



# China in South Asia: Implications for India and Future Research Paths

Event Summary

Wednesday, 21 June 2023

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress hosted the 16th edition of its Foreign Policy and Security Tiffin Talk series with **Amb. Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP, and former National Security Adviser of India, **Dr. Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, Foreign Policy and Security Studies, CSEP, and **Prof. Jabin T. Jacob**, Non-Resident Fellow, CSEP, and Associate Professor, Department of International Relations and Governance Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Delhi NCR.
- The discussion centered on CSEP's report, "[How China Engages South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools](#)" (eds. Constantino Xavier and Jabin T. Jacob) launched in May 2023. This research seminar focused on the report's key findings on China's increasing influence in South Asia and how its social, political, and economic activities affect India's interests. It also featured an interactive engagement with policymakers and experts with a focus on advancing the study and generating ideas for future research on China in India.
- The participants included former and current officials from the government, including from the Ministry of External Affairs, the G20 Secretariat and scholars from think tanks and universities in India.
- CSEP's Tiffin Talk Series features scholars presenting their recent evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This series of closed-door seminars seeks to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policymakers invested in India's foreign policy and security affairs.

## Contextualising the Report

Xavier and Jacob set the tone of the discussion through a presentation that highlighted the report's objectives, parameters, key findings and takeaways. One of the primary purposes behind this report was to include an objective description of China's engagements in South Asia through evidence-based assessments, with case studies ranging from China's Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka to how it builds influence among political elite in Nepal, and through conflict mediation between Bangladesh and Myanmar. They argued that while India's centrality in the region has driven Chinese engagements with other governments, there is an emerging trend of de-hyphenation in China's South Asia policy. They further emphasised Beijing's growing comfort in interacting with a diverse set of actors across the region as exemplified in the report's case studies.

Participants referred to obstacles in acquiring funding and a complex political environment between South Asia and China as some of the causes behind the stagnant growth in South Asian scholarship on China. They hoped that this report could be used as a basis to encourage scholars to study China.

## The Unique Nature of China's Relationship with South Asia

Menon further elaborated on the objective of this report as a magnified lens to analyse the evolving nature of Chinese strategy, particularly as China's foreign policy behaviour has been different from Western global powers. Countries in South Asia are increasingly favourable to China due to its willingness to take risks and actively engage with political elites in smaller countries, such as Nepal and Sri Lanka. Participants

discussed how this strategic approach proves to be attractive to countries seeking to distance themselves from historic domination by Western powers and India in the region.

China's status in South Asia oscillates between a binary: it is a favourable ally to some and a discernible foe to the rest. China has popularized a dichotomous understanding of alliances in South Asia. For instance, China has successfully cultivated the idea that aligning with India is akin to aligning with the United States, further positioning itself as an alternative option in the region. It enhances this narrative by offering the promise of development in infrastructure and other connectivity initiatives. For example, China invests heavily in the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone in Myanmar while also engaging in cultural diplomacy initiatives in Nepal and leveraging communication platforms like Facebook in Sri Lanka. These actions cultivate the image of China as a "good neighbour", moulding a positive lens for these countries to assess China's foreign policy initiatives.

## Lessons for India from China's Soft Power Efforts

Efforts to enhance the image of China as the "good neighbour" extend across multiple sections of society in South Asian countries including civil society, political parties, media, academia and religious associations. Jacob emphasized the soft diplomacy and cultural initiatives initiated by China in countries like Nepal through the hosting of Chinese festivals and education fairs which play a significant role in enhancing bilateral relations. Similarly, social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube are increasingly leveraged by Chinese political parties to influence South Asian audiences. These soft power initiatives aid in projecting a mirage of "illusioned proximity", allowing China to seem culturally and linguistically closer to South Asian interests.

Participants highlighted India's cultural advantage over China in the South Asian neighbourhood. However, existing cultural initiatives tend to emphasize India's

old traditions rather than portraying it as a modern and attractive society. Further, with English as a lingua franca, India remains a preferred choice among professionals from the neighbourhood, however it has not fully capitalized on marketing itself as the occupational hub for South Asian talent. Thus, India has been unable to leverage language and culture to connect with the neighbourhood as effectively as China has accomplished.

Participants suggested that India must undertake measures that not only communicate its interests effectively, but also establish platforms that make it facile to understand the interests of its neighbours. Participants offered recommendations for measures that can improve communication with the neighbourhood, such as promoting the study of Sinhala and Bhutanese (Dzongkha) in Indian schools, forming scholarships to encourage South Asian students to study in Indian higher education institutions, enforcing policies to reduce discrimination they face in such universities and establishing cultural associations to ease their integration.

## Recommendations for future research on China

Participants made several recommendations for the future of research on China in India. Some of these suggestions included expanding the scope of this report to include case studies on Maldives, Bhutan, Pakistan, and Myanmar. Additionally, it was proposed to increase the number of South Asia scholars studying Mandarin and Chinese regional languages to gain a better understanding of the nuances in China's policy approaches. The participants also highlighted the importance of examining how domestic conflicts in China, such as the case with Uyghur Muslims, influence the trajectory of its foreign policy relations in South Asia. Another area of interest was investigating the role of the media in shaping Chinese foreign policy. Furthermore, there was a suggestion to cross-examine and compare China's influence across different regions, such as Southeast Asia, to gain deeper insights.

*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.*

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