

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

Event Summary

Thursday, June 15, 2023

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted a webinar to mark the launch of its new report, [How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools](#), co-edited by **Constantino Xavier** and **Jabin T. Jacob**.
- The discussion featured a fireside chat with **Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP, and former National Security Advisor of India, and **Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, CSEP. This was followed by a panel discussion with **Mareike Ohlberg**, Senior Fellow in the Indo-Pacific Program and the Stockholm China Forum, German Marshall Fund, **Niva Yau**, Non-Resident Fellow with the China Global Hub, Atlantic Council, and **Selina Ho**, Assistant Professor in International Affairs, and Co-Director of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. The panel was moderated by **Jabin T. Jacob**, Non-Resident Fellow, CSEP, and Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations and Governance Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Delhi NCR.
- The webinar involved a discussion on the report's key findings, and in-depth comparisons with other regions of the world, including Central Asia, Europe and Southeast Asia.

Setting the Context

Why is it important to study China, and what makes the study of China so different from other superpowers? Menon drew attention to the rapid changes within South Asia over the last few decades, as well as a shift in how China exercises its influence in the region. Initially, Chinese power was defined by its economic prowess, institutionalised through the Belt and Road Initiative. Today, however, China uses various forms of soft power ranging from religion and education to party-to-party relations. In contrast to the United States and other Western powers, China uses a different approach to exercise its influence in the region. Menon added that unlike the past, China is now a country that is “willing to be seen.” This comes with costs as China is seen to be increasingly involved in the domestic politics of countries in South Asia, from interfering in domestic elections to making attempts to unite all communist parties in Nepal. He also emphasised that “South Asia is no longer a geopolitical backwater”, and each country in the region has its own complexities, and engages with the Chinese state very differently on varied issues. While some continue to

seek economic and developmental assistance from China, there might be domestic political resistance from other South Asian nations over ethnic or religious matters.

Menon mentioned that traditionally, geopolitical analysis of China's influence tends to overlook the soft power tools it employs. He highlighted that the report distinguishes itself from other studies as it has been compiled by scholars from South Asia who study China's behaviour in the region. Listening to other voices from the region enables us to make more objective assessments of the influence China exercises and also understand the evolution and diversification of its power.

Tools of Engagement: Education and Media

During the panel discussion, Ohlberg described the range of strategies and tactics adopted by China as a “toolkit” of actions, particularly in regard to education and media. Ho explained that the effect of Chinese scholarships

in Southeast Asia is similar to the effect of Western scholarships, as they play an important role in shaping the perception of these countries amongst the younger generation. In Central Asia, Yau gave the example of Kazakhstan, where Chinese scholarships are reserved for children of the political elite. This shapes their worldview and has an impact on future policy decisions.

The discussion also focused on the effects of Chinese engagement on traditional and new media. Ohlberg spoke about how China's influence has a dual effect: on one hand, the country attempts to build resources in South Asian countries, but on the other hand, it also tries to restrict criticism by shutting "certain narratives down". Ho described how local media outlets in countries such as Thailand, bought by the Communist Party of China (CPC) as subsidiaries, interact with Chinese state-owned media outlets in a sophisticated manner, particularly by controlling the flow of information. In a collaborative study between Ohlberg and Yau, they found that Malaysian YouTube channels with Chinese speakers promoted disinformation propagated by the People's Republic of China (PRC) during the Hong Kong protests and gained popularity amongst the Malaysian-Chinese community.

Regional Responses to China's Engagement

Ohlberg explained how China's engagement varies in countries based on local conditions. Where the national government supports the PRC, interaction with local actors is comparatively less. On the other hand, the CPC tends to engage locally with the media and businesses in countries where there is resistance at the national level. For example, in Germany and the United Kingdom, it tries to overcome this issue by aligning itself with local stakeholders. Menon also referred to the perception of China in Pakistan over Xinjiang. Despite making inroads economically, China treads carefully on this issue given the ideological difference. Yet, as Jacob explained, China has managed to "weather this storm" as political elites in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan ignore issues such as Xinjiang.

China's use of ethnic elements also varies. Ho explained that in Singapore, the PRC has extensive links with the majority ethnic Chinese population given its "elite capture" and influence. However in Malaysia and Indonesia, there is "a backlash when you use the ethnic card" as anti-Communist and anti-Chinese sentiments are related.

Unlike in South Asia where India is the resident regional hegemon, Yau drew parallels with Central Asia, where Russia is the resident player. She explained that both Russia and China have the "same agenda in the region", which is the strategy of "normative-agenda setting". Both countries create narratives, ensuring that information at the domestic, regional and global level align with each other. For example, one regional narrative which Yau explained is PRC's allusion to the Silk Road as a symbol of "harmonious history" and strong Chinese-Central Asian diplomacy.

Future Research Paths

Yau suggested further research on China's role in mediating conflict, given how this varies from region to region. For example, unlike in South Asia, China does not involve itself in regional conflicts in Central Asia, or often tends to take a neutral position, as with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Ho elaborated by drawing from the report's findings on China's mediation between Myanmar and Bangladesh. She added that there is scope for expanding the study to understand its tactics in peacekeeping.

Ohlberg recommended that future iterations of the report could go beyond the positive impact of China's influence to study the flip-side of its involvement. Further, its religious diplomacy, which is prominent particularly in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, has scope for further research.

Ho mentioned that comparing Chinese and Indian influence in South Asia with each other, and studying how the PRC shapes "regional order" is worth looking into further. Comparing the success of Chinese influence across regions creates further scope for research. She also suggested studying China's motives and influence overseas beyond rivalry with the United States.

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

*This event summary was prepared by **Ritikaa Kaila**, Research Intern, CSEP.
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