters of Chinese diplomats on Twitter joined the platform in the period since May 2019 (Kinetz, 2021).

The Chinese Embassy in India as well as its spokespersons have used Twitter to communicate China's stand not only on India–China relations but also to critique Indian media coverage of China. In 2020 and 2021, the Chinese Embassy issued several statements, particularly on the Indian media reportage of COVID-19's origins and on the coverage of Taiwan. The Embassy spokesperson tweeted in response to media interviews of Taiwan officials that the “Taiwan question is the red line that cannot be challenged” and that the Chinese side “urge relevant Indian media to take a correct stance on issues of core interests

concerning China's sovereignty & territorial integrity.” If the attempts appear to be aimed at shaping how Indian media cover issues sensitive to China, then whether the tweets and statements succeeded in doing so is less clear (Wang, 2021; Sharma, 2020).

Taking its cue: Coordination between old and new media in external messaging during border crises

The border stand-off in Doklam in 2017, the first major India–China crisis in this changing information landscape, was seen by those studying China's media as “a game-changer”, marking a new approach in China's external messaging (Haidar, 2020). Border stand-offs between India and China in the past were given relatively muted coverage by Chinese media and were often only mentioned in cursory statements by the MFA that described the border dispute as being “left over from history” and were faithfully reproduced in official media outlets (*Xinhua*, 2021). The stand-off in Doklam was marked by a multi-pronged messaging strategy. The objective was “to fully integrate the publicity forces of public opinion, radio, TV, newspapers and social media, and carry out a multi-wave and high-density centralized publicity in a fixed period to form favourable public opinion situation to allow for a final victory” (Tu & Ge, 2018).

This full integration of media was applied domestically within China as well, where there were campaigns on Weibo, such as the one by *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), popularising the hashtag “The border line is the bottom line”, which went viral in China, and abroad, where Chinese media organisations put out multimedia content aimed at a global audience. One prominent example was a three-and-a-half-minute-long, English-language video published by the *Xinhua News Agency* and shared on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. A version with Chinese subtitles was released within China on domestic platforms. The contrasting responses the video received within and outside China underline the

challenges faced by China's media in putting out messages that can resonate with foreign and domestic audiences alike. Titled 'The Spark: 7 Sins of India', the video listed 'seven sins' or wrongs committed by India during the border dispute.

The video is an example of how new media communication closely adheres to the party line but is given some space to tailor the presentation of official arguments. The 'sins' mirrored what the MFA had said in official statements. The video, however, attempted to present the arguments in more accessible language. It featured a conversation between an English-speaking female anchor and a man dressed in a turban and beard and speaking in a mock Indian accent. The video immediately triggered a backlash not only in India but elsewhere in the world and was described in news reports as racist (Hu, 2017).

Following the end of the stand-off, Tu Ling and Ge Xiangran, two strategists with the Joint Staff Department of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Western Theater, the military command which was responsible for dealing with the stand-off, published a lengthy analysis of the media strategy on the WeChat account of the Western Command (Tu & Ge, 2018). The analysis reads, "On this 'no-smoke battlefield, we comprehensively used various communication platforms...and always maintained the absolute superiority of the legal struggle against India." They conclude that "initiative is the key of public opinion struggle" and "whoever grasps it will have an advantage, and whoever loses it will fall into passivity." They argue that "To disclose the truth in time and seize the legal high ground, is the key to grasp the initiative of the legal struggle of public opinion" (Tu & Ge, 2018).

The key takeaway from their analysis is the dovetailing of official government announcements, official media coverage, and social media campaigns. Their analysis presents a detailed, chronological breakdown of how this coordinated messaging strategy unfolded. As an example of this coordination,

they note that on August 3 and 4, 2017, "six ministries and agencies" of China—which they identify as the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese Embassy in India, *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*), and *Xinhua*—issued their views on the incident. They write that subsequently, media outlets, such as the *Global Times* (*Huanqiu Shibao*), which is one step lower in the hierarchy, amplified and reposted the message published in the *People's Daily* on social media, thereby "quickly forming a wave of public opinion and promoting the widespread dissemination of pictures and evidence of illegal Indian Army crossing the border." (Tu & Ge, 2018)

Meanwhile, the English-language arms of these media organisations translated the content for their foreign audience. The strategists write, "We should choose the right time to produce evidence, grasp the favourable time to publish evidence, and maximize the publicity effect," adding that it is also key to have "adequate preparation" to "counter" what the other side says. In their view, this media strategy effectively responded to the "three excuses concocted by the Indian side", which were that they were protecting Bhutan, preserving the status quo of the trijunction, and had legitimate security concerns regarding China's road construction. Three counterarguments were emphasised and disseminated to ensure consistency in messaging. Firstly, it was "repeatedly emphasised that Donglang always belonged to China and Bhutan is a sovereign country so India as a third party has no right to intervene." Secondly, it was argued that the "border crossing point of the Indian border forces is 2,000 metres from and has nothing to do with the trijunction." Thirdly, following the lead of the Foreign Ministry, the media pointed to "UN Resolution 3314 to show there can be no justification, political, economic, military or other, for the invasion or attack of the territory of another State by armed forces of one State" (Tu & Ge, 2018).

The PLA's analysis of the Doklam media strategy presented it as an unqualified success

domestically. Within China, the heated campaign garnered wide attention, including the support of Chinese public figures. Yet, whether this succeeded externally and in convincing the world of China's arguments is far less clear since messaging, when travelling beyond borders, can get lost in translation—as is evidenced by the *Xinhua* video.

A similar dynamic played out three years later during the border crisis of 2020 when China's media organisations launched another multi-wave and high-density messaging campaign, which was successful at home but arguably less so abroad. The Galwan clash of June 15, 2020, was a bigger challenge for China's messaging. Twenty Indian soldiers and at least four Chinese soldiers died in the clash. For eight months after the clash, Beijing kept silent and did not confirm that it had lost lives in the immediate aftermath of the clash. It was only in February 2021 that China's messaging strategy came into play. According to a Chinese media analyst based in Beijing, one possible reason for the delay may have been a desire to let the public passion in the aftermath of the clash subside.²

A high-intensity media campaign was built on an announcement by China that the PLA was honouring the four soldiers who had died. A documentary about the clash was played on the official broadcaster CCTV and portrayed India as the aggressor. Clips showed Indian troops crossing the Galwan river and Chinese soldiers standing their ground. What was left unsaid was that, as the Indian government suggested, the Chinese had transgressed the LAC in the valley first and had sparked the crisis (Tribune News Service, 2020).

The documentary was simultaneously broadcast with English subtitles on *CGTN*'s network as well as on its YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter platforms. The original documentary had been produced with the blessings of the Chinese military, part of a

broader propaganda push that followed China's announcement that it had lost four soldiers in the clash. *CGTN* aired a subtitled version, titled 'Revealing truth on border clashes with India helps understand events', as part of Beijing's efforts to portray to the world its version of events. This version received 282,000 views.³

The post-Galwan messaging strategy extended the cross-platform coordination to global social media platforms on a scale that exceeded what was seen during the Doklam crisis. Here, many 'unofficial' voices were also incorporated in the messaging, unlike during Doklam, when it was limited to official media. During the Galwan crisis, unverified images, first shared on Chinese social media such as Weibo and WeChat, were subsequently posted on Twitter by social media handles that had somewhat unclear links with the Chinese government. Two particularly active Twitter handles during the Galwan crisis were Shen Shiwei, who described himself as an analyst without mentioning that he is a reporter for *CGTN*, and Eva Zheng, an account of a person who appears to be a Chinese national based in Pakistan at some point. The latter routinely posts detailed information on China's military deployments on the India border and China–Pakistan relations and is also followed by several Chinese diplomats.

The use of social media during the Galwan clash allowed China to share its message directly with the Indian audience. In February 2021, Eva Zheng shared unverified images on Twitter that showed Indian soldiers tied up and held captive by the PLA in Galwan Valley (Zheng, 2021). The images appear to have been leaked by the Chinese military and were first posted on Weibo by popular "military fans" social media accounts that routinely post information about the military, usually in a positive light, but do not have any formal official linkages. These images were subsequently widely shared by Indian social media users.

² Interview with the author in February 2021.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cw2pWd3Sqc> accessed in March 2021.

Another post that garnered wide traction in India was a video by Shen Shiwei on January 1, 2022, showing PLA soldiers raising the Chinese flag in an unspecified location in Galwan Valley. The video, which garnered 1.7 million views on Twitter, triggered a heated political debate in India and led the opposition to ask the Modi government to “break its silence” and explain how the Chinese unfurled a Chinese flag in Galwan valley (Mohan, 2022). Indian officials later said that the flag-raising did not take place in the contested buffer zone in Galwan Valley but on the Chinese side of the LAC—a fact that was lost in the furore over the video. Subsequently, India staged a flag-raising to respond to the video (Press Trust of India, 2022). In the aftermath of the Galwan clash, fake “Chinese” Twitter accounts that shared images and videos of questionable authenticity mushroomed. These new accounts were earlier Pakistan-linked Twitter accounts that tweeted in Urdu, which subsequently assumed a ‘Chinese’ identity to spread disinformation about the clash. For example, the account ‘xiuying637’ was earlier run as ‘hinaarbi2’ while the handles ‘sawaxpx’ and ‘Zeping’, written in Chinese characters, tweeted in Urdu at one time. The accounts were eventually suspended (Krishnan, 2020).

The wide traction that the Chinese images and videos from the February 2021 publicity campaign received on Twitter shows China’s ability to insert itself into domestic debates abroad. Both posts—particularly the Galwan Valley flag video—triggered heated political debates in India, even eliciting a response from the leader of the opposition party, who criticised government inaction over the issue. While these new multi-platform and high-intensity campaigns—along with censorship, including the arrests of online commentators who questioned the military’s version of events (Krishnan, 2021)—were able to mute criticism largely and rally support for the military within China, assessing their impact abroad on shaping views about China is harder. After all, if the broader goal of China’s external messaging is aimed at creating more favourable

views towards China abroad, the stream of propaganda on the border arguably achieved the opposite result in India.

Recent examples suggest that broadcasting domestic messaging abroad remains a challenge for the Chinese propaganda machinery, as it is still learning how to produce content which will resonate with foreign audiences. The *Xinhua* video and the backlash it caused serve as examples of how content tailored for a domestic audience might not work abroad. Another case in point is a message posted on Weibo by a top Chinese law enforcement body mocking the number of COVID-19 deaths in India. The account posted two images of a rocket launch in China and an Indian cremation ground with the caption, “China lighting a fire, India lighting a fire” to its 15 million followers. The message was cheered by some nationalists in China but was met with revulsion in India. The post faced some backlash within China as well, where it was criticised for being insensitive (Buckley, 2021).

A more active approach on the part of the CPC to messaging, including the use of global platforms, has created new tensions between domestic and external propaganda. The use of social media by traditional Chinese state media organisations—at home and abroad—also poses new challenges when it comes to assessing Chinese messaging, as it has collapsed the traditional hierarchies that were seen as determining the legitimacy or authoritativeness of the information coming out of China. If in the past, the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) or the *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*), the military’s official paper, were regarded as conveying official viewpoints; how a tweet or Weibo post by them, or by their English-language platforms, might be interpreted, is less clear. But what is certain is that social media has emerged as an important information battleground and merits being studied as closely as traditional media outlets that are usually given primacy in studies of China’s messaging.

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09

Patterns and Trends in Chinese Propaganda on Facebook in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

As the coronavirus pandemic emerged in Wuhan and swept across the world in early 2020, a few Twitter and Facebook accounts managed by Chinese nationals and entities affiliated with the Communist Party of China surfaced, seeking to shape and control the narrative, channel propaganda, and contain criticism. Since then, Chinese social media entities have amplified the official Chinese version of narratives surrounding Covid-19 and related issues in addition to propagating information on broader Chinese interests such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Senior Chinese diplomats have responded strongly to criticisms about ‘wolf-warrior’ content and commentary, though by some accounts in 2022, there appears to be a slow shift away from aggressive assertions on social media. What is global in nature, looks different domestically in nurture. This chapter looks at the emergence and evolution of key social media accounts aligned with, and within Sri Lanka, amplifying the policies of the Communist Party. It helps demonstrate the pivotal role played by social media in intensifying pro-China narratives in a world where Beijing has ambitions of shaping global norms to secure its interests. A quantitative study of domestic propaganda production, along with qualitative research, reveals the Chinese government’s long-term ideological goals as well as shorter-term objectives in this regard. The online operations, which mirror earlier offline initiatives to disseminate the Party’s propaganda, show high levels of coordination, strategic planning, and execution. The sustained dissemination of pro-China narratives, and the existing and proposed investments in Sri Lanka’s telecommunications infrastructure, including 5G, warrant extensive scrutiny and urgent policy review.

Recommended citation:

Hattotuwa, S. (2023). Patterns and Trends in Chinese Propaganda on Facebook in Sri Lanka. In Xavier, C. & Jacob, J. T. (Eds). *How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools* (pp. 111-124). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/Inqstg2>

Introduction

Noting that while some aspects of Chinese media campaigns “are in line with traditional public diplomacy”, a Freedom House report released in 2020 cautioned that “many others are covert, coercive, and potentially corrupt” (Cook, 2020). The report went on to state that “the strategies being pursued have long-term implications, particularly as the Communist Party of China (CPC) and its international affiliates gain greater influence over key portions of the information infrastructure in developing countries.” In Sri Lanka, for instance, a comprehensive media report by journalist Bhavna Mohan (2020) revealed the hydra-headed nature of China’s influence operations. Among other initiatives, Mohan observed that the grooming of Sri Lankan journalists had gone on for well over a decade. Offline platforms such as the Sri Lanka-China Journalists’ Forum have existed since the early 2000s (Sri Lanka-China Journalists’ Forum, n.d.). The forum’s president, Nalin Aponso, stated that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would facilitate media development in Sri Lanka (Ping, 2018). More recently, the forum, along with other organisations in Sri Lanka affiliated with China, have endorsed (*Xinhua*, 2020) the controversial national security legislation in Hong Kong (*BBC*, 2022).

‘I’m Sheng Li’, a Facebook account established in 2020 and studied in this chapter, was a featured author in the *Sunday Observer* newspaper as early as 2014 (Li, 2014). Li’s review of a book by Chandana Thilakarathna complemented Thilakarathna’s review of a book by Li a year prior (Li, 2013). Both articles spoke exceedingly favourably of the role, reach, and relevance of China Radio International (CRI) in Sri Lanka, which is the Chinese state media associated with propaganda (Lin, 2015).

I study propaganda directed at Sri Lankan social media users in the context of a growing body of research looking at China’s disinformation campaigns (Twigg & Allen, 2021). In 2012, almost a decade before “wolf-warrior” diplomacy came to be recognised as a weapon China employed widely in pursuit of

its strategic objectives, an article published on the online civic media platform, *Groundviews*, flagged concerns regarding Beijing’s pervasive telecommunications investments in Sri Lanka (Hattotuwa, 2012). These campaigns need to be understood against the backdrop of highly problematic Chinese cybersecurity laws (Harris Bricken, 2019). Chinese disinformation, beyond social media (Elliott & Christopher, 2021), increasingly targets audiences in the United States (Timberg & Dou, 2021). In addition to similar initiatives by Russia (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2020), Chinese propaganda is considered a growing threat to democracies (Cave & Wallis, 2021).

Concerns over disinformation aside, in 2020, there emerged a unique argot known as “wolf warrior diplomacy” among Chinese diplomats on social media (Westcott & Jiang, (2020). Examples include referring to the Canadian prime minister as a “running dog” (Rae, 2021) and other more egregious tweets (Zeng, 2020). Echoing this pugilism, the Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka also tweeted exceptional comments (and imagery) against the former US secretary of state soon after an official visit to the country (Farzan, 2020). However, a focus on the appropriation of social media as a bully-pulpit to subvert diplomatic norms only distracts from China’s more sustained propaganda operations on social media, including those in Sri Lanka.

Chinese propaganda in Sri Lanka

Concerns around Chinese propaganda in Sri Lanka are not unwarranted. But they must be considered in the larger context of certain developments since October 2014, when *The Sunday Times* reported that former President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s government had imported surveillance technologies from Huawei (Hattotuwa, 2020d). At the speaker’s request in 2017, China gifted laptops for all members of parliament to use (*Daily FT*, 2017). Then, after the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in April 2019, former President Maithripala Sirisena requested his Chinese counterpart to provide social media surveillance technology to the country (M. Fernando, 2019). Media reports also recorded

“over Rs 5 billion worth of military support in terms of software and other surveillance equipment” (S. Fernando, 2019). All of Sri Lanka’s police communications began to increasingly rely on Chinese infrastructure (News Wire, 2021). Prior to this, in 2018, a Chinese digital forensics company trained Sri Lankan intelligence officials and others in surveillance technologies (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, n.d.), pitched as integral to the implementation of the BRI (Wayback Machine, 2019). Sri Lanka is among the countries that have accepted vital communications infrastructure gifted by China (Thomas, 2018). However, the lack of domestic privacy and data protection legislation at present raises legitimate fears around surveillance targeting of citizens by the state and third parties, including foreign governments ((Senaratne, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

These considerations aside, in April 2021, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa stated that the country “has prioritised developing relations with China and ‘firmly supports’ China’s positions on issues concerning its core interests” (Srinivasan, 2021). Before the president’s assurances, Sri Lanka’s foreign secretary Admiral Jayanath Colombage flatly denied any evidence of genocide or detention camps in Xinjiang (*Xinhua*, 2021). China considered Mahinda Rajapaksa an “old friend” (PTI, 2020). The Chinese ambassador publicly congratulated Mahinda Rajapaksa and conveyed greetings from Xi Jinping after a major constitutional crisis in late 2018 (Rajapaksa, 2018; Pillalamarri, 2018). China was one of a handful of countries that accepted Mahinda Rajapaksa’s unconstitutional appointment (Hattotuwa, 2018a), which was eventually rejected by Sri Lanka’s Supreme Court (United Nations, 2003).

For well over a decade, Sri Lanka’s clear political and policy orientation towards China, which has continuously accelerated since the Covid-19 pandemic (Imran, 2021) and the general election in August 2020 (Fernando & Shah, 2020), has provided the background for studying the social media content in this chapter. The data for this chapter was gathered using Facebook’s Crowd Tangle tool (Crowd Tangle, n.d.). The engagement data is accurate

as of May 5, 2021. China’s offline engagements with select journalists pre-date, by decades, its online and social media initiatives. The grooming of journalists informs the production of content in traditional media, which through partial focus or strategic erasure, deflects a critical gaze and shifts public perceptions. However, the strategic cross-pollination of online and offline initiatives is complicated and beyond the scope of this brief study.

Facebook accounts of interest

Eight Facebook accounts were selected for this study, building on the initial research frameworks that I had published on Twitter (Hattotuwa, 2021b). Though active offline, Sri Lanka-China Journalists’ Forum does not have an official Facebook or Twitter account. Among several other accounts active on the platform in Sri Lanka, including those ostensibly linked to the Confucius Institute, the Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation, Cheena Sinhala Handa, Seda Mali, Youyou Zhang, Waruni JZ, I’m Sheng Li, Sunimali, and Rasika Liu were chosen for the study. These accounts were chosen after an initial tweet thread looking into coordinated posts on Facebook (Hattotuwa, 2021c), as well as accounts running sponsored campaigns (Hattotuwa, 2021a). Facebook profiles linked to these seed profiles, through the related accounts feature of Facebook, or through the cross-publication of posts, were also studied.

At the time of writing not a single personal profile studied in this chapter were labelled as ‘China state-controlled media’ by Meta (Facebook, n.d.a). All of the personal profiles in this study are now labelled by Meta as “partially or wholly under the editorial control” of the Chinese government, based on Meta’s “own research and assessment against a set of criteria developed for this purpose”. Meta’s policy goes on to note that the platform holds “these Pages to a higher standard of transparency because we believe they combine the influence of a media organisation with the backing of a state.” That Meta, subsequent to and independent of this research, flagged these accounts as state-controlled, reaffirms the validity of their selection for study.

Table 1: Profile of Selected Facebook Accounts

Account	Followers	Created	Admin	Running ads in Sri Lanka ¹	Page type
Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation	1,502	March 2, 2012	N/A	No	Public figure
Cheena Sinhala Handa	1,290,857	March 12, 2012	China (17) Not available (1)	Yes	Media/news company
Seda Mali	68,535	August 5, 2020	China (12) Not available (1)	Yes	Local business
Youyou Zhang	3,152	August 7, 2020	China (2) Australia (1)	Yes	Entertainment website
Waruni JZ	108,454	August 11, 2020	China (10) Not available (1)	Yes	Entertainment website
I'm Sheng Li	46,632	August 11, 2020	China (10) Not available (1)	Yes	Personal blog
Sunimali	4,409	August 17, 2020	China (2)	Yes	Personal blog
Rasika Liu	31,192	September 2, 2020	China (10) Not available (1)	Yes	Non-governmental organization (NGO)

Source: Data compiled by author using Crowd Tangle and is accurate as of May 5, 2021.

There are significant contradictions between the content posted, the ostensible account holder, and the page classification on Facebook. For example, the categorisations of Rasika Liu as an NGO, Seda Mali as a local business, and two accounts as entertainment websites bear no relation whatsoever to the content published or the respective account holder's profile. The individual accounts are tailored to Sri Lankan audiences, including their naming conventions and identity. The content and commentary are almost exclusively in Sinhala, with no statistically significant amount of information present in either English or Tamil, indicating a sophisticated media strategy around end-states linked to the capture, and retention of attention and engagement by Sinhalese audiences, who constitute the majority ethnic group in the country.

Seven of the eight accounts studied were created in the second half of 2020. Of those seven, five were created in August that year. Two accounts, Waruni JZ and I'm Sheng Li, were created on the same day. These accounts feature the same number of page administrators based in China and another undisclosed location. Given that Facebook (and Twitter) are blocked in mainland China, the location of so many administrators in that country calls for scrutiny. Unfettered access to the platform is unavailable to Chinese citizens. This raises the question of how these accounts (without any disclosure of ties to the Chinese government at the time, through state-controlled media labels (Facebook, n.d.a) can post freely and publicly, including from Beijing and other locations in China.

¹ Based on Meta's Ad Library Report data, at the time of writing.

In under five months, from August 2020 to January 2021 (Hattotuwa, 2021b), the accounts studied showed a significant increase in followers (Hattotuwa, 2021b). This can be attributed in part to the paid page and post promotions (boosts) active on Facebook, first detected in Sri Lanka by journalist Maneshka Borham (Hattotuwa, 2021a) in late January 2021. All the individual accounts examined primarily feature profiles of women who are young and conversant in Sinhala. Unfortunately, however, Facebook does not provide independent researchers with an accurate understanding of an account's reach (Facebook, n.d.b). In the absence of this data, available only to those within the company, the number of followers provides a proxy indicator of an account's potential audience and, thus, influence. Since January 2021, Facebook has focused on the number of followers as the primary metric for page engagement (Awan, 2021).

The significant increase in followers is evidence of an expanding audience on Facebook for these eight accounts, growing at pace. By engaging with the content published by these accounts (independent of paid promotions), the followers organically promote pro-China content to their own friends, extended family, colleagues, fans, and followers.

In all, the eight accounts have a total of over 1.5 million followers. As one of the older accounts and given the nature of its output, Cheena Sinhala Handa unsurprisingly accounts for around 1.2 million followers of the total figure. The six accounts created after August

2020 account for over 262,000 followers.

When the growth of followers is visualised as time-series data, Seda Mali shows consistent growth from early August 2020. However, the rest of the accounts show significant growth only after January 2021, around the time paid promotions for these pages (and posts featured on them) started in Sri Lanka.

The growth trajectory of Waruni JZ is highly unusual and warrants emphasis. In the week of September 13–19, 2020, this account lost 75% of its followers, then regained some during the last week of December 2020, which resulted in a noticeable growth. However, all gains were wiped out in the first week of January 2021, and the number of followers dropped to zero. Just a week after that, the account gained around 46,800 followers. This rapid, pendulum-like swing in the number of followers is highly unusual, both in the sudden loss and rapid, significant gain. Available data is insufficient to determine the reason for these dramatic shifts but raises questions around the authenticity of followers and how they are generated (Winters, 2021; Hatmaker, 2020). The sustained output of the accounts has resulted in significant engagement with followers. From August 2020 to early May 2021, an average of two posts a day were published by all the accounts, driven by Cheena Sinhala Handa's average of over 10 posts a day. During the study period — just over nine months (August 1, 2020 to May 2, 2021) — there was an average of 3,400 weekly interactions across all pages. This engagement included the sharing of content and comments.

Table 2: Activities of Selected Facebook Accounts

Account	Total posts	Total interactions	Average posts per day	Likes	Comments	Shares
Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation	325	692	1.19	500	22	117
Cheena Sinhala Handa	2,900	411,708	10.61	278,867	50,705	38,205
Seda Mali	179	74,452	0.65	35,734	19,971	7,286
Youyou Zhang	92	5,639	0.34	2,947	1,594	295
Waruni JZ	109	272,031	0.40	143,545	61,122	13,953
I'm Sheng Li	159	112,024	0.58	56,485	26,323	14,096
Sunimali	78	10,902	0.28	5,793	3,386	274
Rasika Liu	158	62,701	0.58	33,531	18,474	1,890
Total	4,000	950,149	1.80	557,402	181,597	76,116

Source: Data compiled by author using Crowd Tangle and is accurate as of May 5, 2021.

Disaggregated by type, the content across accounts heavily favours photos. Out of over 4,000 posts studied, nearly 3,100 include photos. About 475 posts feature native videos on Facebook, and over 200 have live videos, streamed and archived on the platform. Videos and photos are the most popular content on Facebook in Sri Lanka (Hattotuwa, 2018b). The media strategically selected by all the Chinese accounts is geared to organically generate maximum virality, independent of paid promotions and boosts. What is present and promoted is as revealing as what is absent. Human rights, democracy, privacy, debt servicing, and censorship, for example, are issues and perspectives that are absent from these accounts. If these issues are even as much as hinted at, it is through a lens that promotes the Chinese government's partisan and critical perspectives.

The videos across accounts regularly promote issues related to:

1. The Covid-19 vaccination (and China's advances and gifts to other countries in this regard)
2. Knowledge of Sinhala or attempts to learn the language
3. Travel around mainland China
4. Ordinary life in Chinese cities, including Beijing

5. Technology (including AI) initiatives and parks
6. Agriculture in China
7. Infrastructure including model villages and other large-scale development initiatives related to housing and transportation
8. Buddhism and Sinhalese cultural events
9. Youth perspectives that are partial to China
10. Fashion (including the draping and selection of saris)
11. Dance and music videos in Sinhalese
12. Sampling various food from China and Sri Lanka
13. Lifestyle videos highlighting China's commerce, industry, and commercial spaces like shopping malls.

In comparison, although the Indian High Commission's official Facebook page also features several videos (India in Sri Lanka [High Commission of India, Colombo], n.d.), poor production quality, paltry engagement, and sporadic uploading indicate significantly different motives from the Chinese accounts. Over nine months, 476 videos published across the Chinese accounts generated 11.47 million views and 1.58 million shares. In the same time, the Indian High Commission's official Facebook page published 13 videos, prompting just 6,000 views and 2,600 shares.

Similarly, the US Embassy in Sri Lanka's official account posted 16 videos in the same months, garnering around 25,800 views and 2,100 shares. Official accounts of the Canadian, Australian, and British High Commissions on Facebook, combined, produced just 111 videos, eliciting a total of 34,700 views and 14,200 shares. Evidently, the number of accounts employed, production value, paid promotions, sustained volume of content production, and significant engagement generated by Chinese Facebook accounts are unmatched by any other diplomatic account in Sri Lanka.

A look at the top five posts

The Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation, Cheena Sinhala Handa, Seda Mali, Youyou Zhang, Waruni JZ, I'm Sheng Li, Sunimali, and Rasika Liu altogether generated just under 1 million interactions in the period of study. The top five posts (in terms of engagement) were made by two accounts, Cheena Sinhala Handa and Waruni JZ.

Table 3: Top Posts by Selected Facebook Accounts

Account	Date	Sinhala caption/English translation	Type	Reactions	Comments	Shares
Cheena Sinhala Handa (2021)	January 28, 2021	උපියල් 3000කින් චීනයේ මොනවා ද මිලදී ගන්න පුළුවන්?? (What can you buy for 3,000 rupees in China?)	Facebook video	49,000	2,800	6,900
Waruni JZ (2021b)	March 2, 2021	චීන අයට සිංහල කතා කිරීමේ අභියෝගය (The challenge for the Chinese to speak Sinhala)	Facebook video	46,000	15,000	4,600
Cheena Sinhala Handa (2020a)	August 30, 2020	N/A	Facebook live video	27,000	10,000	4,800
Waruni JZ (2021a)	January 13, 2021	චීනයේ ගෘහ විදුලි උපකරණවල මිල දැන ගමු ද? (Shall we find out the prices of kitchen appliances in China?)	Facebook video	31,000	8,700	3,400
Cheena Sinhala Handa (2020b)	September 25, 2020	පලතුරු අස්වැන්න නලො ගනිමු! (Let's harvest the fruit!)	Facebook video	13,000	2,300	2,800

Source: Data compiled by author using Crowd Tangle and is accurate as of May 5, 2021.

In addition to the significant engagement on the original post and content producer's Facebook account, these posts — all videos — were shared by nearly 130 other accounts on Facebook. A study of the nomenclatures of accounts sharing the videos surfaces names invoking the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna

(SLPP) which was the ruling party at the time and linked to the Rajapaksas, Sinhalese culture, and Buddhism. Many pages are a part of the junk news and gossip page ecology on Facebook, which is highly influential in shaping perspectives in Sri Lanka (Hattotuwa, 2019a). The total number of followers across

pages that share original posts are in the millions. Reposting aids the amplification of content originally posted to the Chinese accounts in addition to paid promotions on Facebook that boost the reach of pages to existing followers and those that the platform determines may be interested.

To this end, it is instructive to compare the engagement figures of just the top five posts from two accounts with engagement data from the official Facebook accounts of the Indian, Australian, British, Canadian, American, and European Union diplomatic missions in Sri Lanka during the same time. Combined, these six accounts posted 148 videos, prompting just 205,900 views,² which is less than the reach of a single video posted by Cheena Sinhala Handa. Altogether, the accounts generated just 12,300 shares, which is less than a single video by Waruni JZ. Furthermore, the total of 12,666 comments and 144,600 reactions across these six diplomatic mission accounts clearly indicates that the appeal of, and engagement with, content from Chinese accounts is, by order of magnitude, far greater.

Hidden patterns

The activity of Chinese accounts on Facebook shows distinct signs of coordination and editorial oversight by a single, central authority. Disaggregating around 4,000 posts from the 9 accounts, a pattern emerges. Each day, three distinct peaks appear, showing when the highest number of posts are published on Facebook—one around 8 am and the other between around 12 and 1 pm. The third peak is around 5 pm. This unerringly rhythmic, sustained content production, geared to coincide with rush-hour commuters and lunch breaks, is a strategic choice. “The media day”, a term crafted by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre in 1984, speaks to how media

content, published in an intentional and sustained rhythm, results in specific modes of engagement by consumers.

What can be studied as a new circadian rhythm is present elsewhere in Sri Lanka’s Facebook ecology and is strongly associated with the instrumentalisation of the platform.³ In “The Permanent Campaign & Its Future”, Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann (Brown, 2002) speak about political technologies that manipulate public opinion. Written 20 years ago, Ornstein and Mann’s thesis finds new relevance in the study of social media’s potential for propaganda. The sustained and systemic production of online propaganda echoes what Raymond Williams called, in the 1970s, a “planned flow” (Johnson, 2013). Williams noted that the conflation of independent journalism and advertising would ultimately result in greater engagement with content among a captive audience. Consumers would eventually stop caring about what they read, and consumption would become an end in itself. This uncritical approach to media engagement is now instrumentalised (by Chinese and other political entrepreneurs) on Facebook to promote propaganda under the guise of light entertainment or informative videos.

When studied across several accounts over time, Facebook recognises this pattern as a strong indication of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) (Facebook, n.d.c), which is disallowed on the platform. However, from the data studied for this chapter, this pattern is true for just one page — Cheena Sinhala Handa — which is the most prolific of the accounts reviewed. Adding to what was highlighted earlier in this chapter, the significant use of photos at specific times suggests the intentional production of content that is geared toward generating maximum engagement.

² Of this total number of views, 139,400 views have been generated by a single video posted in August 2021 by the European Union (European Union in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, n.d.).

³ For example, coordinated posts across multiple and seemingly unrelated Facebook pages partial to the incumbent president, studied during the peak of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in Sri Lanka (Hattotuwa, 2020a). Further, in the lead up to the consequential November 2019 presidential election (Hattotuwa, 2019b), a large group of very influential junk news pages on Facebook during the first wave of the pandemic (Hattotuwa, 2020b), which was mirrored a month later (Hattotuwa, 2020c).

Figure 1: Word Clouds Based on Text in Posts by Selected Facebook Accounts

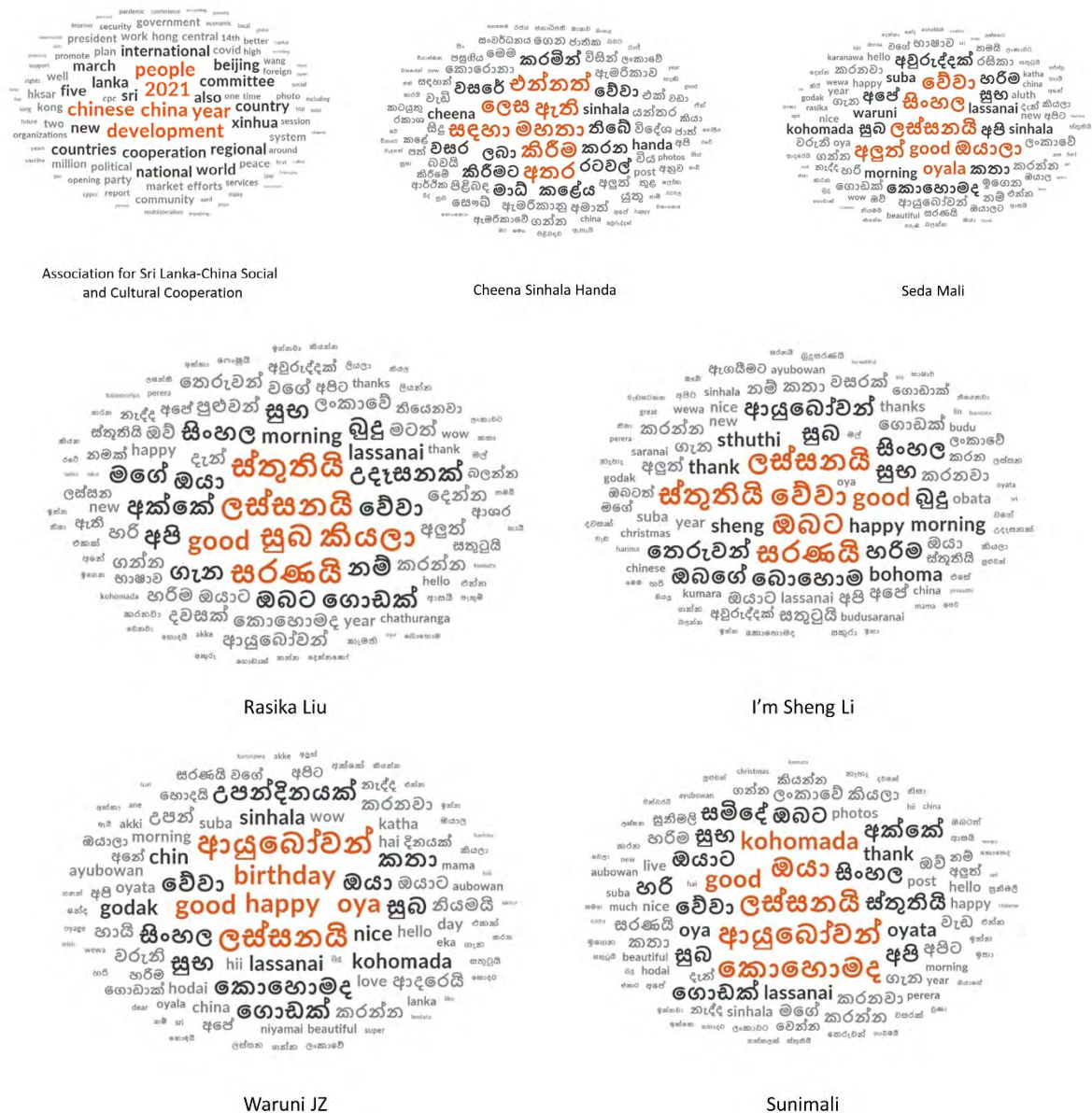


Figure 1 presents word clouds based on the text in each account's posts. The Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation and Cheena Sinhala Handa accounts have distinct word cloud patterns, pegged to each account's focus and mandate. For example, Cheena Sinhala Handa, of late, emphasises vaccinations (in the context of the pandemic). Meanwhile, Seda Mali, Rasika Liu, I'm Sheng Li, Waruni JZ, and Sunimali all feature almost exactly the same words, which is highly unusual because these accounts do not explicitly or overtly show any inter-relationship, or subscription to a

shared editorial framework. The emphasis (in Sinhala) on beautiful things, events, followers, ordinary people, daily and birthday greetings, ascertaining how followers are doing, and a uniformly deferential, polite turn of phrase overwhelmingly distinguishes the text used in all the posts. The resulting lack of significant diversity in discourse or individuality, coupled with the near pitch-perfect symmetry in Sinhala phrases used, strongly suggests strict editorial control and a high degree of coordination in framing strategic issues across accounts that do not show robust offline or online relationships with each other.

Conclusion

The eight Facebook accounts studied for this chapter highlight the degree to which Beijing instrumentalises the platform to promote propaganda in Sri Lanka in a highly sophisticated manner, with output and followers increasing at pace. Unlike Twitter, Facebook⁴ provides Beijing with a direct vector, with significant potential to both attract and retain the engagement of young Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Significant tropes featured in the Chinese accounts indicate Beijing's propaganda model of "strategic patience" (Vilmer & Charon, 2020), where the goal is to shape public perceptions over the long term, not necessarily through coercion or censorship, but via a menu of native content designed to attract, entertain, inspire, or distract from critical questioning. The potential of this persuasive strategy is evident in the data signatures studied, where output is crafted with exceptional attention to tone, time, substance, engagement patterns, viral frames, and a grounded, conversational Sinhala expression that appeals to mainstream Buddhist sensibilities. A high degree of coordination between accounts, entirely hidden unless studied at scale, along with the large number of page administrators located in China, suggests that individual profiles mask a sophisticated propaganda machinery that determines what is posted, through which account, when, and how.

This research recommends urgent domestic policy review and parliamentary oversight of significant Chinese investments and initiatives. It also suggests sustained regional dialogue around the implications of online propaganda for national security, democratic potential, and electoral integrity. Finally, the design, execution, and impact of Beijing's multi-platform, multi-media, vernacular, and country-specific propaganda model should be more closely studied, including by the diplomatic community. Much of the existing research looks at how Chinese disinformation impacts the West or at issues around cybersecurity.⁵ This is vital and valid for those in Europe or the US, but it is less useful for understanding propaganda vectors in countries integral to China's BRI in South and Southeast Asia. Amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, this region, characterised by the complex interplay of demagoguery, domestic politics, encroaching Chinese interests, and propaganda increasingly being spread via social media, is ripe with authoritarian entrenchment (Khalil, 2020).

As an archetype of this geo-political and socio-technological landscape, Sri Lanka presents an interesting case study in how, over the short term, policies favourable to China, and, in the long term, public perspectives partial to Beijing, can be influenced through well-disguised propaganda disseminated over social media.

⁴ And other application-based surfaces beyond the scope of this chapter, including WhatsApp.

⁵ "Through the Digital Silk Road (DSR), Beijing aims to boost the overseas expansion of Chinese tech companies that build telecommunications infrastructure and compete in the digital market. Already, the DSR is under intensified scrutiny for concerns over cyber-security risks, the standard-setting process for 5G technology and China's promotion of 'cyber sovereignty' as an alternative to a free and open digital domain" (Gordon, Tong, & Anderson, 2020).

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