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WORKING PAPER | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Semantics as Strategy

Interpreting China's Official Discourse on South Asia

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China's engagement with South Asia has grown significantly over the past decade, particularly under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While research on the material aspects of China's engagements in the region has expanded, including by measuring its growing economic capabilities and security footprint, the discursive and ideational aspects remain understudied. As China's role in the region becomes more complex, this limited knowledge of Chinese semantics could lead to practical consequences, such as the loss of valuable signals and consequent policy misjudgements about China's goals and intentions in the region.

This paper uses discourse analysis to examine and interpret hundreds of mostly Chinese-language texts. These include official speeches, interviews, and signed articles by the People's Republic of China's (PRC) leadership between 2013 and 2023. To explain Chinese narratives on South Asia, we structured our research around key questions: How do Chinese officials define the region's boundaries? How do they see the predominant role of India, as well as its relations with Pakistan and other smaller states? How do they perceive the economic and democratic models of governance in South Asia? And how do PRC officials conceptualise China's own role in the region?

This study reveals critical insights into how China perceives and communicates its role in the region. By systematically engaging with Chinese narratives, India and other South Asian countries can craft more informed and effective policies to navigate their complex relationships with China. Strengthening regional collaboration, developing independent research capacity, and maintaining a diversified strategic outlook will be key to managing China's influence in South Asia.

Key Findings in Chinese Discourse on South Asia

- 1. Flexible Definitions of South Asia:** Chinese officials adopt multiple perspectives to define South Asia, including ecological, economic, geopolitical, and civilisational. Ecologically, South Asia is framed around the Himalayan region, emphasising shared environmental concerns. Economically, the region is viewed as an underdeveloped space requiring integration into broader Asian connectivity frameworks. Geopolitically, South Asia is portrayed

as a contested space where external, non-Asian powers should not interfere. Civilisationally, it is depicted as part of a larger Asian identity that shares historical and cultural ties with China.

2. India's Central Role: Both an Impediment and an Indispensable Partner: China's discourse reflects three major narratives regarding India:

- India is described as an asymmetric power that dominates its smaller neighbours, whereas China promotes a model of equal relations.
- The India–Pakistan rivalry is seen as the primary obstacle to regional cooperation, and China seeks to balance its relations with both countries, portraying them as “equal powers.”
- China frames India as a potential partner for regional development through trilateral initiatives (e.g., China–India–Nepal cooperation), though India's perceived reluctance to engage is seen as an obstacle.

3. Economic Development and China as the Provider: Chinese discourse presents South Asia as a missing link in global economic corridors, with China playing the role of an infrastructure and public goods provider. The BRI, including corridors such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) initiative, is depicted as a solution for underdevelopment in the region. Chinese officials frame these projects as transparent and mutually beneficial, despite criticisms of debt risks and sovereignty concerns.

4. Political Stability and Governance—China as a Guide and Mediator: Chinese narratives highlight South Asia's political instability and governance challenges. The Chinese model of “people's democracy” is offered as an alternative to Western-style governance. China also positions itself as a neutral mediator in regional conflicts, including India–Pakistan tensions, Myanmar's

Rohingya crisis, and Afghanistan's political transitions. This reflects China's broader ambition to enhance its diplomatic influence in the region.

Policy Recommendations and Future Research Avenues

To effectively navigate China's growing influence in South Asia and develop informed policies, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Investing in the China Policy Research Ecosystem:** There is a significant knowledge gap in South Asia regarding China's strategic intentions, driven partly by a lack of expertise in the Chinese language and discourse analysis. Governments, particularly that of India, should increase investment in China studies programmes at universities, think tanks, and diplomatic training institutions. Strengthening policy-oriented research will ensure better decision-making and more accurate assessments of China's regional role.
- 2. Decoding and Responding to Chinese Discourse:** Policymakers must systematically analyse Chinese official rhetoric to identify shifts in China's strategic posture. Investing in dedicated research capacity to interpret Chinese diplomatic speech and documents can help anticipate Beijing's next moves and mitigate misinterpretations.
- 3. Contextualising and Comparing Chinese Speech with Actions:** South Asian decision-makers should beware of the gap between Chinese discourse and practice. Comparative studies of China's engagement in other regions, such as Africa and Latin America, can provide useful insights into the potential trajectory of its South Asian strategy. Monitoring whether China's spoken commitments translate into tangible actions will enable more informed policy responses.

About the authors



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