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

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### 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.

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## 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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