

## Seminar

# China's Engagement with South Asia: Themes, Partners and Tools

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Constantino Xavier:**

I am a fellow here at CSEP and we are really happy to have this first event to disseminate, discuss and have you all engage with this report that I co-edited with Prof. Jabin Jacob who is at Shiv Nadar University and also non-resident fellow here at CSEP. This is the report, how China engages south Asia – themes, partners and tools. It is up on our website and it is a constellation of different chapters and case studies. I think we have around with 13 contributors from across the region in south Asia. The heart really of this project over two years was engaging scholars that are writing on the region but are also located in the region. And situated in the country that are being analyzed. So, we have three case studies on Nepal and China's different deepening diversifying forms of engagement with Nepal. We have three case studies on Sri Lanka. Again, different case studies on China's growing presence in that Indian ocean region island. We have one case study from Bangladesh. And we have one case study on China and India. To sum up very briefly what we had in mind for this report was to map China's diverse ways of engagement in south Asia. This is generally understudied area. It is an area that is developing in different sectors. You will see from the range of case studies that we cover different sectors such as education, public diplomacy, technology, social media, civil society and political party engagement, the religious aspect of China soft power and also governance influence. The idea was to build a community of scholars in south Asia that are working on China and avoid a bit of that trap that we have seen a lot between two extremes. Either sort of a glorification of China as a country that is somehow going to solve all of south Asia's problems and bring solutions. On the other extreme, a rather negative approach towards China that sees in China the source of many problems and future troubles in the region. That is why we commissioned several of these studies from some very bright scholars and analysts across the region that are watching China very closely and empirically mapping and surveying China's different forms of engagements in terms of its teams, partners and tools. What we thought of doing today here is starting in two parts. We had a division of labor between myself and Jabin Jacob. In the first part we are delighted to have with us ambassador Shiv Shankar Menon who is a distinguished fellow here at CSEP in New Delhi. Former national security advisor of India, former foreign secretary of India, and most importantly one of India's most prominent experts on China, who has served in China in various capacities including as Indian ambassador to China. In this first part we will have a bit of a conversation to set the context of this report to understand what made us engage in this two yearlong project, this output. The second part Jabin will take over to have a discussion with three comparative regional experts on south east Asia, central Asia and Europe to also make this communicate a little bit with the larger efforts in other regions to understand China's growing presence. So, Jabin will take that forward after this first half an hour. Ambassador Menon, let

us get started right away I think in this fireside chat. It is 43 degrees outside. I couldn't think of a better word. But here we are at this fireside chat. Let us imagine the fire around us. But I think the first question I would like to ask you and engage with you a bit, a question you have heard many times in our workshops with the authors over the last two years, something we have been persistently asked by other people that you know constantly interrogated the need to understand and to do an exercise like this. Why study China? What makes China so different from other great powers that have engaged with other regions of the world? How is China's presence in south Asia different from India's and America's and different presence in south Asia. So, if you could come in our defense of our report and explain the logic behind it.

**Shivshankar Menon:**

Well, thank you Tino. And thank you for having me. Firstly, I must congratulate you and the authors of the report on the various studies. Because I cannot think of another instance of a report which has been put together by people from within the region from different countries and who have in an academically rigorous way studied China's behavior in the region. Why is this worth doing? This is worth doing because, two things are in front. One is south Asia has changed and so rapidly in the last few decades. Secondly so has China's behavior and what China does. It is not that China has not been engaged in south Asia in the past. All the way back in the Sri Lankan case for instance, the rice rubber pact in the 50s. But the nature of China's engagement as China has grown has developed the power and the nature of that engagement has changed considerably. And its unique to China. I think that is something... you know for \_ theorists all great powers are supposed to act alike. But they don't. because China's particular set of attributes, the nature of her power is different from the power that other great powers, let us say the United States or other countries which are interested in south Asia, the power that they actually displayed. In the Chinese case, originally, I think over the last three decades or so, if you look at the evolution it was primarily economic that China possessed and it was primarily through trade, investment. Later systematized and institutionalized through the Belt and Road initiative after President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. But since then, I think it has grown into various other dimensions and that is where the value of the report is. Because as you said it mentions soft power in various forms, digital, religion, working with political parties. More than that I think the Chinese approach to the uses of that power. China is now willing to be seen to be not just taking sides but actually participating in the internal politics of some of the south Asian countries. Whether it is trying to bring the communist parties together in Nepal or whether it is making clear her preferences when there are elections in other countries in south Asia and so on. So, I think it is worth looking at this. Now because it is today China can actually exercise power in multifaceted domains and today has the beginnings of soft power. I wouldn't say that it compares to the soft

power that still the west or the US and others exercise, nor does it constitute the kinds of affinities in south Asia that say India has. Which are social, which are cultural, which are very deep-seated and they are not necessarily state power at work. In the Chinese case the state is a much bigger actor. But she does have a whole host of soft power tools which we tend to ignore in the traditional sort of analysis. Because what you normally get is a geopolitical analysis. Here is China, China-US rivalry, main geopolitical fork line, south Asia, part of China's periphery, therefore it is looked at purely in strategic or geopolitical terms. But there is much more to China's engagement and for me that is why it is worth studying it. Because what China does in the periphery today is what she does then as her power grows further afield. Suddenly you can now see for the first time signs of China being willing to take part in the politics of west Asia. You heard president Xi Jinping offering to play a role in intra-Palestinian disputes. In trying to bring people together on the Palestinian side. That is new. But it is something that started in south Asia and certainly occurred first probably in Indo-China in the close immediate periphery from the 80s onwards from even before that. So, for me it is interesting to see how this has evolved. Since the situation is evolving so rapidly both in terms of China and her behavior but also in terms of what is happening in south Asia. I think this is well worth.

**Constantino Xavier:**

Just to follow a bit on this issue why is China relatively more studied today and why the greater networks of scholars and basically greater knowledge centers of China in Europe, in south east Asia, in the west in the US, than in south Asia. What explains this lack of knowledge on China? Not only India, but I guess in Nepal too. In a neighbor country of China where you frankly have... it was difficult for us to find scholars in Nepal that have followed the domestic affairs, know mandarin and study China. So, what explains if I may call it the poverty of China studies in this region.

**Shivshankar Menon:**

I think that because we used to wrongly look at China as a uni-dimensional power. And purely as a source of possible economic assistance or infrastructure building rather than now, I think you can see this scholarship beginning to develop as we become aware of the various facets of Chinese power and Chinese influence. And the role that China is playing in the world. But as China's role in the world has increased so I think the scholarship will increase. If you think this is poverty of scholarship, when I started studying China in the 60s people thought we were mad. Nobody could understand why we wanted to study China. In any case, I think, it seems to me that it is a useful case to study in terms of social science because it is different from the other cases that we are used to. So, the sort of hegemony of **westphalian** scholarship or let us say scholarship of how western states behave I think you have a useful comparison here or another case which enables you to broaden your mind and

actually test your theories and your categories and improve your thinking. So, it is a useful exercise I think in many ways.

**Constantino Xavier:**

Another bias if I may call in our report is that I think of the eight case studies we have seven are from non-India countries in the region.

**Shivshankar Menon:**

I am glad we are listening to other people.

**Constantino Xavier:**

People have been asking us why don't you have more people writing on China India.

**Shivshankar Menon:**

Because I don't think the China India is typical or is really comparable in many fundamental ways to the relationships that other south Asian countries have with China and this has been apparent for some time that China's relations with other countries in south Asia, they are not all the same. They are different with Pakistan, with Nepal or Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and so on. Myanmar. But they might differ from each other but they have less in common with China's relationship with India which is in many ways generous and driven by factors internal to that relationship. I am very glad that we are studying these for their own intrinsic worth. I think that is essential and that we also listen to the voices from the rest of south Asia because it enables us to be much more objective in our own understanding of the situation and of what we could be doing, what we should be doing.

**Constantino Xavier:**

Will this on the policy side this reflects the scholarship I think approach to China reflects to fundamental views on China, right? I was just in Sri Lanka and people are very positive towards China still. It is a country that is performed on most demands from Sri Lanka, with insufficiencies we know but is this also source of tension you see in the region between India that is reluctant these days and certainly to say the least having a difficult relationship with China that other countries are actually embracing China as an alternative development partner and as an important partner in their modernization of their economy?

**Shivshankar Menon:**

I don't think... if you look at it from the point of view of smaller countries in south Asia, for them the overwhelming presence in their lives is the preponderance of India in many ways. Its economic

weight, its social demographics, other way. Our borders are borders, whether it is in terms of human migration or actual trade and goods, not all of it which is captured in official figures. The reality is that India's reality in the politics, the economics and the societies of our neighbors. And it is therefore natural when they construct a modern state and a national identity that they look for outside balancing factors. In the 50s and 60s it used to be the west in Sri Lanka. But now it is China as well. So, there is a pull in the rest of south Asia which I think we must recognize exists. It is not only China pushing and China choosing to engage. But there is also a pull. The other thing is it is true that south Asia today is no longer a sort of geopolitical backwater that it was during the cold war when the primary floor plans were from Europe and the killing fields were east of India in the rest of Asia, in Indonesia and Korea and so on. And in west Asia. So, today the Indian ocean significance to global trade and to a globalizing China, India, is much, much more than ever before. And so, we will and if you look at the way in which we are actually... our fates are today tied together across the whole range of issues. It is not just the globalized economy. On issues like climate, like maritime security, on issues on the pandemic was a good example of how we all our fates are linked. So, I think you will see much more engagement by all of us with each other. Willy-nilly. We might think the world is fragmenting, that it is deglobalizing, that people are decoupling. But in actual fact, the facts don't bear that out whether in terms of trade, whether in terms of investments, whether in terms of movement of goods, people, there is no question that actually we are much more inter dependent. So, if there are Indians who think that – oh, south Asia should somehow be exclusive to us, then I think that is really \_\_ trying to stop the scene. So, we might as well get out there and engage with everyone else and understand what they think of this and why they are in this and how it's working. And this is why I think your report like this is useful from a policy point of view.

**Constantino Xavier:**

So, from a linear perspective certainly would I normally call a shift from denial to delivery and more delivery what is really needed. Ambassador Menon on the point about the grass being so green across the Himalayas which is the way Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka are looking at China, they have been engaging and China delivered on several fronts. I was stuck with one point in your preface that is also a bit cautionary that the tide may be changing also. That some of these countries have engaged China very much for balancing, for economic modernization, for support for engagement. But at the same time and I quote, you mentioned that the region it also remains to be seen whether this welcome towards China will continue as China gains power and agency in the international system and behaves as other great powers do. End quote. So, on this it seems that as China becomes more normal as all of the great powers, there will also be growing concerns and pushback in some of these countries. Forget India of course, for a second. But you mentioned the political involvement in

Nepal by China. But also increasing voices asking to what extent some of these Chinese economic assistance projects or the costs of involvement are worth for these countries. So, do you see the tides turning already, will they turn and how are they turning?

**Shivshankar Menon:**

I don't think these are mutually exclusive. I think other countries in south Asia will keep seeking Chinese economic assistance or investment or trade infrastructure building and so on. But I think the normal political reactions in a society to an outside red power getting involved in their affairs and the more involved the more reaction. I think that is normal as you said it is a process of normalization of China's role and the reactions to it. Even in Pakistan which is probably the country in south Asia which is closest to China, whose fate is probably most tied to China in terms of her economic future certainly especially after CPs, EC and the 62 billion dollars worth of Chinese money investment. Even there you can see signs of resistance to what many people consider excessive dependence on China. But that doesn't mean that they will swing from one extreme to the other. The levels of dependence may vary and that is why this kind of study is useful. Because it enables you to measure where you are on that scale. Where countries are and how it has developed. And it also is useful because it shows you some of the complexity of these relationships. It is not that everybody in Sri Lanka feels that the Chinese presence has been good for Sri Lanka. But everybody does see some utility. Deferring degrees perhaps of utility in working with China. And China is useful to these countries in many ways. And I think we should recognize that. For me the fact that these are voices from within the region that actually gives them real authority and means that they really should be heard. I don't think that there is an end stage to this process. It is not as though the moment will come when... no. This is an evolving process as the nature of China's engagement changes, reactions will change too, as these societies evolve the reactions will change. It is not really a natural alliance or ideology between where Pakistan is today and where the Chinese communist party and Chinese ideologies. But there is clearly a solid economic interest and a strategic interest which keeps the two countries close together. And certainly, the power holders in both countries whether it is the Pakistan army and China. In each case it is slightly different and it is worth looking at the nuance of that of how that works. That is one of the advantages of this report to my mind.

**Constantino Xavier:**

You mentioned, you alluded to ideology, the importance of ideology or its limited importance, but certainly a factor. I was recalling a nice article by Sujeev Shakya wrote in Nepal saying that the Nepali communists are actually closer with the Indian communists than the Chinese communists. And we overrate that proximity. But what is your take on that in terms of politics because I think we have one

we have Asanga also writing a chapter on Sri Lanka where communism does not factor really in. But still what the communist party has been able to develop ties with political parties too. We have completely agnostic communist party of China or is there any other ideology left in these engagements abroad?

**Shivshankar Menon:**

The initial Chinese engagement is very ideological in the 50s, 60s at the height of ideology in the cultural revolution and China was exporting revolution. We saw the support they gave to naturalize to revolution across the board. Today you have the opposite situation where China presents herself as a globalized universal citizen of the world rather than an exporter of ideology even though she tends every once in a while, to talk of the China model and of how other countries can learn from China's development experience. But that is not really pushing ideology. But that doesn't mean that ideology is absent in the south Asian countries. It is just that it been downplayed today in these relationships, unless you think of the transactional use of religion for political influence, as and for the generation of soft power. If you regard that as ideological I don't actually. I think that is just another tool. Rather than an actual ideologically driven policy. Can this last? It is interesting, the further away a country is, the more separated a country is from China. The safer they feel dealing with these kinds of issues. So, this is why in the Pakistani case for instance, while it is very seldom discussed, the fact is that Pakistan is an Islamic country and there are reactions in society to what is happening in \_\_. And the Chinese have to be careful in how they handle it and they do. They try very hard to work with it. Whereas in Sri Lanka, in the Sri Lankan case frankly, Sri Lanka's own ideological development has been so separate from anything in China. So, today you have the strange situation where the Chinese used to be embarrassed when the Nepalese communists used to call themselves Maoists in the 90s and the north. The Marxists or the so called Marxists, Leninists, Trotskyites in Sri Lanka again would be an ideological embarrassment for the Chinese. So, you have the strange situation where you have a nominally ideological communist party of China which is downplaying ideology. It is an interesting phenomenon to watch. I don't know where it will go though.

**Constantino Xavier:**

In some of the work, we came across and some of the Chinese sources we can only guess the puzzlement also. Chinese decision makers in dealing with the I think some of their officials where the chaotic politics of south Asia. Nepal had tried 10 prime ministers in 10 years. Sri Lanka has had its own degree of instability. So, these are countries certainly that must be also not easy to influence if you think it from a basic one party state structure where you expect some stability and continuity. But on this point, one thing that came out also nicely in our report it seems is besides the adaptive



quality to China, every case, every sector, every country has a different story to tell. It is not monolithic single approach that China is pursuing. Thus, we use this sort of themes, partners and tools, try it to look at different countries. So, there is an adaptability, there is intelligence and a certain capacity also China to adapt to different circumstances and learning right, from different countries and different sectors and you can see that happening from country to country over different years. But generally, we have of course the perspective on China's side in terms of push factors, which we tend to study a lot what China wants, what China seeks, desires etc. One underrated issue in our study that we found quite interesting is that often you mentioned and you called it anticipated compliance from countries. Actors in these countries that are asking China to come in, that are pulling China in, that are seeking engaging China, seeking support, seeking favors and expecting China almost to be present in their domestic political affairs, in regulating and legislating different sectors, etc. I think quite interesting. But do you think we overrate still the former over the later? Where do you see more productive research to be done?

**Shivshankar Menon:**

Well, when you look at it empirically when Sri Lanka defaulted for instance in April 2022 and you look at the actual response of the international community as a whole, not just China. But China is part of it. It took a long time, it took over a year for the international community to actually get its act together and offer some real money to Sri Lanka to help her get out of her situation. That is a default that everyone saw coming. Had been prepared for. So, yes, I do think there has been a tendency in south Asia and in India as well. I mean the rest of south Asia and India, to overestimate the Chinese capacity to actually intervene in moments of crisis or... it is one thing to build infrastructure when things are going smoothly. But today I think south Asia is in a poly crisis as Adam Tooze calls it. If you think of it, five governments changed within a little more than a year, one default, three in discussion with the IMF because of debt. And all of them going through internal political challenge. So, it is a much more complicated environment for China in which China is operating today. And therefore, you notice a degree of caution in fresh commitments and now you can say this is due to pandemic, due to China's own situation, a slowdown etc., and there might be a thousand other reasons. But I do think we are entering a new phase of Chinese engagement. Partly because as I said, south Asia has changed. It is in crisis and it is complicated. But also, because Chinese behavior has changed. And China senses the world around her has changed in an adverse way from her point of view. I think Xi Jinping has made this clear over and over again. I do think we are going to see this change. I am not saying that all these instruments that she today uses will be abandoned. But they will probably be used differently in a different mix. It is going to be so. So, it is a subject worth looking at in the future as well.

**Constantino Xavier:**

Thank you, Ambassador Menon. I think that is a lot we have to chew on looking back at the report, looking at the region, looking forward in terms of how we at CSEP may take this forward in different directions in research. I think I speak on behalf of Jabin and the whole team. Thank you very much for guiding us, pushing us to do this, believing in this. Because there were... of course, a lot of naysayers saying it is not worth studying China. I think we have not changed that much from the 60s. In fact, we were looking at the number of mandarin speakers, ambassador Menon, in 1950s and 60s in the Indian foreign services which you were part of and it clearly represented there the sort of underrating of China and then the jump from the 70s onwards etc. So, we certainly need to study much more of China and hoping to have you engage more on this and take this report forward. In what I think you described very well as a more competitive crowded and open region and crisis prone region where China is not anymore, an extra regional power, where China certainly a resident power influencing and shaping key moments for all these countries. Thanks Ambassador Menon.

**Shivshankar Menon:**

Thank you and congratulations.

**Constantino Xavier:**

So, with this I will pass it on to Jabin, my co-conspirer, to take it over and bring in more than just south Asia but different regions in. Jabin, over to you.

**Jabin Jacob:**

Thank you Tino. Hello everyone. We are delighted to have you all join us from various parts of the world. And welcome especially to our three panelists from Berlin, Singapore and Seoul. For those of you who have just joined us and wondering what this is all about, this is a report, "how China engages south Asia – themes, partners and tools" that Constantino and I co-edited. And which we are discussing today. I see that some of you have already discovered the Q&A box, so please those of you who have come prepared you can already put in your questions in the Q&A box. Otherwise, you can start keep putting them as we speak. Let me quickly introduce the three speakers. Miss Niva Yau is non-resident fellow with China global hub at the Atlantic council. Previously she was based at the organization for security and cooperation in Europe academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, a very fine place I am told. She focuses on central Asia and on China's new overseas security management. I suspect that we will have a little bit of this to discuss too in our presentations. Dr. Mareike Ohlberg is a senior fellow in the Indo pacific program at the German Marshall fund in Berlin. She also leads the Stockholm China forum and previously worked at the McCarter institute for China studies. Marieke is

focused on China's media and digital policies as well as on the communist party of China's influence campaigns in Europe. Our final speaker is Dr Selina Ho, assistant professor internal affairs and co-director of the center on Asia and globalization Lew Kuan Yew school of public policy at the national university of Singapore. She is also a nonresident fellow with both the inter-American dialogue and the Singapore institute of international affairs. Her work, her research focuses mostly on Chinese politics and foreign policy with a focus on how China uses infrastructure and water disputes in southeast Asia and south Asia to exercise power and influence. Again, all three speakers are of area of interest that are of great interest to those of us in south Asia, wanting to learn from other experiences and also to apply those lessons in our cases. So, let me start with Niva followed by Marieke and then Selina. I am going to start with Niva precisely because central Asia is really a part of the world that simply doesn't get enough attention in New Delhi and this needs to be underlined. Even though central Asia is closer geographically speaking at least to the Indian capital, there is hardly any enough attention. So, I am going to ask each of you to spend about three to four minutes giving us your thoughts on this CSEP report. What stands out for you and perhaps highlight some issues or thoughts that you found in common with what you see happening in your specific region of focus. So, Niva, you first.

**Niva Yau:**

First of all, thank you so much for having me and congratulations for such an excellent publication that you have put together. When I started reading it, I was already kind of comparing with the case of central Asia and when you say that it was difficult for you to find writers actually from the region based on the country writing about China in their own country. I think it would be about 80% harder if we were to do such a publication in central Asia because people are not just afraid to write about China these days, they are actually also afraid to talk about China these days. So, the publications that you have put together is actually extremely valuable for a global case study. Immediate thoughts I thought all the themes were extremely important, particularly for central Asia I was thinking each of those themes could be applied to central Asian case study on topics like the student and soft power, on topics such as religious influence and particularly conflict mediation was the one that I thought was extremely interesting. Because this is not really a practice in central Asia. The PRC stays out of the regional conflicts. Especially the ones between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It stays out completely. It helps both sides actually, it gives the same amount of aid to both sides at the same time. So, it tries to completely stay out of it. So, it is very interesting to see the ways that China engages in conflict mediation somewhere else to see what are some of the potential PRC postures in the region and also what are some of the factors that actually need China to get involved in these conflicts. I also thought, it was interesting to look at how China engages with the Nepali communist parties, because

obviously China does that in Kazakhstan quite a lot, but it failed. Quite frankly. I think there is a lot of comparing and contrasting and I look forward to reading the report much more closely.

**Jabin Jacob:**

Thank you. Over to you, Mareike.

**Mareike Ohlberg:**

Thank you from me as well for having me here and congratulations on this much needed report which I really enjoyed reading. Maybe a couple of things. I have worked on this topic for quite a while, I have worked on those CCP influence and interference in Europe, I have looked at some countries in Asia, particularly in southeast Asia, but also some other parts. I have looked at those in sub-Saharan Africa and usually across the spectrum. Political elite capture, business elite capture, academic engagement, media engagement, civil and so, really what I think a lot about how we can come up with better frameworks to study CCP influence or PRC influence. I think regional studies such as the ones that the one that you made, you published is essential in getting the framework right. What I usually tell people when they want to look into this topic in their own region I say, look, there is a general tool kit of things, of tools and techniques and tactics that you can find almost anywhere. Party to party diplomacy is usually something that the CCP does in most countries. Working with business interests is usually something that happens. The own media expansion, work placing stuff and local media and working with social media, working with academia, etc., etc. So, there is a whole tool kit of things that you can map. But then it is really essential to look at the local composition. How it exactly pans out in each country. And this is where having looked at this full for a while, you can really see that even though... I give people all these things to check for, the exact variation and what is going to be effective what resources are available, are going to be vastly different from country to country. As are the effects. I think this is something that comes through in the report. I also guess I want to highlight the importance of again having those regional studies in there because you cannot transfer one on one what is happening in one country to another. And I want to give three examples that I found useful in explaining that. The first one is a lot of those work on influence, interference, you can call it soft power whatever you want, a lot of it originally came from Australia and New Zealand. Because that was where this was first rediscovered and was studied in detail and we had incredibly useful frameworks coming out of that. But then in my own work it was really important not to transfer this framework one on one to my own work. Because for instance Australia and New Zealand both have vast diaspora. So, the diaspora plays a really big role in those countries. But that is not necessarily the case in Germany. Then people have a tendency to look at it through the original lens and then of course, look for the 'had malign influence' of the Chinese

diaspora in Germany etc. I am trying to tell people that the levers that CCP can use in Germany are actually quite different. That is true for every region. Like there are some countries that have influential diasporas and it is worth studying them. But in other cases, it is much more important to look at for instance business interests that are aligned. You have to look at media influence etc. It is really important to tailor this. Another difference. In countries where China already enjoys the support of the national government, they are going to do much less of these surrounding activities. For instance, in Germany or in the UK there is a lot of local diplomacy, there is a lot of aligning with business interest, because there is a lot of opposition at the national government or federal government level against certain (cut in audio for 2 seconds). The PRC tries to use those smaller actors around them to overcome this resistance. But that is not necessarily something you would find as much in countries where there is already buy-in from a central or federal or national government. So, third example and this is something that which is why I think these regional studies are so important. One of the things that was completely not on my own radar but that came up in a recent study that I did together with Niva that we could talk about later and that also comes up permanently in your report is religious diplomacy. It is not something that was highlighted in the Australian reports or New Zealand reports as far as I am aware. It is not something I have looked at in Europe. But it was something that was very relevant when I looked at Asia and also at sub-Saharan Africa. It was basically a new discovery. Oh, yeah, there is this tool that is actually really important and that plays a key role in some of those countries. So, having those regional reports is really important for us to supplement our own toolkit, like our own understanding and to gain a more full picture of the different tools and techniques. Anyway, I am going to stop here, I think I have gone over my four minutes. I am going to stop.

**Jabin Jacob:**

No, thank you Mareike. I think that is an important point that you just made about elite capture depending on local conditions. I mean, the Chinese might have a general toolkit, but local conditions also matter. From an Asian perspective it is quite natural that religion should be used as a matter of diplomacy or as a toolkit or whatever. Selena, you have actually talked a great deal about questions of agency of smaller powers. In this particular study of south Asia is all smaller powers with two big powers competing for influence. Your thoughts.

**Selina Ho:**

Thank you very much Jabin and thank you Tino for having me here. It is a great pleasure to be here. I really enjoyed reading this report. I think it is a wonderful report of a very understudied region of Chinese influence say compared to so much out there about Chinese influence on southeast Asia. You

have a lot of reports out there about Chinese influence in Africa for instance. I think that is one region that you might not have invited people in for this panel. But too many of us already as it is. And the range of strategies and tools that you have in your report, I like that it didn't focus on the hot power like security and economic. But really on social media, students and then what I found particularly illuminating was Buddhism, that was a little bit of interesting for me. I think it really makes sense in the south Asian context. What I didn't notice in southeast Asia is this Buddhism element. It could be just my ignorance but it might have something to do with the strength of Islam in this region. I will talk about that later on. I think the range is impressive. I really like the tools and the themes and strategies that are being discussed in this sort of papers. Then, China's new roles in conflict mediation between Bangladesh and Myanmar is really interesting too. And especially just now I think ambassador Menon mentioned about the middle east or someone else mentioned about what is happening in the middle east. Really China's role in peace keeping all over the world has actually also gone up. And that is really something interesting. I just have a series of suggestions and thoughts about the report Jabin and Tino, as you go forward. If you intend to publish this in a book form or something, a few thoughts that I thought would really strengthen it and make it into a concrete book form. One question that I have is... I have a set of questions that is specific to the report and then larger issues which I think you two as editors can actually address. One question is how China's role in south Asia is really interesting. Because unlike southeast Asia, China is running up against another giant there right. The resident power which is India. The regional hegemon. A regional hegemon with which it has had historical baggage and current territorial disputes or the clashes. Now in southeast Asia, China is the resident great power. There is competition from other major powers but in this case in China in south Asia, India is already the resident regional hegemon. So, my question is how is China's influence in south Asia shaping south Asian regional order? How is that changing regional order in south Asia when you have India as the hegemon, as the leader, as the big brother. Can we compare China's role with India's role there for instance? That is the one thing. Then the other question I have is, in which areas are Chinese influence more successful than say others, in economics, in military or is in cultural, lead capture, media, party to party or about people to people kind of exchanges with the students and all. So, which areas are the Chinese most successful in than others? So, which areas? Because this will tell us about Chinese power and influence and capabilities, right? Then a couple of broader questions on the study of Chinese influence. One is why is China having a global presence and wanting to grow its influence overseas. This is, everyone assumes that China wants to do this and then they always cast it in the light of US-China rivalry. But what are the other things, other than US-China rivalry? Is it about protection of its assets overseas, is it about shaping environmental facilities rise? And all these kinds of other reasons, one little portion on that

would be really useful. The other more theoretical one and more in terms of framework is, you actually need to differentiate between power and influence. So, power is material and non-material resources, right and capabilities. Now influence is the effective use of these resources. So, there is in the papers a little bit of mixture. When you want to talk about influence, you have to see the effects, right? How do you measure influence? Power is just a raw capability. It does not necessarily translate into influence. There have been all these studies out there that dependence doesn't really necessarily lead to alignments. Having China as your largest trade partner for instance does not mean that you are going to align with China on every political or security issues out there. Just now I mentioned, how do we know that China has influence? How do we measure? One obvious way is look at how behavior changes. Policies and behavior, does it change in such a way that where it is actually at the expense of the target states interests. Such as the case study on CPC inroads in Sri Lanka's governance and foreign policies, that was very interesting. Because that was a clear case of influence to me. The other way is to look at target states if it believes or reflect China's values. Do they believe that China is number one? Do they believe that China is on top in the ranking order in the region for instance? So, these are actually ways to look at how to think about power and influence and how to measure influence actually. I think that is all I have. Thanks, Jabin.

**Jabin Jacob:**

Thank you, Selina. I think this question about differentiating between power and influence and assessing influence through its actual effects on the ground is something that we are conscious of and ambassador Menon has also referred to it several times. I think the overall picture at least from our report is that this is really mixed. It isn't actually a clear cut case of where China is able to actually exercise this influence. And again, these depend on country to country which is what makes this study interesting and I think very important that we are actually looking at these questions or beginning to look at these questions deeply. The next set of questions that I have maybe two or three minutes each is, to ask each of you from your vantage point in your particular regions, what is it that China is doing that you find different completely from what China might be doing in south Asia. What is it that perhaps those of us in south Asia need to anticipate and see that China might be engaged in doing sometimes soon? We talked about religious diplomacy as something that is unique to south Asia, perhaps. Or in Africa. But maybe other trends in your region which you think policy makers and analysts in India and rest of south Asia ought to be looking out for. Let me start with Mareike because you actually have done... I suppose you are going to say to the Chinese influence campaigns are really likely to grow, yes. But what else?

**Mareike Ohlberg:**

Not necessarily I think it is really \_\_\_ and it definitely a space to watch. But I think one thing that I don't think is necessarily currently missing in south Asia but that I think would deserve more attention is, I think this report for the largest part I feel like looked mainly into the kind of positive side of things from the CCPs point of view. So, like how to network, how to build resources, how do you win over students, win over political parties, places the positive narrative in there. That is a really important part of what is happening. But I think one thing that is really worth looking into and I think that is already happening in the region maybe but not as much as in some other regions is the other side of the coin. The kind of the coercive side, the not just building resources but trying to shut certain people up. Trying to shut certain narratives down. Trying to intimidate people into stopping their reporting on certain topics. I think there is some examples from Nepal that are quite appalling where possibly somebody lost their life for their reporting on China. I think it is really important to look at this whole toolkit as a set. Because I feel like the way that the PRC approaches this topic is very much as a whole toolkit that is supposed to have a whole lot of society effect of promoting the friends of the PRC, making sure that the perceived enemies of the PRC are isolated, the platform shut down, etc., etc. and making sure that the broad people in the middle at the very least don't criticize the PRC. But ideally you know they will speak up on behalf of China but at the very least don't criticize the PRC. So, I think it is important to look at how this all works together and how it is viewed from the CCPs perspective. And I am highlighting the coercive toolkit and the trying to shut down the base because this is something that's been really important for China in recent years. The Xi Jinping speech with references of the old debate of the three afflictions that previously China suffered beating from foreign colonial powers and that was ended by Mao Zedong. Then China suffered poverty, suffered hunger and that ended by Del Xiaoping and now currently China is suffering all this horrible criticism from other countries that really needs to be shut up and that is the stopping the being scolded is the generational challenge under Xi Jinping. And this is why so much effort has been put into actually shutting down critics, silencing the platforming critics and I think there is a rich already quite few examples from the region. But it is something that would need to be looked at in much more detail, examined in much more detail under which circumstances does it work out, under which circumstances do these attempts fail. Because obviously it doesn't always work to shut people up. But it is another thing that is really important in my view to understand and to get a better grasp of, in order to counter that. And make sure that this does not succeed because... a lot of the other measures that are being done a lot of them you can argue are legitimate. They are certainly not illegal, but this is the one field for most of the really illegitimate stuff happens which I think deserves stronger counter measures and stronger responses. But for that to happen you have to first



understand what is the actual situation on the ground. So, I just wanted to put that forward as one thing to include in perhaps in this volume, perhaps in future debates.

**Jabin Jacob:**

I think that is an important point. We will certainly be looking at it, we are certainly aware of it. So, Selina, let me get back to you. I mean, southeast Asia is probably the one region where Chinese activities have the greatest sophistication and the greater scale. So, what are your thoughts on this particular aspect. What is it that south Asians ought to be looking out for?

**Selina Ho:**

Let me do some comparisons with southeast Asia. I think that actually I was when I was reading the report was actually struck by more similarities than differences. But there is one key difference which is the ethnic element. But I will talk about that in a bit. Just draw some similarities. One is that the use of scholarships. In the public students in China. Now this is very similar to southeast Asia. I went on a few trips to Laos not too long ago. I was told in smaller Laos there are about 8000 to 10000 students already on some sort of scholarship either from central government provisional government or some SOE or similar enterprise. They are all studying in China in some province or other. Now, this is very similar. Now the question we have to ask ourselves and I think south Asian countries should ask themselves is, the effect of these scholarships is kind of similar to Fulbright and US Fulbright UK scholarships. And those play a big part in influencing how the next generation view these powers, right? The countries that give out the scholarships. So, the question for us is, as a younger generation in our region, your region, south Asia and my region, as they grow up, they are growing up at a time where they see China on the rise. This is not something that older people like me will see... have seen happening. We saw the US rising, the west rising. But they are growing up at a time where China is on the rise, they only see a strong China or the west, well they see all the disarray in the west. The west in decline. So, the question is how would this cultivation of younger people through scholarships, people to people influence, how would this actually change perceptions as regional order and global order as time passes, generation after generation. I think that is one thing. The use of religion and Buddhism, the case of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. As I was saying just now, this is not something that I have actually really investigated. So, I am not sure whether there are such things going on in majority Chinese populations like Singapore. But you would imagine that for example in Malaysia and Indonesia, this would be harder. Buddhist influences. And the problem is for Malaysia and Indonesia Xinjiang is a problem for China's ties, right? I think Niva will come in on the Xinjiang question later on perhaps. But because of this public opinion at home and alternate sources of information and newsroom, international media, what China is trying to say on the Xinjiang issue is

an impediment in the kind of influence that it can have in say countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. Party to party ties, Nepal's case I was saying, in Sri Lanka's case very interesting. And in south east Asia that is where this is a little bit more difficult. Since in Malaysia in major Islamic parties are actually prominent and they actually dominate. In the place where the CCP has very successful is with other communist parties and socialist parties as you guys have noted in your report, in Vietnam with the VCP with the Lao communist party as well. But there is a limit to... and then with Malaysia it is with Chinese based political parties which is the Malayan Chinese association. MCA. So, that is in Malaysia. Where China is or CCP is more successful is with the socialist parties, communist parties, as well as the ethnically Chinese parties. I think that is where they are most successful. In terms of the use of media, increasingly sophisticated both in social media accounts but also in traditional media, you see them buying media outlets in Thailand for instance. As subsidiaries... some form of subsidiaries and there are these agreements between Sing Hua and China daily CC-Gen for instance with local media outlets in south Asia. So, these are all very interesting developments that are going on. So, the key element that I think that is very different perhaps is the ethnic Chinese element. I am not sure whether that is... it is happening in southeast Asia as well where they are cultivating ethnic Chinese elements. Or even if they do that, is there any use at all given that they are such a small pocket, right, of the population in south Asia. But using that, they cultivate their presence for example Chinese clans. In a country like Singapore where we are majority are Chinese, Chinese influence is through social media, through clans, through business associations, it is quite extensive in that sense. But in certain countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, this actually makes them very wary. Anti-Chinese sentiments is related to anti-communist sentiments. So, when China tries to interfere and use the racial card in say Malaysia, there was a case a few years back where there were some racial tensions and the ambassador went to the China town in Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. And started speaking on behalf of the Chinese. There was this huge furore that was created. So, there is a backlash when you use the ethnic card, in this among countries where the Chinese are treated with suspicion, but in certain countries where like Singapore where there is a majority of Chinese it is easy for China to come in and work with the clients and business associations for instance. Thanks, Jabin.

**Jabin Jacob:**

Niva, you already mentioned that China does not engage in conflict mediation in central Asia. For example, during Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan. So, that is one difference. But what are the other differences you think ought to be highlighted?

**Niva Yau:**

That is actually so much I want to reflect on from the previous speakers. Let me just pick a couple of things. First is the scholarship. So, we actually, my colleagues have done quite a bit trying to understand the effectiveness of Chinese scholarships for central Asian students. One of the things that actually... we found a couple of things and some of them really interesting things. We find like a lot of students are after they learn Chinese, they are stuck with a career path of working for Chinese companies. And actually, these students that are Chinese speaking who have enjoyed Chinese government scholarships are actually kind of the backbone of the regional bilateral trade with China because they are (audio break). For central Asia the language study actually has that trade sort of element in there. But in politics as well, in Kazakhstan, the Chinese embassy actually has tailor made scholarships for children of political elites. And we are actually starting to see that more and more politicians or people in government have had a background of studying in China. Not just for a six month language program but like for a bachelor degree or for masters. I think their time spent in China is actually very important. It transcends their world view and how they suggest policies and how they do things. The scholarships do matter. I think quite a bit at least in central Asia. Just one point on Malaysian Chinese and how China uses that ethnic card in Malaysia. In our study with Mareike for IRI, we actually found that during the Hong Kong protest in 2019 there were these like new Malaysian Chinese YouTube channels that were speaking in Chinese promoting PRC disinformation about key leaders of the movement and also of the national security law and of the extradition law. These videos have like half a million of views and they were extremely popular among some Malaysian Chinese community at a time when these groups were actually very supportive of Hong Kong especially the young Malaysian Chinese. So, we can see that these forms of like new media here are actually being used the same way. They could be used also in south Asia as one of the studies already suggested in the report. Going back to central Asia, what is something that China does in central Asia that perhaps we haven't really seen in south Asia and it wasn't really covered in the report. Selina said that India is the resident player in the region. So, in central Asia we have Russia as the resident player. Actually, the experience is that both Russia and China actually have the same agenda in the region and part of this agenda is a very strong strategy of normative agenda setting. So, creating narratives, making sure that the definitions align and these not just concern kind of what is going on in China domestically but also concerns regional and global narratives. What do I mean by that? Regional narratives would be for example since the 90s China creates these selective stories of silk route, harmonious history as a foundation to strong central Asian diplomacy with China but, in actual fact like the silk route was never just purely harmonious but over time people have this idea that the silk road was harmonious. And it is one of the starting points of how China uses tactics like that for normative agenda setting. Also, together with Russia China promotes this idea of \_\_

revolution to discredit protests. This was for Kyrgyzstan and basically discredit people's motivations for political reforms. Then fast forward to 2000s and kind of 2010s, you have China coming in to define what is terrorism. So, the whole idea of Shanghai corporation organization is to create this concept of the three evils to discredit political movement in Xinjiang. The political movement in Xinjiang that was so much about ethnic based discrimination but China created this whole vocabulary of three evils, anti-terrorism, anti-separatism and anti-extremism. That has basically shifted the entire regional understanding of what was going on in Xinjiang. That was incredibly successful. Now fast forward, we see that with global narratives as well on democracy and human rights. These are agenda that are so much information based. Selina just now was talking about why is China pursuing influence. So, part of what Mareike and I did in our coming report is we have a whole section about the idea that China in pursuit of becoming a major power in the world. It is not just focused one economic and military power. But also, information power is one of the three pillars of what it means to be a major power. Being able to have this voice, have this opinion and have these narratives become globally adopted is one of the most important aspect of what it means to be a powerful country. A lot of that has been experimented in central Asia in choosing narratives and changing history even.

**Jabin Jacob:**

Thank you. We are sort of running up against time and there is a bunch of questions in the chat box already. Let me just take a couple of points that each of you is sort of coming across on all three presentations. One, I think was the fact that media and information power or narrative making is actually a very much an important prong of Chinese influence or Chinese approaches to exercising influence in each of these three geographies and also it is something that we have anticipated in our studies in the report, you have Sanjana's report. A chapter at the end of this report on how Chinese use Facebook in Sri Lanka. By the way it is a much longer study about how these Chinese also use twitter. And one of the interesting things that stands out in that report in that essay by Sanjana is that the Chinese actually have a much larger presence on social media in Sri Lanka. Bigger than the next six embassies put together. Which is astonishing. I mean, if you think about the fact that Sri Lanka is an English speaking country and embassies such as European union and the Americans, the Indians have no presence comparable to China on social media. But not just that, the Chinese are also able to engage in social media in the local languages. In order to actually exercise influence to change narratives, to exercise information power, the level of investments that the Chinese put into language learning in these countries is incredible. I think Tino mentioned it at the beginning there is another study that CSEP is doing on language competencies within the Indian foreign service, the size of language competency or the scale at which a language is studied and numbers are built up in terms

of interpreters and translators in China is just incredible. It has to be seen to be believed. No conference is without an interpreter or simultaneous translation. So, that is something maybe at least those of us in India perhaps need to pay greater attention to. Now in terms of one interesting part that comes out is China's use of religion tool. On the one hand China uses religion which is Islam to define terrorism. But here I sort of want to take maybe a little bit of an issue with both what Selina said about how this becomes difficult given the situation in Xinjiang it becomes difficult for China with respect to Indonesia and Malaysia. But in the case of south Asian countries, Muslim countries like Bangladesh or Pakistan, it seems that the Chinese are able to weather this storm and political elite in Pakistan are able to sort of ignore it completely. The prime minister or the former prime minister was on tv saying he had no clue what was going on or he thought that nothing was going on in Xinjiang. I think that speaks to the point that Mareike talked about before which is not only should we be looking at China's positive efforts to create networks etc., but also about how it shuts down debate. How it coerces and prevents certain narratives from taking root, taking shape and so on. The kind of pressure it brings on media houses and so on. Again, Selina's point is very important about how the Chinese are investing in spots, buying up media houses, newspapers, radio channels, stations etc. I think all of this is something that we in south Asia will need to particularly pay attention to. Since we have very little time, I think I will... can I give each of you a minute perhaps to quickly flag... Niva and Mareike talked about their joint work. But maybe you could tell us Mareike perhaps, you could tell us a little bit about this work and when you think this is sort of coming to fruition and perhaps you could use CSEP as a venue to release this, huh?

**Mareike Ohlberg:**

Yeah, maybe. This is going to... I don't have the exact publication date yet but it is coming out very shortly. So, I think hopefully this month, all fingers crossed. But as far as I understand it is going to be this month. Perhaps aside from filling in more regional examples from various sub-regions in the Indo-Pacific, I think one of the ways that Niva and I are hoping to contribute to the debate is by really setting up a framework of how to study information manipulation. We are basically looking at information spaces. But what we are saying is for information spaces it is not enough to just look at social media or at media but you have to look at it from a whole of society perspective which is what we posit is how the CCP and the PRC look at this phenomenon. You have to look at the key role that foreign proxies or people from each country play in amplifying PRC narrative. It is obviously not enough to just look at the expansion of PRC media itself, but you really have to look at how various foreign voices are integrated into the strategy to amplify certain points, to repeat those points, to create the impression of a broad consensus within that country that people are on the side of China, that China is the reasonable voice here, that China's policy are ideal and then again the counter side

of it that critics of these policies are marginalized to the largest possible extent. So, we are kind of looking at whole of society approach to information management that looks at both amplifying certain voices and then using the course of toolkit to shut down and suppress anything that is considered amount to critical or that is considered undesired. And to look at it really from this not an individual thing, but to try to bring things together and how that works together. I am thinking that hopefully will help shape some of the future work in this area.

**Jabin Jacob:**

Selina, you are visiting India in September.

**Selina Ho:**

I think so, yes.

**Jabin Jacob:**

So, what is it that you are working on? That perhaps CSEP could sort of latch on to and maybe use it to expand this particular project.

**Selina Ho:**

I am actually working on two projects that has to do with China and southeast Asia right now. One of them I am hoping to submit that paper soon with my co-authors, the title is and it speaks for itself, is 'southeast Asia – a Chinese sphere of influence'. It is looking at what is the sphere influence in the first place. And how is it different from influence and how do you measure whether a region is a sphere of influence. So, there are larger theoretical implications that can be translated to other regions as well.

**Jabin Jacob:**

I don't think you should say anymore because you will have plenty of questions waiting for you

**Selina Ho:**

I was going to end with that.

**Jabin Jacob:**

Let me quickly get to the questions. I think there are two broad trends that I see in the questions. One in fact is a question that might be related to our work which is, there is still a feeling in India and elsewhere also, we are in the 10<sup>th</sup> year of BRI now, right? How is the BRI faring? But what I want to sort of ask each of you is to tell us how is the BRI faring in terms of sort of the push back. Its is not

just all positive results from the BRI. But there is also now pushback coming in from smaller countries even. Even in Laos I think about how the BRI is actually operating. Questions even Pakistan, you know, all weather friends, there is a great deal of confusion questioning of the impacts of the BRI. So, in terms of this narrative building that the Chinese are engaging, we talked about the question of how effective is this influence? What is the result on the ground? So, the Chinese do make mistakes, right? The Chinese aren't 10 feet tall. The Chinese are you know getting pushback. So, how does this actually function? How is this seen in each of your areas? Maybe I will start with Niva now on central Asia and the BRI and perhaps some references to the latest initiatives, the global civilization initiatives, development, security initiatives. How are these playing out?

**Niva Yau:**

I think I would like to echo just now what Mareike said about PRC influence really depends on how receptive local countries are and I think that cannot be more true for central Asia. Because central Asia it leads in the past 20, 30 years have been very open to Chinese initiatives as a counter to Russia as they believe back in the day. But now it is gone very deep to a point where China is their only choice. So, because of that actually BRI is not really failing. I mean the BRI was announced in Kazakhstan. Actually, the whole project itself, the idea of the belt and the road, the belt being this super economic belt is something that Chinese officials already started talking about in the 90s, like revival of the old silk road. So, the BRI really started in central Asia, it was almost created for central Asia and it may make the most sense actually for central Asia. There was some level of pushback in this kind of couple of years after the announcement of BRI because a lot of these projects when they first came in, they were not transparent at all and people don't know about it until they are on the ground. They started to see thousands of Chinese workers, majority of men coming in and people are very fearful of losing their land. So, a lot of these projects initially created a lot of backlash and pushback and protests like nationwide protests. But unfortunately, because of how much the local governments they have adopted a very strong pro-China positions, they have in the past couple of years imposed very heavy pushback on activists and NGOs and civil organizations and lawyers who are interested to investigate or at least bring more transparency to issues related to Chinese projects. This is unfortunately where we are at. The pushback has basically been eliminated by how much the local governments work to destroy these voices. We have just had the central Asia China summit in Xian a month ago and since then we are seeing a lot more economic deals being signed people are having worried voices you can see it on the internet, but people are unable to protest because there were some protests in Kazakhstan the week that China and Kazakhstan announced to get rid of this visa regime. They are going to have visa free to travel both ways. People were protesting and they are

already within hours, everybody was arrested. So, unfortunately this is where we are at and this is because the local governments are extremely strong on their positions on China.

**Jabin Jacob:**

Selina?

**Selina Ho:**

Jabin, thank you, for giving me the opportunity to bring out this book 'rivers of iron' and it is about the Pan Asian railway that me and co-authors have written about. You talk about Laos, so Laos is a big chunk of this project, right? And Laos to China railways has already been built. And it is been functional so for more than a year now. It is highly popular, it is a source of national pride for the Lao people. But you are right in the sense that it is not like Laos everything is sweet and everything is wonderful. There is... Laos is looking to diversify. It is worried about, it is concerned about Chinese influence and dominance and it would prefer to have more partners. But perhaps it is not as concerned about being reliant on China as western countries are more worried about Laos being reliant on China. Laos really accepts this part of its identity as a small and weaker state that he has to rely on its neighbors. All the neighbors are... it shares five borders with countries which are much larger than it is and he sees these five countries including China as a way for it to grow economically which is very important for the Lao elite. But overall BRI from what we understand is that there is a slowdown in terms of new projects, new investments. Primarily because China is also rearranging its own economy to be more to deal with its own internal problems. The kind of changes that are happening internally in China's economy. But also, it has to do with fear of large debts. I don't believe in debt trap diplomacy, the kind of narrative that is out there. I think a lot of people and scholars have already shown that it is not a 'trap' per se. but it could be a consequence of Chinese lending activities. But the Chinese themselves are worried. They have actually cut down on loans overseas and in Laos as well. They will be much more careful about lending money to Laos. Because there rating is like a 'D'. at a 'D' rate, a very low credit rating is very low. So, they actually have stopped giving out so many of these kinds of aid and loans to countries that are not able to repay.

**Jabin Jacob:**

I think there is a question here that references this. Which is I think from Paul Stanley at Chicago. He is sort of asking about how the various players in Myanmar are looking at China's role in the negotiations. Chinese are historically a very strong influence in northern Myanmar among the different ethnic armies. But the military Junta in Myanmar is also heavily dependent on Chinese for political reasons. I want to sort of tie this into what you were saying Selina before about China's



influence in ethnic communities or Chinese ethnic communities. You are right. There isn't much of an ethnic factor in south Asia so much. But China is becoming extremely serious about the rights of its citizens. Or the interests of its expatriates. Right now, we have in fact a spat going on between China and India with respect to Chinese journalists in India and Indian journalists in China. China's claim is its citizens are being treated poorly or unfairly. So, this is actually even though we might not have an ethnic factor, it is enough to actually raise questions or enough of a stick those Chinese to beat somebody with. So, my question is really perhaps a larger one. Yes, there is that China will continue traditional forms of engagement through ethnic groups in places like Myanmar and so on. Perhaps even in Nepal try and intervene in ethnic conflicts and so on. But the larger question of China's sense of extra territoriality as a case of Chinese influence in these regions. What is your thought about this? And especially because in southeast Asia especially I think there are several examples to talk about.

**Selina Ho:**

So, Jabin, this is actually the second project I am working on which is how China's security footprint overseas increasing with its economic footprint. So, there are a lot of bad actors out there. So, we have to be careful to differentiate between different actors and that we call 'China' right? China is not unique to \_\_\_. So, we all study China know that. So, the idea that there are these elements, criminals overseas, dissidents overseas, dissidents are not the same as criminals in my opinion. But the Chinese lam it together and that creates the security presence overseas. But what I am actually studying is how in southeast Asia itself in the Mekong region you see police patrol boats on the Mekong region, you see police coming in to arrest criminals, Chinese criminals actually in the casinos, in the human trafficking problems that are overseas, in the golden dragon area where all these SEZs, especially economic zones are going on. So, the question for us, for me and my co-authors is how do we... China no longer looks at development as necessary as, as the only thing for peace and prosperity and stability of its neighborhood. Which in turn it is going to benefit from. It is actually looking at development plus security now. So, it is always this presence overseas and all these at the end the question that we have and we are still working on this paper is what is the impact of these kind of police presence overseas on the, as you talk about with this the extraterritoriality, right. So, it impinges on the sovereignty of these states, right? Smaller states. But then we have to think also from a different angle because in case in countries like Laos, the state doesn't have the capacity to chase down criminals. So, the Chinese steps in, help train local police, work with local police, and in the end actually increases the capacity of the Lao state to deal with criminal elements. So, is it necessarily a bad thing? How should we perceive this? As impinging on Lao sovereignty or is this about improving Lao security. So, this is an interesting question to think about and we haven't come to any conclusions yet. This is something that we have been looking at.

**Jabin Jacob:**

I think the training element has been particularly highlighted in China's global security initiative. Since a lot of these questions in the chat box are about hard security issues it wouldn't be fair or maybe it is just right that we end this thing with one final question on hard security issue taking off from what Selina said I will ask this to Niva who has actually been working on private security contractors in central Asia. I think this is particularly interesting for us because we see... in a way this is kind of elite capture. There are institutions and sections within governments that the Chinese have identified that they can do business with, better than they can with other sections. In a place like south Asia where there are pro India and anti-India groups or sections or lines of thinking, this is particularly useful for the Chinese to actually employ as a means. But I want to come to private security contractors. There are people in the chat box who actually do look at these issues as well. So, in central Asia how do you think and how do you see this as operating. Perhaps this is also an area of interest or work that you do. Niva, the organisers have given me five more minutes. So, maybe you have got two minutes and then I can hand over to Tino for the final words.

**Niva Yau:**

I will be really fast and I will echo what Selina was saying as well. Like with Chinese investments and economic projects it comes with a security angle as well. You need to secure these projects. And that is when... so this is why actually one of my new projects is actually mapping security activities of non-state Chinese entities overseas. So, these are not police, these are things like private security companies, these are Chinese commercial companies themselves hiring security activities and actually conducting security activities for themselves. What does that mean for local countries and not just in central Asia. But also, elsewhere in the world as well. What does that mean for local law enforcement and what does that mean for other foreign actors who are working in the region, so on and so forth. I think one of the biggest problems with these sort of non-state Chinese entities on the ground engaging in security activities is most of the time they are untrained. And that is a big problem when you have men who perceive themselves as a military actor, running around with weapons on the ground because... in Kyrgyzstan for example, the government actually gave these Chinese companies the license to carry arms. And even though by Chinese law if you are a Chinese national you are not supposed to carry arms overseas on a commercial mission. It didn't matter because the jurisdiction doesn't... it is a very hard area to actually monitor, right? So, the problem with these untrained men, running around in places like Kyrgyzstan or in some African countries with weapons is a ticking time bomb. The whole sector of Chinese private security companies overseas has only been in the past five to seven years. And it is a sector which is still maturing. It is a sector that is

not engaging with other foreign private security companies like from France or from US. And so, the Chinese side is developing their own model of what these rules are, what these norms are. And the fact that Chinese economic projects and investments come with such a high price also makes local governments unable to actually check the behaviour of these companies. Because that would create... that is another source of tension. I am currently working on that. I would love to share more and connect in future.

**Jabin Jacob:**

Thank you. I think the question of private security contractors or the fact that China exercises extraterritoriality is also a case of influence because it really requires a fair amount of coordination between the local Chinese embassy and actors and systems in place in these local governments. A lot of this actually works on the basis I would imagine of these scholarships, these fellowships and these ties that have been built up over years and decades in the China's relation with these countries. I think this is an area of interest that we might look into in addition to questions of information wars or information building, information narrative building and so on and so forth. Now let me thank my three panellists for this wonderful exposition. Thank you for your attention to the report, thank you for your views and your comments. Dr Mareike Ohlberg, Dr Niva Yau, Dr. Selina Ho, thank you and we hope that this will not be the last of your engagement. We hope to engage with you more as our report or the next stage of the report of this take shape. With that let me hand over to my colleague and co-editor Constantino for the last few words. Over to you Tino.

**Constantino Xavier:**

Thank you Jabin for the heroic effort in packing all this and this great expertise of our three colleagues working on central Asia, southeast Asia and Europe into the 60 minutes. I was thinking and we are always looking at answers with legitimising this project. Because I think you will agree, this is such a minefield to cross. There is so many political views on these issues. There are rivalries, there are different normative preferences on the politics, there is India and small states, there is US and China rivalry. There are different ideological preferences etc. first scholars as we are, I think you all agree it is very, very difficult to study China. But at the same time, it is very, very important to study China. I mean, any area and the many examples you have shared today show that, that is really the endgame. There will be profound implications in the rise of China for regions around the world. Whether it is the views, world views of the next generations, how they look at the world, how they look at China, but also the world which comes out in scholarships and just different knowledge production systems and talks and norms. It will have profound implications on what we perceive as regulatory and governance frameworks. We talked about security but also any type of legislative

efforts in these countries where China has interests like other external powers we are trying to shape, those frameworks to pursue their interests. Finally, of course the political systems and the way the countries will have internal systems and how will they develop those political systems and China's own interests and preferences for the system. So, the two key things I think that we can only do with scholars we can hang on to, we have done, we have tried to do this report and these were the exact instructions we gave to all others just do one thing. One of two things that nay research should be doing, one is describe and the second is compare. Describing I think our report does. Today all of you have done a great job at helping us compare. And that is I think the two sort of guidelines that we really look forward to pursuing here at CSEP of this project. Describing more of China in these regions as neutral as evidence as empirically grounded as possible. And compare across countries, across sectors knowledge because that is the only way we can understand this object of study. So, I will end this by saying thank you, Jabin for being a comrade in arms in this report. And believing in these sorts of two light motifs of this project. And ambassador Menon for spearheading this from the beginning and also sort of pushing us to understand China from this perspective. Thank you, Selina, Mareike and Niva today for helping us comparing. We will keep on describing and we will need more of you and others which we have had in many workshops we have done already in fact with scholars from African and Latin America, Selina we have a few helping us to understand how China is seen those vantage points. Most importantly to the contributing authors. What ambassador Menon initially mentioned is the importance of learning from these voices. Learning from these scholars. And we are really privileged to have had all these scholars from Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka contribute to this effort and we hope we are going on tour and we are going to disseminate this widely across the region and engage many more scholars across the region and beyond to take this forward. So, this is just the first event in which we compared but, we will keep on describing in partnership with institutions and the next generation of China scholars in and beyond the region. Finally, thanks to the entire team at the centre for social and economic progress. These are great colleagues to work with. In particular Nikita Nayar who coordinated this whole endeavour for the last two years. And is also to further studies in the US. And Anahad Kaur and Mahesh Kushwaha also worked very much in this event. And the whole entire communications team which is always standing in solidarity behind us and making these events happen. So, thank you all for joining us and look forward to engage in future occasions.