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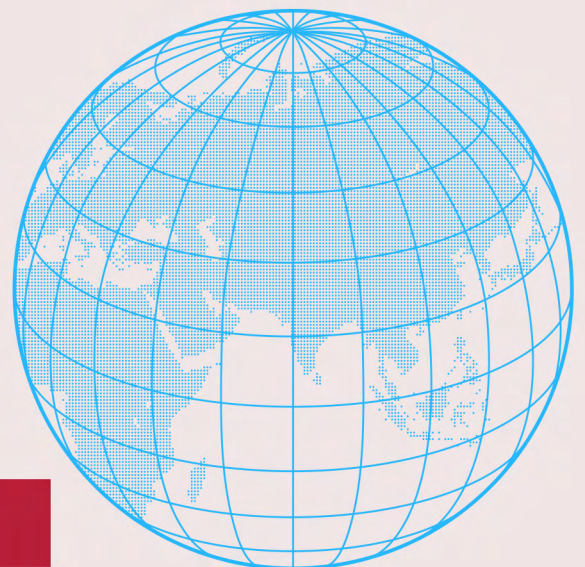
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Semantics as Strategy

Interpreting China's Official Discourse on South Asia

Shruti Jargad
Constantino Xavier



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The cover page features the Chinese names of countries discussed in the paper—India, Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka—as well as key terms such as the Belt and Road Initiative, Asian Civilisation, and the Himalayas.

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Abbreviations

AICCS	All-India Conference of China Studies
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AUKUS	Australia–United Kingdom–United States
BCIM	Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCCS	Centre for Contemporary China Studies
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
CMEC	China–Myanmar Economic Corridor
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPEC	China–Pakistan Economic Corridor
CSIS	Centre for Strategic and International Studies
EAM	External Affairs Minister
FM	Foreign Minister
FMPRC	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
PRC	People's Republic of China
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
US	United States

Abstract

Over the past decade, South Asia has become a key focus of the foreign, economic, and security strategy of the People's Republic of China (PRC), particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative. South Asia also features as an important region in China's peripheral diplomacy towards its neighbouring countries.

However, 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. For India, the neglect in analysing China's discursive practices in South Asia and this knowledge asymmetry could lead to practical consequences, for example, the loss of valuable signals and policy misjudgements about China's goals and intentions in the region.

This paper uses discourse analysis to examine and interpret the text of hundreds of mostly Chinese-language official speeches, interviews, and signed articles by the PRC's 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?

We identify nine narratives falling under four broad themes: (1) flexible geographic definitions of South Asia's boundaries from ecological, economic, geopolitical, and civilisational perspectives, with a focus on ties with China's inland provinces of Yunnan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, and with the larger continental whole of Asia; (2) variable engagements with India's predominant centrality in the region, from the perspectives of asymmetry with South Asia's smaller neighbouring states, equality with Pakistan, and partnership with China; (3) economic perspectives on South Asia as a missing link in global connectivity corridors and China as a provider of public goods to the region; and (4) South Asia as a cradle of political instability and conflicts that stifle development and, therefore, as a region that could benefit from Chinese-style governance models and mediation.

Executive Summary

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.

1. Introduction

In 2013, at the Symposium on Diplomatic Work in Neighbouring Countries, President Xi Jinping noted the changing dynamics in China's neighbourhood and highlighted the importance of peripheral diplomacy to realise China's development and national rejuvenation (Swaine, 2015; Xi, 2014d; *XinhuaNet*, 2013). Conventionally, China's East Asian neighbourhood has been considered its natural region, to which the depth of China's economic integration and cultural similarities with East and Southeast Asia attest. However, in recent decades, China's engagement with its southern and western neighbours, including in South and Central Asia, has accelerated and deepened.

This regional reorientation can be attributed to several external and internal factors. External factors include the break-up of the Soviet Union and the emergence of smaller independent nation-states in Central Asia, economic growth in South Asia spearheaded by India, and the growing strategic importance of Southeast Asia, including for China's South China Sea claims. Internally, China's goals of state-building and economic integration in the western frontier regions of Tibet and Xinjiang and its pursuit of growth and development in inland provinces such as Yunnan, along with a desire to seek alternative trade routes to the Malacca Strait, have brought South Asia to the centre of Chinese foreign, economic, and security policies, making it a region of high, if not the highest, priority. As Menon (2021, p. 280) argues:

“Today, southern Asia and the Indian Ocean are a higher, but not the highest, priority for China in its contention with the United States, for its energy security, for its internal security concerns in Tibet and Xinjiang, and for its quest for primacy in Asia.”

Subsequently, South Asia has assumed a critical role in China's ambitious and expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has invested significant financial and political capital in economic corridors such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor, which encompass energy pipelines, hydropower projects, and a new network of railways and ports, among other large infrastructure (Miller, 2022). Between

2013 and 2023, the trade volume between China and South Asian countries doubled, with an annual average growth rate of 8.3 per cent, making China the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and the second biggest for Nepal, the Maldives, and Pakistan (*XinhuaNet*, 2023). Simultaneously, the volume of political, military, and diplomatic exchanges has also increased (Pal, 2021). China has also made inroads into new domains such as culture, governance, education, and training, which were conventionally areas where India enjoyed predominance in the South Asian region.

This rising complexity of Chinese ties in the region necessitates a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Chinese thinking, intentions, and goals. In this context, speaking at the All-India Conference of China Studies (AICCS) in 2021, India's external affairs minister (EAM) emphasised the importance of Chinese studies for Indian policymakers:

“We need to invest more deeply in the study of China [...] From a policy perspective, it is naturally to our advantage that there is solid expertise on China in India [...] Exchanges in all domains are obviously facilitated by a more informed understanding of the polity and society with which we are dealing” (Jaishankar, 2021).

The China policy research ecosystem in India has expanded in recent years. The AICCS is one such example, together with work done at various think tanks and universities.¹ The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) itself now has a dedicated in-house China think tank, the Centre for Contemporary China Studies (CCCS). Tansen Sen's critique (2013), that there is “no genuine interest from the Indian government, the private sector, or the leading think tanks in developing China studies in India at present,” may thus seem less accurate today.

However, significant gaps persist, especially in terms of weak transmission belts of knowledge between the policy decision-making system and the growing field of China scholars at universities, think tanks, industry, and civil society (Gogoi, 2023). Further, Saran (2022, p. 8) notes that:

¹ Such institutions with China programmes include the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi University's Department of East Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Ashoka University's Centre for China Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, The Takshashila Institution, Hyderabad Central University, Sikkim University, Doon University, Gujarat Central University.

“Since the border war of 1962, the focus in India has been narrowly on the study and analysis of Chinese foreign and security policies without appreciating that these can only yield useful insights when set in the larger frame of the country's worldview.”

The most recent comprehensive survey of the field offers a similarly cautionary perspective. It identifies continued and significant gaps and notes that “although the ‘buzz’ about China has certainly increased, it is apparent that this has not necessarily translated into a more informed understanding of China here in India” (Thampi, 2021, p. 5). Thampi's report maps the expansion and underlines the lack of expertise on China's domestic policy drivers and institutional determinants:

“It is important to become familiar with the discussion and debate within China today – among scholars and the wider public – on developments there and the future trajectory of the country. Only a fraction of this is accessible to those not familiar with the Chinese language” (Thampi, 2021, p. 35).

1.1 Understanding China in South Asia

For the objectives of our study, the China expertise gap identified above is of central importance. India–China bilateral relations are acquiring greater complexity across different sectors with simultaneously cooperative and conflictual elements. Indian decision-makers will therefore face significant obstacles in understanding and engaging China unless they have a supportive research ecosystem to interpret the domestic context in which Chinese decision-makers operate. Language analysis is one possible instrument to unveil how China speaks and thinks about South Asia: What are Chinese officials saying, what do they mean by what they say, and why do they say what they say?

We know this matters, especially in foreign policy-making, because there have been past instances of misjudgements that may have been avoided with better interpretative skills and research expertise. For instance, former Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale (2021) argues that India's Nepal policy in the 1950s was impaired by a cognitive “fog of misunderstanding,” failing to appreciate signals in Chinese discourse about the Himalayan kingdom falling under its historical sphere of influence. In this Indian vision, China is seen as an external actor or an interloper in smaller states like Nepal that are perceived as belonging to India's sphere of influence.

This does not mean that analysing how China speaks is the only way to understand how China thinks. But an excessive focus on actions may explain why much of recent policy analysis in India tends to describe China as a “bully” in South Asia (Chellaney, 2021). In line with media coverage and public sentiments, India's research agenda on China in South Asia has tended to adopt a perspective of adversarial power politics, interpreting Chinese actions as predominantly focused on bypassing, encircling, or weakening India in and around the subcontinent. In the context of limited linguistic and contextual China expertise to interpret speech and compare it to practice (Rana, 2001), signals from the Chinese side are thus prone to be entirely ignored or wrongly comprehended by decision-makers.

Our study is one attempt to decipher official Chinese discourse on South Asia. It builds on a larger and emerging research agenda on India–China and China–South Asia relations. For example, scholars like Raghavan (2018) attribute the deepening India–China security dilemma to conflicting interests and domestic politics. Other recent studies have also unearthed the historical and cultural contexts of overlapping and cooperative dimensions in South Asia (Ranjan & Guo, 2022; Sen, 2024; Xavier, 2020).

The success of India's “Neighbourhood First” policy—including its rising political, economic, and security engagements and a recalibration of relations with each of its smaller neighbours, from Afghanistan to Myanmar—hinges on designing policies that go beyond the chimerical attempt to deny China space. This means flexibility in terms of different, often parallel postures focused on conflict, competition, coexistence, and cooperation in different sectors and countries. Understanding Chinese speech offers important clues to Indian policymakers to comprehensively interpret—and more efficiently respond to—China's actions in South Asia. Mehta (2008) explained the importance of objectively analysing the triumvirate of India, China, and South Asia for Indian decision-makers:

“The climate of good relations between India and China is especially vulnerable to divergence of interests and policies of India and China towards the countries of South Asia. It is prudent to understand them [China's policies and interests in South Asia] objectively as South Asia will remain the critical heart and core of the success and failure of India's foreign policy and its international standing.”

1.2 Questions

Given the Indian policy demand on China in the neighbourhood, and the knowledge gap on China's rising role in South Asia surveyed above, we undertook a systematic narrative analysis of official Chinese discourse on South Asia. Based on a qualitative assessment of the collected Chinese- and English-language content, we seek to understand how PRC officials conceptualise China's role in the region. We explore this through four 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 engage the region through economic corridors and development initiatives?
- How do they see the democratic models of governance in South Asia?

1.3 Methodology

There is a wide range of tools for discourse analysis, both qualitative and quantitative. While there are many studies using statistical analysis of large corpora of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) data, for this paper we rely on qualitative analysis and interpretation of official discourse. For example, we find patterns of predication or ascribing qualities to different objects by connecting them to positive adjectives and adverbs, such as "good neighbour" and "equal partners." We also show examples of contradictory subject positioning, such as "brother," "bully," or "ally," that China uses for different countries, creating a clear differentiation of the self and other. Third, we identify central concepts and discursive nodal points that populate the Chinese narratives. For instance, metaphors of "friends" and "family" that speak of Asia as one family create a powerful image of belonging.

Table 1: Sources

Officials	Type of Source	Sources
Xi Jinping	Official transcripts of speeches delivered at relevant multilateral fora and on bilateral visits to South Asian countries; signed articles in newspapers; collection of speeches and articles	Collection of Xi Jinping's Speeches 习近平系列重要讲话数据库 https://www.12371.cn/special/xxzd/jh/ , https://jhsjk.people.cn/ Xi Jinping's Diplomatic Thought and New Age Diplomacy 习近平外交思想和新时代中国外交 http://cn.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/node_8020197.shtml
Foreign Minister	Official transcript of speeches delivered at selected multilateral fora and bilateral visits to South Asian countries; press conferences addressing foreign and domestic media; interviews	Leadership Activities 部领导活动 https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/wjbxw_674885/ Minister's Activities 领导人活动 https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/
MFA Spokespersons	Daily press conference of the MFA addressing foreign and international media persons; issue specific briefings	Spokespersons Remarks 发言人表态 https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/fyrbt_674889/ Briefings 吹风会: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/cfhsl_674891/
Ambassadors to South Asian countries	Speeches at public events; signed articles and interviews with local media and reporting on Embassy websites.	Official Websites of Chinese Embassies to India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Afghanistan, the Maldives, and Bangladesh E.g. http://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/ News and activities 新闻动态: http://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/xwdt/
Other officials (e.g. Li Yuanchao and Yang Jiechi)	Speeches at relevant multilateral and bilateral fora	Full text of Speeches 讲话全文 e.g. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/

Source: Compiled by authors

Official discourse here refers to the utterances, both spoken and written, of central state actors engaged in making and influencing foreign policy. For our analysis, we have reviewed more than 500 speeches, articles, and interviews that have content related to any of the countries in the region and refer to “South Asia.” These were collected from *Diplomatic Speeches of Xi Jinping I and II* (Theory China, 2022), an online repository of Xi Jinping’s speeches, the MFA website, the websites of Chinese embassies in South Asia, and official state media.

While recognising the role of local governments, intellectuals, academics, think tanks, and businesses in designing and influencing policy, this paper focuses on the top party and state leadership that exercises foremost power in China’s Leninist political system (Zhao, 2022). This includes Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and president of the PRC;² Li Keqiang, former premier and member of the CPC Politburo Standing Committee; Wang Yi, state councillor and minister of foreign affairs; and a few other key leaders such as Yang Jiechi, former director of the office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, or Li Yuanchao, former vice-president (2013–2018).

After the words and utterances of the top leaders, which form the most authoritative source, is the Chinese foreign ministry and its officials, including MFA spokespersons and diplomats posted in South Asia. The MFA is the primary interface of China’s foreign policy and communicates the state’s positions on all issues and domains. The daily press conferences are a vehicle through which China is articulated and represented to the outside world. Further, unlike in the past, diplomats posted in various countries are now increasingly active on social media platforms such as X, apart from giving more frequent interviews and writing articles in the traditional press. Together, these form a critical resource to gather granular insights on the Chinese perspective.

We focus our study on the period from 2013 to 2023 as it overlaps with China’s neighbourhood diplomacy policy as well as the Belt and Road Initiative, which has made South Asia a key region in China’s foreign policy strategy. This is the timeframe during which the PRC significantly expanded its presence across

South Asia, through the BRI and other political, economic, and security engagements.

Finally, a note on the methodological limitations of our study: as discussed in the next sections, discourse analysis is one among several different and complementary approaches to decipher foreign policy thinking. While offering some useful policy insights, our focused research assessment must be complemented with more in-depth research on individual themes, possibly covering different or longer periods. By mapping the gap between Chinese speech and practice, as well as more comparative studies across different regions, studies like ours will help decision-makers to navigate engagement with China.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

The rest of the paper is divided into three sections. The second section of the paper situates our methodology in the discourse analysis literature and shows its policy relevance. In the third section, we present our findings thematically in four sub-sections. The fourth and final section summarises our conclusions and presents the policy implications of our study for Indian (and other South Asian) decision-makers seeking to understand and engage China.

2. Triangulating Chinese Thought, Speech, and Action in South Asia

This section demonstrates the policy relevance of our methodology for Indian and other South Asian decision-makers engaging with a rising China across different sectors. We start by surveying the limited knowledge on the ideational aspects of China in South Asia compared to China’s presence in other regions. Second, we describe the method of discourse analysis as situated in the theories of international relations (IR) and why it enhances our understanding of China’s behaviour. We argue that the connection between speech and strategic thinking is acute in China because of its Leninist form of government and current political dispensation. Giving examples, we illustrate the utility of diplomatic speech analysis for informing foreign policy objectives.

² Xi also holds other key positions like the director of National Security Commission, leader of the Central Commission of Foreign Affairs, and chairman of the Central Military Commission, that make him more powerful.

2.1 China's Thinking on South Asia: What Do We Know?

China's rapid rise in South Asia, its influence, and its impact have been studied from different angles (Pal, 2021; Ranjan & Guo, 2022; Xavier & Jacob, 2023). Much of the literature surveys bilateral relations between China and specific South Asian neighbours, particularly China–India and China–Pakistan ties (Freeman, 2018; Garver, 1992; Grossman, 2020; Kumar, 2019; Malik, 2001; Mohan & Hao, 2020; Paul, 2019; Sahoo, 2013; Small, 2014; Wagner, 2016). Several of these studies have captured the empirics of the tangible aspects of China's outreach, for instance the volume of trade and investments, official visits, Chinese-led projects, and their financial impacts on national economies.

However, research on the softer and ideational aspects of Chinese relationships in the region remains inadequate. There are plenty of studies that examine discursive and non-discursive practices to analyse China's regional perspectives on Central, East, and Southeast Asia, as well as Eurasia and Latin America. But there is limited understanding of the Chinese narratives on South Asia, including its definition of the region, patterns in diplomatic discourse, and self-perceptions of China's own place in the region.

For example, Godehardt (2014) argues that since the 1990s, China's rise and growing regional involvement are “moving Asia” (p. 6), and Chinese perspectives on its different Asian regions are crucial to understanding what Asia means to China and where China allocates itself. In the case of East Asia, Li (2009) contends that China has not yet defined its own role, and its behaviour is driven by pragmatism. Garcia (2021) finds that China has successfully promoted its narrative of a “security-development” nexus and securitisation discourses in its region-building project in Eurasia. At times, as Carrozza (2021) finds in the case of Africa, China's policies, such as greater participation in peace and security, are not mirrored by changes in the official discourse. Kaczmarek (2017) argues that China understands regionalism in functional, rather than territorial, terms and that Asia serves as a major reference point for the Chinese vision, particularly for initiatives like the BRI, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), or the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). This variability of perspective has also been observed in definitions of the “Global South,” where Beijing categorises countries

based on their engagements with Chinese political initiatives and regional platforms (Kohlenberg & Godehardt, 2020).

In the case of South Asia, much of what we know about Chinese thinking on the region comes from the works of a few policy practitioners and Sinologists. They tend to examine Chinese thinking on South Asia as a subset of broader studies, whether on different domains (security, cultural, economic) or geographic levels of analysis (Asia or the global order). While building on this broad experience and ground-based knowledge, our study evaluates and expands their interpretations, offering a first-hand, systematic methodology, and an exclusive focus on South Asia.

A review of these policy practitioners' and other experts' writings on Chinese thinking on South Asia suggests four predominant interpretations. The first suggests a Chinese understanding of South Asia as a fixed concept, in line with the post-colonial boundaries of India and its neighbouring countries—often referred to as the “SAARC region” (Jain, 2017; Ranjan & Guo, 2022). However, there are important indications (as confirmed in our own analysis in this paper) that Chinese officials go beyond the nation-state framework and adopt a more historical and cultural perspective. For instance, Sen (2017) and Mulmi (2022) look at the connections that existed between geographies that now constitute India, Nepal, and China within the context of broader Asian history as seen from Beijing. Taking a historical approach, Saran (2022) argues that the hierarchy principle, borne out of the ancient tributary system, persists in the way China imagines the world and its place in it. In the narrative of the Silk Road too, China places itself at the central position, when China was at the periphery and not a nodal point. Both these works show the historical underpinnings of the behaviour of the modern Chinese state.

The second predominant interpretation of Chinese thinking in South Asia places India at the heart of the region (Panda, 2016; Shivamurthy & Pathak, 2023). Our study confirms, indeed, that Chinese officials accord centrality to India in their thinking on South Asia. But our discourse analysis indicates that this centrality may be in decline: as relations with Nepal, Bangladesh, or Sri Lanka deepen, not all of Chinese thinking (and behaviour) in those countries is regulated by its relations (and approach) towards India. As Jagat Mehta (2008, p. 339) presciently

emphasised back in 1992, “China has always pursued the quest for parallel and independent relations with the [other] countries of the subcontinent.” Our study thus contributes to what Saran (2022) identified as the “need to be familiar not only with how China looks at India but also with how China shapes its relations with those countries which are important to India, such as our immediate neighbours in the subcontinent.”

The third popular interpretation suggests that, even while according centrality to India in South Asia, Chinese officials think of India as an inferior and subordinate actor in Asian and global contexts. As per Saran (2022), “China would like to see India slotted into a subordinate role in an Asia dominated by itself.” Our analysis identifies instances of such thinking in Chinese discourse but also shows significant contradictions of hierarchical conceptions when faced with the power reality of India's predominant role in South Asia. Here, we see Chinese officials speaking simultaneously about (a) working towards mitigating regional asymmetries, whether by supporting smaller states against India or suggesting a sense of equality between India and Pakistan, and (b) partnering with India as an equal across the region.

Such contradictory narratives may be an indication of what one of India's foremost Sinologists, G. P. Deshpande (1986, p. 362), argued to be a possible Chinese confusion about defining India's role within and beyond the South Asian region. “South Asia is a difficult region for China to understand,” he argued in the context of the Cold War, where Beijing was unsure about the Indian state's (and elites') ideological nature and, consequently, its geopolitical leanings. The multiple and contradictory definitions we found in Chinese discourse describing India's role in South Asia suggest that there might still be some confusion (or disagreement) among Chinese officials on whether New Delhi is a partner in the revolutionary quest to recraft the world order or a foe, subordinately aligned to the United States even in its own regional sphere of influence.

A fourth interpretation of Chinese thinking on South Asia suggests that China is predominantly driven by political and security interests, with the dual objective of extending control over its periphery and containing India within the subcontinent. Menon (2021, p. 282), for instance, argues that “China's South Asian policy seems driven primarily by its security interests in the Indian Ocean and Tibet and

by its political and strategic interest in its periphery and in keeping India preoccupied in the subcontinent.” Similarly, Gokhale (2021) argues that the Chinese have sought to balance their public narrative of “sharing space with India in Asia” with its actual policy of “containment” so as “to keep India preoccupied in South Asia.”

In both these analyses, the region is relegated to being a subset of India–China competition, and our study finds that such thinking is indeed frequently reflected in official Chinese discourse. Yet we also identify other speech patterns suggesting that Chinese thinking on South Asia may be (or may be becoming) more complex, reflecting additional prisms through which officials define the region, such as cultural similarity, economic corridors, and shared ecologies. One might, of course, argue that ultimately these alternative understandings are subordinate to core political and security interests.

2.2 Learning to Listen: The Value of Discourse Analysis

There is increasing recognition across the policy and scholarly community that reading Chinese state and party documents helps decipher the official stance on a variety of political, social, and economic issues. There are several dedicated projects that undertake this task for different areas of expertise. These projects include the Centre for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) *Interpret China*, *China Law Translate* (affiliated with Yale's Paul Tsai China Center), the *Reading the China Dream* blog by Professor David Ownby, and *NPC Observer*.

This interpretative and narrative focus is not new, but it has regained relevance in the wake of many wrongful assumptions made about China in the past two decades. For example, it was widely presumed that, much like the development trajectory of post-war Germany or Japan, economic liberalisation and China's socialisation through membership of international organisations would lead to political democratisation (Mitter & Johnson, 2021). Presently, decreasing access to China for foreign researchers, as well as a paucity of data and other primary empirical evidence, has led to a flourishing of studies focused on Chinese official, public discourse. The Sinology policy research ecosystem in the United States, Europe, Japan, or Singapore has expanded and invested important resources into the process of deciphering Chinese speech. This quest to understand

the PRC's leadership thought and explain or predict its behaviour naturally requires advanced expertise—including language skills—to separate discursive signals from noise and deception. Such a policy-driven research agenda is particularly important today in India and South Asia, where the field of Chinese studies has been comparatively less developed but is now catching up fast given the growing importance of China in the region.

Discourse analysis in foreign policy emerged in the 1980s alongside poststructuralist IR theories, which highlight the role of ideas and social relationships in shaping material realities. Wendt (1995) illustrates this by showing how nuclear threats are perceived differently based on political relationships rather than just material capabilities. Within this framework, discourse analysis examines how policies are constructed through domestic political debates and linguistic practices rather than being direct responses to external threats. Meanings are produced by repeated statements and social practices that become normalised over time (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005; Neumann, 2008). By analysing various sources, discourse analysis provides a deep understanding of how foreign policy gains meaning through speech and writing. Public statements, such as executive speeches, are not neutral but influence norms, perceptions, and political realities. Hence, this methodology requires knowledge of the socio-political context and language to interpret discourse effectively.

While discourse analysis provides a thick description, there are alternative sources to approximate Chinese strategic thinking. Studies like Xavier and Jacob (2023; 2025) and Pal (2021) do this by mapping Chinese actions and behaviour across South Asia, with a focus on practice. However, by examining structural drivers and material aspects, such methodologies fail to explain the domestic discourse and processes behind a particular policy decision. Another alternative methodological approach, which has proved to be the most difficult for Chinese and foreign scholars alike, is that of primary interviews with decision-makers and the study of archives and internal documents. Because of the inaccessibility of these sources, the Chinese foreign policymaking process has been called a black box (Zhao, 2022). Triangulating information from these three different data points—i.e., public discourse, actions, and primary sources—would render a more complete picture of Chinese thinking. In this paper, for reasons of accessibility and feasibility, we use the first data

point, i.e., official diplomatic speech, thereby laying foundations for future research to build on.

In foreign policy, diplomatic speech is employed as a tool to enhance discursive power to achieve various ends. First, diplomatic language is aimed at shaping international image and influencing global perceptions. Rising powers like China make concerted diplomatic efforts to project a positive image, protect their interests, and enhance their standing in the international community. For instance, the current Chinese leadership has made exhortations to “tell the China Story well” and resorted to notions of “world peace and development” to construct its story of the BRI (Brown, 2020; Chan & Song, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified the “discourse wars,” with China engaging in “vaccine diplomacy” and unleashing a blitzkrieg of positive coverage via state media to counter the negative publicity amongst foreign publics (Chan & Yu, 2023; Mu et al., 2021; Pan & Yao, 2023).

Second, diplomatic speech reflects a nation's external priorities and objectives. US President Donald Trump's posts on X have been shown to reflect his foreign policy choices on Russia, North Korea, and the Middle East (Dave, 2018). Decades earlier, Mao's metaphors, like calling the US a “paper tiger,” its allies “running dogs of imperialism,” and India a “robber,” were all intended to offend and mirrored Chinese foreign policy thought that was deeply anti-Western (Liu & Wang, 2020). In the reform era, Deng's dictum of “hide and bide” was reflective of a policy that was inward-oriented and focused on economic growth.

Third, through diplomatic discourse, countries seek to effectively signal their policies, intentions, and actions to the international community as well as the domestic audience (Rana, 2001). Such signals could be direct or indirect, verbal or non-verbal (Jönsson & Hall, 2003). For example, the narrative of “China's peaceful rise” under Hu Jintao was meant to allay fears of China being a revisionist power (Zheng, 2005). Similarly, Chinese leaders' public mention of the South China Sea as a “core interest” alongside Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang is meant to signal China's assertive claims in the region. As an instance of “signalling by implicature,” Khan and de Estrada (2024) show how India avoids breaches in social relationships with China and the US via indirect speech on issues of the Indo-Pacific. India implicates, as in conveying meaning beyond what is explicitly stated, while depriving recipients of evidential material.

Finally, by repeating fixed slogans and customary phrases, countries project ideational norms among targeted actors. For example, the use of the expression “war on terror” by the US gave a normative stance to its actions in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Garlick and Qin (2023) show how Chinese leaders use phrases like “community of shared destiny” or “win-win cooperation” to promote Chinese discursive practices in the Global South.

Notably, in the case of China, official speech and discourse take on special importance in explaining strategic thinking. This can be attributed to both the Leninist political structure and the recent turn to ideological purity under President Xi Jinping. Schoenhals' (1992) seminal monograph shows how the CPC enforces ideological oneness via official “formulations” (体法 *ti fa*), which then become the guiding principles in policy formulation and implementation. The language of the state becomes the “sole legitimate medium of political expression” so much so that policy implementation is affected by concerns with questions like “How should this be put?” This shows that words and phrases matter and reflect the reigning ideological trend.

Under Xi Jinping, the official narrative, enshrined as Xi Jinping Thought, is the highest guide for policymaking, making it imperative to understand what he says. While critics argue that public discourse serves the purpose of propaganda and not factual communication, there is still value in analysing discourse as it may reveal strategic thinking and intention (Rudd, 2022; Tsang & Cheung, 2024). For instance, one of the clearest indications of the assertive foreign policy under Xi Jinping has been the aggressive language of MFA spokespersons and diplomats, or what has been labelled as “wolf-warrior diplomacy.” Tsang and Cheung (2024) argue that Xi's statements like “China and developing countries are natural allies in international relations” reflected a strategic ambition which has been implemented in policies like the BRI. Finally, the Chinese leadership itself has expressed the power to shape international discourse as a strategic goal (Semenov & Tsvyk, 2021). Following this, research on diplomatic discourse (外交话语 *waijiao huayu*) has rapidly increased, both by Chinese academics and by foreign scholars and governments.

3. Themes and Narratives in Chinese Discourse

What are the key themes and narratives that permeate Chinese official discourse in and on South Asia? This section, the empirical core of our paper, presents our key findings based on our survey and the methodology presented above. We identify four thematic patterns composed of different narratives: (1) defining South Asia through ecological, economic, geopolitical, and civilisational narratives; (2) India's central role, both as an impediment and indispensable; (3) development through economic corridors and China as the provider of public goods; and (4) political stability and governance, with China as a guide and mediator.

3.1 Defining South Asia: Ecological, Economic, Geopolitical, and Civilisational Narratives

“China and South Asia are political partners, economic partners, and safety barriers to each other, with interests and the fate of both sides linked together” (Sun, 2013).

The first thematic pattern we identify relates to how Chinese officials define and conceptualise the region conventionally called South Asia. How does the Chinese leadership visualise South Asia cartographically and geographically, in terms of its land and maritime dimensions? What constituent political units form this region, and who is included or excluded from it in Beijing's understanding? And what clues do Chinese official narratives give us about the framing of this region and how it may be changing?

There are many possible answers to understand Chinese definitions of South Asia. One may, for example, examine official Chinese cartographic depictions of world regions. Another possibility is assessing the geographic jurisdiction of Chinese state institutions, for example the South Asia division of its MFA. Usually, such definitions include the eight countries that compose the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In this most typical definition, in the words of one Chinese official, “China shares common borders with five of the eight South Asian countries, and is a good neighbour, good partner and good friend with the eight South Asian countries” (Yu, 2017). The five common border countries referenced here are Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The three others are Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.

In our analysis of official speech, however, we identify four additional narratives that go beyond these conventional cartographic and state-focused definitions of South Asia: (1) an ecological definition anchored around the Himalayan mountains and rivers as a shared ecosystem linking Tibet to the subcontinent, or what Chinese discourse refers to as the rim-Himalayan region; (2) an economic definition of South Asia as a variable space with increasingly inclusive and flexible boundaries; (3) an exclusive security and geopolitical definition of South Asia as a frontier area subject to growing influence from extra-regional, non-Asian powers; and (4) a cultural definition of South Asia as a subset of a larger Asian civilisational space marked by common historical, political, and developmental trajectories.

Ecological Definition

The first discursive pattern reflects an ecological understanding of South Asia that focuses on the Himalayan ecosystem, a bridging space between the continental hinterland of Eurasia and the maritime domain of the Indian Ocean region. In an alternative conceptualisation, as Xi Jinping (2015a) noted before the Pakistani parliament, South Asia is where the “land and maritime Silk Roads meet.” In this alternative conceptualisation, rather than being located somewhere in the centre of the Indian subcontinent and the Gangetic plains, South Asia’s point of gravitation is shifted northwards to the Himalayan mountain range: a link between the Tibetan plateau and the Indian subcontinent. In the context of relations with Bhutan, for example, Foreign Minister (FM) Wang Yi (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Bhutan, 2023) thus speaks of both countries being “connected by mountains and rivers.” This idea of a shared ecological link is used in several other contexts, including with reference to relations with Nepal, India, Pakistan, and even Myanmar.

This ecological definition finds formal expression in what Chinese officials refer to as the Himalayan rim (环喜马拉雅, *huan ximalaya*), presented as a pivotal sub-region. Speaking at the ceremony of the Third China–Tibet–Rim Himalayan Forum for International Cooperation, held in 2023 in Nyingchi (Tibet), Wang Yi emphasised that “the countries of the Rim Himalayas are geographically connected, culturally similar and have a shared destiny. They have similar views on ecological protection and are partners in the process of achieving modernisation” (Wang, 2023a). Started in 2018, this Chinese regional

initiative is of interest because it reframes South Asia from an ecological perspective beyond the Nepal–Tibet border: a region anchored in the hydrographic reality of the Brahmaputra River, which originates in Tibet and flows eastwards as the Yarlung Zangbo before entering Bhutan and India and finally merging with the Ganges to form the Meghna River in Bangladesh.

Economic Definition

A second discursive pattern reflects an equally flexible economic reframing of the traditional political boundaries of South Asia. Chinese officials frequently present the region as a historically open space that used to be—and should once again be—connected by corridors of commerce with neighbouring regions, whether Central Asia or China’s western provinces of Tibet and Yunnan. This geoeconomic understanding of South Asia goes well beyond the traditional political and cartographic depictions that are restricted to what is commonly known as the SAARC region, from Afghanistan to Bangladesh and from Nepal to the Maldives.

Unlike the Indo-centric and peninsular perspective, anchored in and around the Indian subcontinent, Chinese speeches indicate a more flexible definition, focused on the potential of economic interdependence, sub-regional trade linkages, and transportation corridors. The definition here is generally more expansive, going beyond political borders, especially towards the East. In some addresses, reflecting this economic perspective, South Asia is thus linked to Myanmar and even parts of Southeast Asia. For example, speaking at the 3rd China–South Asia Expo, Li Yuanchao declared that “China is ready to work with South Asian countries to seize key corridors, key nodes and key projects, strengthen the alignment of plans and standards, promote the construction of backbone corridors such as the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, and promote regional cooperation on the Greater Mekong River” (Li, 2015a). We examine this economic and inter-regional connectivity lens in detail in a later section.

Geopolitical Definition

The third discursive pattern reflects a more orthodox definition of South Asia, focused on exclusion, partition, and insulation as per different security and geostrategic interests. For example, unlike in the

economic perspective focused on the East, where Chinese officials seem to blur the boundaries between South and Southeast Asia (with reference to the India–Bangladesh–Myanmar triangle and the Bay of Bengal), there is an obverse pattern at play when it comes to Afghanistan. Here, we observe that Chinese officials refer less frequently to South Asia (and if so, mostly limited to the role of Pakistan) and, instead, make far more references to Central Asian countries. For instance, China initiated the Foreign Ministers' Meeting among neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, which included participation from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran. Similarly, while Chinese speeches on Afghanistan emphasise the importance of "immediate neighbours" to support the country's pacification and development, they include Russia as a part of that regional effort while leaving out India (Wang, 2021). On the Western front, therefore, China's definition of South Asia sometimes seems to fall short of crossing the Hindu Kush pass. Unlike Pakistan, Afghanistan is not always included in Chinese definitions of South Asia.

Another example of an exclusive definition of South Asia relates to a negative framing of the West and other extra-regional powers as interlopers. In this recurrent pattern, South Asia is seen as a sub-region prone to insulation, division, and separation from the broader Asian region. In 2014, at the CICA summit, Xi Jinping (2014a) argued that "Asia's problems must be handled by Asian people, and Asia's security must be safeguarded by the Asian people." At the China–South Asia Expo in 2015, Li Yuanchao (2015a) proclaimed that "distant relatives are not as good as close neighbours," highlighting the geographical ties that link China and South Asia in contrast to the United States and other powers both from within and beyond Asia.

Speeches by Chinese officials thus present South Asia as a geopolitical frontier zone. After his 2022 visit to Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Nepal, Wang Yi argued that "Asia refuses to become a chessboard in the game of great powers, and Asian countries are by no means pawns in the confrontation between major powers" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a). For him, developing countries in South Asia are "full of worries about the world falling into division and confrontation, and are seriously concerned about the destruction of global industrial and supply chains by unilateral sanctions" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a).

South Asia is accordingly defined as an arena of potential great power confrontation and bloc politics. This competition threatens both China's peripheral diplomacy values and the concept of an Asian security and economic order handled exclusively by Asians, rather than being subsidiary or complementary to an American-led order. Criticising the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) security partnership, China's ambassador to Sri Lanka in 2021 cautioned that some major countries "forming gangs to form small circles and forcing small and medium-sized countries to choose sides, it is bound to bring huge security risks to Sri Lanka" (Qi, 2021a). Similarly, the Ambassador to Bangladesh criticised the Quad, a US–India–Japan–Australia partnership. He called it a "narrow-purposed" geopolitical grouping and warned Bangladesh not to join it, as the country would not derive any benefit from the initiative (*The Daily Star*, 2021).

There are, however, also contradictory but less frequent references to the possibility of partnership with the United States in South Asia. For example, in the context of Nepal, after deploying much diplomatic and economic weight to oppose US economic assistance projects such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) Nepal Compact, in 2023 China's ambassador to Kathmandu indicated Beijing's willingness "to work with Nepal to explore the 'China–Nepal Plus' cooperative framework together with other nations, including the US and India, in supporting the prosperity of Nepal" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal, 2023). This only reinforces the key attribute of China's geopolitical narrative on South Asia: a malleable region as per specific Chinese security interests that vary across time and space.

Civilisational Definition

The fourth and final discursive pattern indicates a Chinese definition of South Asia as part of a larger Asian civilisation. With reference to historical narratives, officials frequently portray the region as sharing a common colonial and cultural experience with China, whether through subjugation to Western imperialism or common Buddhist values. Unlike the ambiguous and universal references to "shared values of mankind" at the global level, Chinese official discourse on South Asia indicates cultural and context-specific tailoring.

First, China emphasises its identity as a “developing country” that is sympathetic to the cause of the South Asian nations to develop their economies and improve people’s livelihoods while offering an alternative path to modernisation. Second, as joint objects of Western colonialism, China and South Asia are portrayed as sharing a history of resisting imperialist aggression and oppression (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2015d).

And third, China harkens back to the ancient people-to-people exchanges forged by travellers like Xuan Zang and Fa Xian which disseminated Buddhism in China, and the explorations of Chinese navigator Zheng He. All these various threads are tied into the idea of the “Asian Civilisation,” which is built as a counter to the “clash of civilisations” narrative of the West (Xi, 2019). Thus, there is an attempt to bring together diverse historical civilisations, bypassing the nation-state division shaped by colonialism. In his 2015 speech at the Pakistani Parliament, Xi (2015b) gave a broad overview of these ideational threads, underlining China’s role as an intra-continental bridging power between different Asian civilisations:

“Both China and South Asian countries have a long history of advocating kindness, fraternity, inclusiveness, mutual learning and harmonious coexistence. As an important part of the dialogue among Asian civilisations, China is willing to strengthen dialogue among civilisations with South Asian countries, jointly disseminate oriental wisdom and promote Asian values.”

Similarly, at the South Asia Expo, Li Yuanchao (2015a) referred to the ancient Silk Road, trade, and cultural exchanges and claimed that “in modern times, the Chinese people and the people of South Asia have sympathised with each other and risen up to resist colonialism and imperialist aggression and oppression.” Inserting South Asia into a larger process of what is seen as the rise and fall of different global systems, in 2018 China’s Ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, emphasised that “from the global perspective, China and India are largely relevant to the evolving international structure of ‘rise of the east and decline of the west’ and against the headwinds of anti-globalisation and protectionism” (Luo, 2018).

Such discourse is also frequently used in the Indian Ocean region, where officials refer to “a thousand-year-old Buddhist relationship initiated by the eminent monk Fa Xian, and the historical bond of Zheng

He’s seven ocean voyages” (Xi, 2014b) that makes China and Sri Lanka “ancient civilisations on the Asian continent, with a long history of civilisation exchanges” (Qi, 2024). Similarly, in a signed article in 2023, the Chinese ambassador to the Maldives, Wang Lixin, wrote that “as friendly neighbours in Asia, China and the Maldives both belong to the same long and splendid Asian civilisation, and the exchanges between the two civilisations have a long history” (Wang, 2023b). Here, in contrast with the above perspective on China as one among several different Asian civilisations (pitched to an Indian audience), we see an appealing reference to a single, “same” Asian civilisation (pitched to a Maldivian audience).

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There are different degrees of overlap between these four discursive strands that define South Asia in official Chinese narratives. There are also some significant contradictions between different definitions, suggesting not only that Chinese officials have varying understandings of South Asia, but also that they may be tailoring their definitions according to the audience and specific context. Thus, on the issue of regional identity, Chinese discourse displays variability where there are aspects of inclusion and exclusion. By deploying the ecological narrative of “mountains and rivers,” there is an attempt to shift the perceived centre of the subcontinent northwards, where it coincides with an even more expansive economic narrative. The economic and civilisational narratives posit South Asia as a cog in the wheels of wider economic and cultural exchange in Asia. However, this same language of “Asian civilisation” is also meant to exclude the West, diminish the influence of the US and its allies in the region, and enhance China’s political centrality. There are concurrent, even contradictory, references to one “same” Asian civilisation, as well as different civilisations in Asia. This flexible definition of South Asia deserves further systematic study, as elaborated in our conclusion.

3.2 India’s Central Role: Both an Impediment and Indispensable

China is cognisant of India’s central geographic and economic role in South Asia, but there appears to be a fluctuation in Chinese official narratives. We identify three different themes that relate to the concepts of asymmetry, equality, and partnership. First, China posits itself as a model big power and neighbour that treats its smaller neighbours with equality,

in contrast to India's purported big-brother attitude that leverages its asymmetric advantage to the detriment of smaller states such as Nepal or Sri Lanka. Second, China sees the India–Pakistan rivalry as the major impediment to regional integration and calls for the separation of economic relations from territorial disputes. There is, however, much emphasis on India–Pakistan hyphenation and portraying both as “equally important” powers in South Asia, despite the “iron-brother” partnership between China and Pakistan. Third, official speech also suggests that China sees India as an indispensable partner to provide solutions to other countries in the region under a cooperative, trilateral model.

Asymmetry: India and Smaller States

In line with Xi's pronouncements (*XinhuaNet*, 2013), Chinese leaders and diplomats make repeated references to the values of “amity, sincerity, benefit, and tolerance” (亲 *qin*, 诚 *sheng*, 惠 *hui*, 容 *rong*), the five principles of peaceful co-existence, win-win cooperation, and a community of common destiny. China frequently upholds its relations with smaller South Asian countries as a “model of equal relations between big and small countries.” The emphasis on equality is interestingly combined with an emphasis on India as the biggest country in the region and the expectation that India ought to behave in a similar manner, rather than coerce smaller states or interfere in their domestic affairs.

For instance, in a signed article in Sri Lankan media, Xi Jinping (2014b) wrote that the “China–Sri Lanka relationship...has become a model for friendship between big and smaller countries.” In Pakistan, Xi (2015c) claimed, “We are a sincere partner of South Asian countries. We will treat each other with respect and as equals.” In the aftermath of the 2015 constitutional crisis in Nepal and the economic blockade that disrupted relations with India, Wang Yi said, “China has always advocated the equality of all countries, big or small, and has always treated Nepal with sincerity and equality. It is believed that India will adopt the same policy and approach” (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal, 2015). He continued to stress that “neighbouring countries and any other country should respect Nepal's independence and sovereignty and the right of the Nepali people to choose their own path of development.”

There is also a prescriptive tone to Beijing's discourse. For example, in a 2023 interview, China's ambassador

to Nepal, Chen Song, stressed that the “Chinese side has consistently upheld the principles of equality and mutual benefit in its interactions with Nepal... cooperation between Nepal and other nations, such as the US and India, should be conducted on a basis of equality” (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal, 2023). Chinese ambassadors have also been vocal in labelling India's security concerns as unjustified interference in bilateral issues between China and smaller neighbours. In 2022, the Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Qi Zhenhong, claimed that opposition to the docking of the Chinese research ship *Yuanwang 5* at the Hambantota Port was a “naked interference in Sri Lanka's sovereignty and independence” and that China and Sri Lanka had “jointly resisted the intervention.” Further, human rights, including the Tamil minority issue, are portrayed as an “excuse to bully Sri Lanka” and a “tool to interfere in internal affairs” (Qi, 2022).

The portrayal of India as a mistrusted regional hegemon in Chinese official discourse reflects two implied trends: (1) China as a different and exceptional type of regional power, one that respects the logic of sovereign equality and resists the temptation of power politics; and (2) China's self-ascribed role as a benevolent neighbour and a normative player to either balance or educate India and, therefore, mitigate the region's power asymmetry.

Equality: Hyphenating India and Pakistan

The narrative of China as the normative power, placed outside and above the regional rivalries in South Asia, is particularly visible in its stance on India–Pakistan relations. Three major patterns appear in Chinese statements. First, India and Pakistan are seen as equally major powers in South Asia. China is therefore justified in maintaining parallel strategic relations with both at the same time. Second, cooperation between India and Pakistan is stressed as being beneficial for the region. Third, China is portrayed as a potential mediating force that can help normalise relations between the two South Asian rivals with nuclear capabilities.

For example, in 2014, Chinese MFA spokesperson Hong Lei remarked that “India and Pakistan are both major South Asian countries,” and Ambassador to India Wei Wei wrote that “China–India relations and China–Pakistan relations could run in parallel” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014; Wei, 2014). This was repeated in 2015 by foreign ministry spokespersons Lu Kang and Hua

Chunying, who called India and Pakistan “important countries in South Asia” and “friendly neighbours of China,” while also stressing that the improvement of their relationship is “vital to regional peace, stability and development” and “in [the] common interests of all countries in the region” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2015a, 2015e).

Further, contrary to India’s concerns, in the Chinese narrative, Pakistan is portrayed as a victim of terrorism and extremism, akin to China, and therefore in legitimate need of international support. For example, expressing China’s support for Pakistan as a responsible regional power, Li Keqiang (2013) noted that “Pakistan has taken an active part in the regional cooperation process of South Asia. It stands for resolving differences through peaceful dialogue and works with other countries in South Asia to promote prosperity and development in this region, thus contributing greatly to regional and international security.” Similarly, in Wang Yang’s words, “Pakistan has actively participated in the international fight against terrorism and United Nations peacekeeping operations, endured tremendous sacrifices, and made indelible and important contributions to the maintenance of world peace and regional stability” (Wang, 2017).

Simultaneous to China’s “willingness to mediate” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of India, 2018; Luo, 2017) and promote peace talks between India and Pakistan is also a depreciation of India’s concerns about China’s BRI project running through disputed territory. Chinese officials argue that the “question of the ownership of Kashmir is an issue left over from history between India and Pakistan” and that cooperation between China and Pakistan is not aimed at a “third party” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2015c), nor do the projects “affect sovereignty disputes” (Luo, 2017).

The narrative of India and Pakistan as equally important reflects a strategic hyphenation between both countries in Chinese eyes. It is seen as coexisting with the “iron-clad,” “all-weather” relationship between China and Pakistan, and the understanding that Pakistan plays a “unique role in China’s endeavour to grow relations with countries in South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia” (Li, 2013). This narrative projects India as one among several regional powers, not necessarily at the same level as China, but bogged down by adversarial relations with Pakistan.

Partnership: India and China

The third image of India that emerges in Chinese official discourse is that of partnership: an India that is portrayed as an equal power to transform the region, working together with China in other countries across South Asia. Here, Beijing’s narrative suggests that India is an indispensable actor to ensure regional development, peace, and security; that China is ready to partner; but that such cooperation hinges on India shedding its reluctance.

After the 2018 Wuhan Summit, for example, Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou emphasised that both countries will “enhance policy coordination in their neighbourhood to discuss cooperation in the form of China–India plus one or China–India plus X” (Krishnan, 2019). “Plus one” or “X” refers here to a variety of countries in the immediate and broader neighbourhood, for example Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, or other Indian Ocean littoral states.

Further, Beijing expressed interest in extending “this new model of cooperation” based on “China–India Plus” to the Iranian nuclear issue and the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar, as well as to Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of India, 2018). The idea, which was tested through a joint China–India training programme for Afghan diplomats in 2018, suggests that the region’s smaller countries would benefit from a positive and equal engagement between Beijing and New Delhi, which would also enhance mutual trust between India and China (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of India, 2019).

The case of Nepal stands out most frequently in the speeches we analysed. In 2018, for example, China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, noted that “Nepal stands as a natural beneficiary from cooperation from China and India” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). The potential for trilateral cooperation is frequently referred to as having positive spill-over effects for the development of the entire region. In the words of the Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Yu Hong, in 2018, “China is ready to deepen mutual trust with all South Asian countries and work together with India and make greater contribution to the development of the region so that the people living on both sides of the Himalayas will enjoy peace, stability and prosperity” (Yu, 2018). Rather than a competitive “arena,” Nepal is thus defined as a potential “stage for mutually beneficial cooperation” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Nepal, 2015).

Similarly, in the case of Sri Lanka after the 2014–2015 leadership change, China's MFA spokesperson suggested the potential of India as a partner in seeking "benign interaction and mutual promotion of trilateral relations [that] are beneficial to the three parties, as well as to regional peace, stability and common prosperity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015b).

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The last narrative on India as a partner reflects a sequential and cyclical pattern: India and China deepen their bilateral relations to include a regional dimension. By establishing a series of cooperative triangles, they develop a web of regional economic interdependence which, in turn, is poised to strengthen the China–India partnership. This Chinese discursive presentation of India as an equal partner and player in South Asia, however, comes with a few implicit caveats, as seen above.

First, the discourse tends to place the onus on India, which is implicitly portrayed as an obstacle and thus beckoned to recognise the benefits of cooperating with China for the larger regional good. The implied message is clear: it is India's hesitation or unwillingness to partner with China that is restricting the developmental potential for other states in the region. Second, the Chinese discourse on India as an equal partner does not apply to Pakistan: it only appears in reference to smaller South Asian states such as Nepal or Sri Lanka, where China may see utility from working with, not against, India. And third, there is an implicit discursive suggestion that negates (or ignores) South Asia as a part of India's sphere of influence.

On the surface, this perspective may be construed positively as an idea of symmetry, of China and India working together, shoulder to shoulder, for the developmental benefit of the region. Yet between the lines one may also read the portrayal of China as an equal South Asian power, one with the same rights and responsibilities, as well as interests and stakes, as those of India. This obviously contests—or refuses to recognise—the idea of an Indian sphere of influence and regional primacy due to geographic proximity, power capabilities, and other factors.

3.3 Development Through Economic Corridors and China as the Provider

“要致富，先修路” (To get rich, we need to build roads first). (Li, 2015a)

We identify two main economic narratives in China's official discourse on South Asia. First, a discursive pattern that emphasises the importance of inter-regional economic corridors as engines of growth and modernisation for Asia. Here, the South Asian region is conceptualised as lagging developmentally because it remains geographically insular: a subcontinent that is physically disconnected from, and marginal to, the East and Southeast Asian supply chains and transportation networks linked to China as the main economic hub.

The second economic narrative pattern portrays China as a potential provider of public goods required to fuel economic modernisation and development in South Asia, from trade to infrastructure financing as well as regulatory solutions. This offers an opportunity for low- and lower-middle-income countries such as Bangladesh or India to catch the “express train” of China's economic growth (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022b).

Economic Corridors: Connecting China to the Indian Subcontinent

Building on the flexible definitions of South Asia analysed above, the first economic narrative pattern reflects a Chinese preoccupation with the region being left behind by the BRI network of trade and transportation corridors. There is a causal connection apparent here: in Beijing's perspective, it is precisely the lack of economic engagement and transportation links with China that is obstructing South Asia's developmental potential.

In his 2015 speech in Pakistan, Xi (2015b) reflected this understanding of the region as a central economic node: “South Asia is located at the intersection of land and sea of the ‘Belt and Road’, and is an important direction and partner to promote the construction of the ‘Belt and Road’... The construction of the two corridors will effectively promote the economic growth of the countries concerned and provide a new and powerful impetus for deepening regional cooperation in South Asia.” The corridors referred to here are the Western (CPEC) and Eastern (BCIM or China–Myanmar Economic Corridor)

variants of the BRI, linking China with Pakistan and with Bangladesh and Myanmar respectively.

Connectivity and infrastructural development along economic corridors form the crux of China's regional outreach in the past decade. As reviewed earlier, Chinese official discourse reflects an expansive and inclusive vision of South Asia as part of a larger, well-connected Asia. However, unlike the Silk Road of ancient times, which was an amalgamation of multiple networks and empires with a circulatory exchange of ideas, knowledge, and goods (Sen, 2017), the PRC's modern connectivity initiatives place China at the centre of regional and global flows.

Yet, over the past decade, official discourse on the BRI has also adapted and responded to the changing geopolitical situation as well as criticism from both recipient and competitor countries. While a longer evaluation of the BRI is out of the scope of this paper, it can be observed from the State Council Action Plan (2015) and the 2023 White Paper on the BRI that the planned corridors serve multiple political and economic goals. Domestically, they are aimed at the "reform and opening up" of the western and north-western regions by connecting them better to Central, West, and South Asian countries. The corridors are aimed at not only the facilitation of trade and investments, but also promoting regional cooperation on rules and standards, improving access to markets, and deepening people-to-people and cultural exchanges.

Chinese narratives consider criticism and respond in three ways: (a) by incorporating newer elements like global health, climate change and energy transition, debt sustainability, etc.; (b) by using positive adjectives like "transparent" Belt and Road Initiative; and (c) by denial and questioning detractors (Chan & Song, 2020; Rolland, 2021; Schrader, 2018; Turcsanyi & Kachlikova, 2020). For instance, in his keynote speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Xi (2023) said, "Viewing others' development as a threat or taking economic interdependence as a risk will not make one's own life better or speed up one's development...Ideological confrontation, geopolitical rivalry and bloc politics are not a choice for us. What we stand against are unilateral sanctions, economic coercion and decoupling and supply chain disruption."

China as a Provider of Public Goods

It is important to understand that, in China's official perspective, connectivity and transportation corridors are seen only as a means to facilitate the ultimate end: greater economic interdependence with South Asia with win-win dynamics of mutual development.

Chinese discourse thus presents the Belt and Road Initiative as a major public good that will bring benefits to China and the region by promoting economic integration. Economic corridors that transcend national political boundaries and instead focus on the comparative advantages of different geographical regions are presented as a key feature of the BRI. In South Asia, these include the CPEC and BCIM, and they have been labelled as the "engines" for a "Trans-Himalayan Economic Growth Region." In 2014, at the Dialogue on Strengthening Connectivity, Xi (2014c) remarked:

"[...] the Belt and Road Initiative originates from Asia, relies on Asia, and benefits Asia, pays attention to the interconnection of Asian countries, and strives to expand the common interests of Asian countries. The Belt and Road Initiative is a common cause between China and its Asian neighbours and China is willing to provide more public goods for its Asian neighbours through connectivity."

Highlighting the importance of regional connectivity, Li Yuanchao (2015a) noted that "we need to work together in good faith to accelerate connectivity... China is ready to work with South Asian countries to seize key corridors, key nodes and key projects, strengthen the alignment of plans and standards and, promote the construction of backbone corridors such as the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor..." However, even as South Asia is seen as a major market as well as a key region in China's goals of developing its Western hinterlands, the infrastructural and technical bottlenecks (emerging from different rules and legislations) are seen to be restricting the development of South Asia. This point will be elaborated further in the next section.

Further, while not paying heed to India's security and sovereignty concerns emerging from the CPEC in Pakistan, Chinese officials have highlighted the benefits of the BRI to India's development and the peace, prosperity, and stability of the region. For instance, Chinese ambassador to India Luo Zhaohui argued in 2017 that:

“similar to some of India’s initiatives, China’s Belt and Road Initiative seizes the key link of connectivity, focuses on economic cooperation, especially infrastructure construction, and meets the development needs of countries along the Belt and Road, providing important opportunities for India’s development.... Despite this, India has reservations about the Belt and Road Initiative... China has no intention of intervening in the territorial sovereignty dispute between India and Pakistan.” (Luo, 2017)

However, over the years, as India–China bilateral relations have worsened, China has pivoted towards focusing on projects that do not involve India, like the Trans-Himalayan Corridor with Nepal and the Padma Bridge in Bangladesh.

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Economic relations lie at the heart of China’s official discourse on South Asia. This includes (a) a focus on economic transportation corridors and connectivity routes, linking South Asia to China and to the rest of Asia, and (b) portraying China as a benevolent provider of public goods that will bring prosperity and development to the region. It is therefore impossible to separate China’s narrative discourse on South Asia’s economic development from its larger regional and global outlook. The emphasis on trade and transportation infrastructure, in the form of BRI “economic corridors,” manifests this integrated approach. As emphasised by Xi Jinping (2014e) in an address in New Delhi in 2014:

“China and India should become a regionally driven development express, leading the common development of all countries in the region. The two sides should strive to forge consensus on regional cooperation, work with relevant countries to promote regional economic integration and connectivity, accelerate the construction of the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor, and complete the negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) at an early date.”

3.4 Political Stability and Governance: China as a Guide and Mediator

“治国常富，而乱国常贫” (*Well-governed countries are rich, whereas unstable countries are usually poor*) (Xi, 2022a).

Chinese official discourse on economic development in South Asia often also comes alongside references to particular models of political governance as well as effects on peace, stability, and security. The region poses challenges at various levels for the PRC leadership. First, there is the democratic character of its regimes and its multiple political transitions, including regime changes and chronic instability: in Pakistan, for example, this manifests as a precarious civil-military balance, and in Nepal as a succession of different coalition governments, including 10 different prime ministers in the past 10 years. Across the subcontinent, the pace of political change and the intensity of partisan competition is a natural challenge for China’s attempts to build long-term economic partnerships with a stable set of partners. Here, our attempt was to understand how Chinese officials perceive South Asia’s democratic systems and how they describe or refer to its pluralist political character.

Second, there are high levels of political violence in the region, including inter-state disputes as well as domestic conflicts. This includes the India–Pakistan rivalry, as well as the Bangladesh–Myanmar tensions on the Rohingya refugee issue, or transitional justice processes in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Unlike other regions, South Asia lags behind when it comes to a cooperative security architecture to address these conflicts. This puts an extra onus on China to tread carefully and balance its relations with multiple stakeholders to preserve its stakes in the region. Here, our attempt was to understand Chinese official discourse in relation to such conflicts.

As expected, Chinese officials do not openly criticise South Asia’s democratic systems, nor do they take clear sides on different disputes. Yet two narrative strands emerged in our analysis. First, a cautious yet implicit suggestion that posits China’s strong, autocratic state as a model of “good governance” that may benefit the developmental interests of South Asia. This is the image of China as a governance guide for the region. The second narrative is more explicit and gaining more discursive currency in recent years: the role of China as a conflict mediator between different states or even internal forces.

China's "Social System" as a Governance Guide

In its official rhetoric, China has demonstrated formal respect for the different "social systems" and "national models of development" in South Asia. This is in line with its overall deference to the choices made by each country for different political regimes, which it repeatedly emphasises as the principle of non-interference. However, Chinese narratives directed at South Asia are also ripe with implicit references to the superiority of its own system of governance, which is called a "people's democracy." These suggest that the region suffers from a political and governance deficit, indicated by high levels of inter-state and internal conflicts to the detriment of economic development and regional integration. And for South Asian countries to correct this, it is implied that they can learn from China as a governance guide.

The "social system" in official Chinese ideological parlance is the "basic system" (基本制度 *jiben zhidu*), which includes the economic and social structures as well as the political and legal systems (He, 2020). In China's context, this includes socialism with Chinese characteristics, the CPC's uncontested leadership, people's democracy, and public state ownership as the main features (Li, 2019). Institutions based on the "basic social system" are seen as key to achieving goals like political and social stability, economic growth, and poverty alleviation (Lu, 2020). Hence, stably following a Marxist framework, the Chinese leadership sees social, political, and economic systems as interconnected. In this narrative, stability and peace are understood to be crucial for good governance and economic development. China is portrayed as having succeeded on this front and is presented as an example for the rest of the developing world.

While exalting the economic development and political stability that China has achieved under the Communist regime, South Asian countries are, however, considered as being "still in transition," facing internal and external uncertainties (Sun, 2013). China is portrayed as a "friendly neighbour" and partner in "mutually beneficial cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013) that will assist countries in South Asia to build national unity and stability by sharing lessons in governance and providing public goods towards building their own "basic social system" (Qi, 2021b, 2021c). Furthermore, based on its own success, China is presented in South Asia as showing a new path to modernisation which offers an alternative to the Western

model of development, including the idea of free elections and competitive multi-party democracy.

For instance, the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh, Li Jiming, published a series of 25 articles in 2020–2021, titled "Cultural Roots of China's Good Governance," where he contended that "China's good governance derives from its institutional strengths, including its exceptional organisational power and innate coherence of its unique political system" (Li, 2020). The context of the COVID-19 pandemic and China's early success vis-à-vis the West in controlling the virus formed the basis of such triumphant declarations. Later in 2023, Ambassador Yao Wen proclaimed to his Bangladesh audience that:

"China has successfully explored a path of modernisation with Chinese characteristics, breaking the myth of 'modernisation = Westernisation', creating a new form of human civilisation, and providing important inspiration for countries around the world, especially developing countries, to achieve modernisation." (Yao, 2023)

The political transition in South Asia is often also couched as a part of a larger transformation of Asia. In 2013, Li Keqiang stated that "the revitalisation of Asia is inseparable from South Asia...and seeking peace, stability and development is the common goal of all countries in South Asia...we (China) share the same destiny as them... We hope to carry out friendly and mutually beneficial cooperation with countries in the region and build South Asia into a blessed land where countries are united and stable" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013).

The role of China as a governance guide is also reflected in official discourse on the South Asian nexus between underdevelopment and conflict. Terrorism, separatism, and extremism are named as indicators of political misgovernance and a common threat to regional security and stability with negative spillovers on China as well. A repeated trend in the Chinese narrative is to posit security and development as two sides of the same coin. A stable and secure political environment is seen as necessary for achieving development.

As ambassador to Pakistan, Sun Weidong (2013), for example, posited, "China and South Asia are political partners, economic partners and a safety barrier to each other, with interests and the fate of both sides linked together.... Meanwhile, it is urgent to improve

the security environment and boost the level of development in South Asia.” And in his signed article published in Pakistan in 2015, Xi Jinping (2015c) emphasised that “security cooperation and economic cooperation complement each other and promote each other, and the two wheels must turn together.” Finally, speaking at the 10th China-South Asia Expo in 2023, Wang Yi beckoned partners in the region to embrace China as a governance guide: “China welcomes South Asian countries to continue to ride the express train of China’s development and share the dividends of China’s development. We are ready to work with South Asian countries to contribute to the long-term peace, stability and prosperity of the region” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2023).

China as a Conflict Mediator

China’s official discourse also posits the PRC as an objective mediator in conflicts both between and within countries of South Asia. This reflects not only the Chinese government’s confidence in its own political and economic achievements as an inspiring partner for South Asia, but also its desire and intent to serve as an active arbiter. This narrative refers to China as a major player in South Asian regional geopolitics, one that is allegedly able to rise above bilateral disputes and provide an objective and just resolution of conflicts in the wider interest of regional peace, development, and stability.

Research shows that Chinese mediation activities in the Global South have increased since 2013 (Legarda, 2018; Mahmud & Rai, 2023; Nantulya, 2022). This has been attributed to an increase in commercial and political interests due to investments under BRI projects, as well as China’s attempt to elevate its international role and reputation under President Xi Jinping. At the Boao Forum for Asia in 2022, for example, Xi (2022a) proclaimed that “in order to promote world security and welfare, China is willing to put forward the Global Security Initiative...to uphold the peaceful resolution of differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of crises.” Further expounding on the initiative, FM Wang Yi noted that “China stays committed to dialogue and consultation and remains a steadfast mediator of hot-spot issues... Major countries should uphold justice, encourage dialogue, facilitate talks for peace, play good offices and mediate in light of the needs and will of the countries concerned” (Wang, 2022b).

In the case of South Asia, Chinese official discourse displays two patterns. The first one is implicit and persuasive, appealing to conflicting parties to cooperate towards and maintain peace. This is most apparent in reference to India–Pakistan relations, the principal regional site of inter-state adversarial tensions. Here, MFA spokespersons have repeatedly noted that “the positive momentum of improvement in bilateral relations [...] is crucial for peace, stability and development in the region,” and that, therefore, “China will, as always, support the two sides [India and Pakistan] in properly resolving relevant differences through peaceful dialogue and continuously improving bilateral relations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2015a, 2015e). In another example that refers to India–Pakistan peace prospects as being in China’s interest, the then Chinese ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, noted that “we hope that India and Pakistan will get along with each other, which will be beneficial to regional stability and China.” For this, he stressed, Beijing was willing to play the role of an honest broker: “when we express our stance that there is a conflict between India and Pakistan, China is willing to mediate. Of course, the premise is that both India and Pakistan are willing” (Luo, 2017).

The second discursive pattern is explicit and refers to China’s active attempts at political conciliation. It refers to Beijing’s role as a force for regional good by developing arbitration mechanisms for conflicting entities to engage and resolve regional disputes. This pattern is particularly visible in the case of smaller countries in South Asia: both for facilitating mediation on domestic as well as bilateral issues. For example, at the World Peace Forum in 2015, while identifying Myanmar and Afghanistan as “regional hotspot issues,” Vice-President Li Yuanchao (2015b) declared:

“China successfully hosted the foreign ministers’ meeting of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan. We support the political, security and economic transitions in Afghanistan and play a mediating role in its domestic peace process in a way that is acceptable to all sides. We are also engaged in facilitating national reconciliation in Myanmar by leveraging our own resources and advantages to promote peace and stability both inside Myanmar and along its borders with China.”

China has also sought to actively facilitate mediation between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the issue of Rohingya refugees. In 2019, at an informal meeting with the foreign ministers of Bangladesh and Myanmar, Wang noted that “as a mutual friend of Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Chinese side is willing to provide help within its capacity to this end” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2019). In 2021, Wang Yi put forward a “three-point proposal” for the resolution of the civil war in Myanmar while claiming that “China is ready to engage and communicate with all parties on the basis of respecting Myanmar’s sovereignty and the will of the people of Myanmar and play a constructive role in easing tensions” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2021b). Earlier in the same year, Chinese ambassador to Myanmar Chen Hai said in a media interview that “China is willing to play a constructive role” in conflict resolution in the country” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2021a).

Recurrent in these declarations are suggestions that Chinese-style mediation is different from that of the West in that it is not “unilateral” or based on “long-arm jurisdiction” and that it respects the “sovereignty, national dignity and territorial integrity” of all countries regardless of their size and engages with “all relevant parties” (Xi, 2022a).

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Chinese official narratives on South Asia tread a fine line, leaving much to what seems to be intentional discursive ambiguity. Two strands emerge in the political domain. The first relates to the predominance of democratic regimes in the region. On the one hand, there is formal respect for differences in political systems, with a South Asia marked by democratic diversity and governance instability caused by competitive partisanship. On the other hand, however, there are also implicit references to the superiority of the Chinese governance model as a guide for South Asian countries. In this narrative mode, China is presented as an alternative to the Western model of development and modernisation which is bound to benefit the region’s material progress.

The second narrative strand that emerges relates to China as a mediator of political conflicts. Here, on the one hand, we see China being presented as a political player, increasingly willing (and able) to be involved in the resolution of South Asia’s domestic and bilateral disputes. On the other hand, however, we also

witness a continued discourse that focuses on the old principles of “non-interference” and respect for the sovereignty of smaller states. These are not necessarily contradictory: in the perspective of Chinese officials, this may indicate a sense of exceptionalism, offering alternative modes to the American or Western models of conflict resolution. At the same time, such ambiguity and difference may also be indicative of a certain deference towards India, the predominant political actor in the region: by portraying its involvement as distinctively non-Western and Asian, Beijing may be seeking more buy-in from South Asian countries, as well as tolerance from India.

4. Key Findings, Policy Recommendations, and Future Research

China’s rising profile in the region has significant implications for India as the region’s traditionally predominant power. India–China bilateral relations saw several ups and downs after 2014 but tanked in 2020 with a lethal military clash in the Himalayas, and warmed up again in 2025. Amidst this difficult—largely adversarial and even hostile—bilateral context, India is therefore concerned about China’s inroads across its immediate neighbourhood, especially in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.

India’s regional policies have accordingly been shaped by attempts to pre-empt, limit, or oppose Chinese influence in neighbouring countries. In several instances across economic, security, and political domains in these countries, India and China have thus locked into escalating dynamics of competition and conflict, driven by a zero-sum logic. Cutting across organisational differences, from the diplomatic and economic to the military and intelligence establishments, Indian officials today largely perceive China as the main threat to Indian core interests in the region.

Against this difficult context, our study offers new knowledge that may help Indian and other regional decision-makers better understand how China sees its own expanding role in the region. In some instances, it confirms rising Indian concerns about China encroaching at the expense of Indian economic and security interests. In other instances, it offers correctives, portraying a China that is not singularly driven by the quest to undermine Indian regional interests. Most importantly, beyond just confirming or correcting Indian threat assessments, our study

offers more granular insights into diverse strands of Chinese thinking. This ought to be of use to Indian, as well as other regional and international policymakers dealing with China as an increasingly influential actor in and around the Indian subcontinent.

This final section offers (1) a summary of our key findings in terms of the four principal Chinese official narratives on South Asia; (2) an assessment of two time trends in terms of variations of these narratives between 2014 and 2024, with examples of discursive accentuation or stagnation; and (3) suggestions for further policy-relevant research with predictive utility to unpack Chinese strategic semantics and triangulate thought, speech, and action in the region.

4.1 Summary of Findings: Four Chinese Discourses

The analysis of China's official discourse on South Asia from 2013 to 2023 reveals a multifaceted approach that mirrors China's evolving strategic interests in the region. By utilising discourse analysis, our study shows how Chinese officials define the PRC's role in the region. These narratives are significant not only for (at least partially) revealing how China has viewed the region in the recent past, but also because they have predictive utility for decision-makers engaging with China in the future. Our study identifies four main narratives.

First, China's official discourse shows what seems to be an intentional flexibility in defining South Asia. Depending on the context, South Asia is framed through ecological, economic, geopolitical, and civilisational narratives. For instance, from an ecological standpoint, the region is tied to the Himalayan rim, which links China's inland provinces of Yunnan, Tibet, and Xinjiang to the subcontinent. Economically, the region's boundaries are extended to include Myanmar and other neighbours, connecting it to larger continental trade and infrastructure networks, such as the BRI. This flexible framing allows China to align its definition of South Asia with its own strategic goals, expanding or contracting the region's boundaries to suit specific interests. It also reflects strategic and discursive adaptation, with China speaking to the specific interests of different audiences.

Second, China sees India's role as central to the region, defining it both as a current impediment and an indispensable factor for future development partnerships. China's discourse on India thus reflects

strategic ambivalence. On the one hand, India is acknowledged as the largest and most influential country in South Asia. By promoting its "China-India-Plus-One" model of trilateral cooperation with smaller South Asian states, Beijing has indicated a willingness to partner with New Delhi. On the other hand, China's narrative positions itself as an equal to India, contesting India's primacy in the region. By presenting itself as a more stable, benevolent power, China also subtly challenges India's perceived "hegemonic" role, particularly towards smaller neighbours like Nepal, Sri Lanka, or Bangladesh. Furthermore, while China maintains strong relations with Pakistan as an "iron-brother," the official discourse emphasises the equal importance of India and Pakistan, suggesting a strategic hyphenation.

The third narrative positions China as a benevolent extra-regional power. Beijing's discourse emphasises development through inter-regional economic corridors and the role of China as the provider of public goods to South Asia in the form of infrastructure, trade, and economic integration. China's discourse emphasises the economic shortcomings of the region, portraying its investments as crucial to lift South Asia out of poverty and instability. Through the BRI, China presents itself as an engine driving regional development and modernisation, with projects like the CPEC and the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor framed as vital for connectivity and prosperity. This positioning allows China to project itself as an alternative to both India and the West, in terms of offering a development model that emphasises infrastructure-driven growth, political stability, and a governance model that it deems "suitable to domestic conditions."

A fourth and final Chinese narrative trend is the portrayal of South Asia as a region plagued by instability and internal conflicts that can benefit from Chinese mediation and China's single-party governance focused on "political stability." While showing respect for South Asia's different "social systems," Chinese officials often describe the region's governance structures as inefficient and hindering economic growth. By contrast, China positions its own autocratic governance model as superior, suggesting that South Asia could benefit from exchanging political experiences with China. This political framing serves two purposes: it underscores China's role as a stabilising force in the region, and it allows China to indirectly critique the Western-style or Indian democratic models. China's emphasis on stability as

a prerequisite for development reinforces its desire to reshape regional governance narratives in its favour. China's discourse also positions itself as a neutral mediator and an advocate for peaceful conflict resolution in the region, whether for bilateral or domestic disputes.

4.2 Two Time Trends: Discursive Accentuation and Stagnation

None of the four narratives identified in our study are static: for example, in the case of how Chinese officials define South Asia geographically, the boundaries are flexible and shift according to the country or audience they are speaking to. The same variation also applies when evaluating how Chinese discourse may have changed over time: What do Chinese officials say more or less of? What do they say differently, or what do they stop saying altogether? There are methodological limitations preventing us from making conclusive statements about what narratives increase (or decrease) in frequency and intensity: our period of analysis is restricted (2013–2023), and our analysis is not quantitative. Yet we find tentative indications in terms of two discursive trends: what is said more of (or emphatically: discursive accentuation) and what remains stagnant (or ambiguous: discursive stagnation).

With reference to the first trend of accentuation, we identify a set of narrative themes that seem to have acquired greater salience in Chinese discourse on South Asia since 2013. These are discourses that seem to be increasing in frequency and intensity, of which two examples stand out. A first example relates to our analysis in section 3.1 defining South Asia as an exclusive geopolitical zone: here, we see indications of a growing focus of Chinese officials on the United States as a hostile actor that threatens regional stability, peace, and development. This accentuation might be a response to the growing India–US partnership in the region and reflecting China's preoccupation about South Asia pivoting away from a Sino-centric Asian order.

Another example of Chinese discursive accentuation relates to what Rao (2022) calls ecological “connector zones” and the “recognition of a shared habitat [that] was once common to the Himalayan ranges that border India and the Tibetan plateau.” Especially after the Galwan crisis of 2020, Chinese discourse seems to have placed growing emphasis on climate cooperation and shared environmental resources with the

region, especially along what it calls the “Himalayan rim” region.

With reference to the second trend of discursive stagnation, there are also narrative themes that have not picked up as much as we might have expected, given China's rising influence in different sectors across the region. One example relates to speeches offering China as an alternative political system. We examine this narrative in section 3.4 to reflect Beijing's suggestion that it can act as a “governance guide” to share its “social system” with South Asian countries. As Saran (2022, p. 51) notes, “in the Chinese historical narrative, one finds a deeply ingrained preference for strong and centralized political authority as an assurance of peace, order and social harmony.” In South Asia, we see Chinese behaviour reflecting this thought, with the CPC engaging different South Asian parties and hosting regional workshops on Xi Jinping and party-led governance.

However, there does not seem to be a commensurately explicit articulation of this in Chinese official speeches targeted at the region since 2013. What explains this gap between careful and cryptic speeches about political systems and the rising (even if still limited and conspicuous) action to promote the Chinese political system in South Asia? Assuming that this Chinese discursive moderation is deliberate, three possible explanations arise: (1) an adherence to the norm of political non-interference; (2) a diplomatic concern about backlash; or (3) a realisation that there is limited utility to publicly pushing an authoritarian model in a pluralistic and diverse South Asia.

4.3 Policy Recommendations: Investing in the China Policy Research Ecosystem

The policy implications of our study are significant in a rapidly changing regional order. Reacting to Chinese actions across the South Asian neighbourhood alone will not be enough: interpreting Chinese official speeches offers valuable signals that can help decision-makers understand the cognitive context and strategic objectives of Chinese behaviour.

This demands a stronger ecosystem of Chinese Studies—and better linkages between research and policymaking processes—to help decipher PRC speech and connect it to practice with a predictive dimension. Historically, as Saran (2022) argues, “India and China for centuries have been strangers to one another.” And it may be possible that this epistemic

gap about China may become even larger in the next years, as India–China relations undergo a difficult and likely adversarial process of recalibration. Two trends point to this possibility.

First, on the side of China as the speaker, it will be increasingly difficult for Indian and other South Asian decision-makers to separate signals from noise. Our study shows that Chinese discourse on South Asia is deceptively paradoxical: China adapts its discourse to the target audience. It may sound flexible, fragmented, and even contradictory, but our study shows that there are patterns that indicate a coherent strategic narrative to maximise Chinese interests in the region. There is a second, related challenge: Chinese language in/on South Asia is also increasingly aligned with Chinese discourse globally and in other regions and is part of its broader worldview and strategy. China's use of discursive power, particularly in its emphasis on “win-win cooperation,” a global “community of shared destiny,” or the idea of Chinese-style “economic modernisation” for the Global South, is aimed at building leverage to redefine international norms (Jargad, 2024).

Second, on the side of the listener, there is a large and growing gap between Indian and other South Asian understandings of Chinese discourse. On the one hand, shaped by its concerns about China, India tends to interpret Chinese speech with a sense of threat. On the other hand, shaped by their interests in forging closer relations with China, other smaller South Asian states tend to interpret Chinese speech with a sense of opportunity. China assumes the role of two different types of sirens for two distinct audiences.

For India, when China speaks, it hears the dangerous siren of alarm and emergency. Yet for other smaller South Asian states, when China speaks, they often hear the irresistible siren of allure and empathy. Naturally, Indian policymakers will thus tend to navigate the fog with a heightened sense of risk and their guard up, expecting and preparing for storms ahead. A Nepali, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan policymaker, however, may engage in the opposite extreme: ignoring or underrating the fog, they will optimistically navigate towards China in expectation of clear weather ahead.

Both these challenges will affect Indian decision-making on China in the coming years, especially as it seeks to regain its predominance in the South

Asian region. While conceptual misinterpretation or the lack of expertise, time, and resources to decipher another country's intention is always a factor in international relations, a strong research ecosystem can help mitigate risks and identify opportunities. As discussed in the introduction of our paper and as acknowledged by EAM Jaishankar, this policy-relevant field of China studies is critical for decision-makers.

Building on examples such as the CCCS at the MEA, the Indian government will have to invest more in creating sector-based expertise on Chinese domestic domains. It is this political, institutional, historical, economic, and cultural analysis of the “internal drivers” of Chinese foreign policy that will enhance policymakers' capacity to tailor and implement an effective strategy for the next-door giant (Menon, 2022). As a principal in stable India–China relations, seeking to understand where to cooperate or compete with Chinese companies across South Asia, Indian industry must also play a more prominent role in supporting the development of such China expertise.

4.4 Future Research: Contextualising and Comparing Chinese Speech

To comprehensively piece together Chinese strategic thinking, “blind” speech analysis is not enough. By adapting the methodology of Chinese discourse analysis to the case of South Asia, our study confirms that official and public utterances are only one among several other indicators of thought. Not all words carry the same weight: for Indian policymakers it is thus urgent to have the contextual skills to identify irrelevant discourse or, in the opposite direction, instances of intentional deception. Our study therefore throws open more research avenues that will contribute to a more richly embedded, analytical, and policy-oriented understanding of China's thinking on South Asia. We suggest three concrete research parameters:

First, by linking the discursive to the behavioural level of analysis, future research should investigate if and how Chinese narratives align with China's actions and whether there is a divergence between discourse and practice. Additionally, exploring the responses of South Asian countries to these narratives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of China's growing influence in the region. For this, we need more South Asian country experts that can help map China's activities across the neighbourhood (Xavier & Jacob, 2023; 2025).

Second, by extending the analysis in time, from a Chinese historical context. What are the historical references made from a Chinese perspective? For example, building on Sen's work (2017), how does the PRC perceive its historical role of China as a "civilisational state" in the region before 1949? This speaks to the importance of historical analysis and analogies in decision-making (Khong, 1992; Neustadt & May, 1986). For this, we need more Indian historians of China.

Third, by exploring how speech may reflect embedded cultural images and perceptions of India and South Asia. What are the impressions and ideas that decision-makers hold about the region? How do these inform their engagements? This speaks to the

importance of socio-cultural analysis that is in line with what anthropologists call thick and contextual description. For this, we need more Sinologists focused on cultural studies.

A fourth and final research avenue would give our South Asia case study a comparative dimension. How does Chinese discourse on South Asia compare to its discourse on other key regions, for example in/on Europe, Africa, West Asia, or Southeast Asia? This speaks to the policy relevance of area studies, an academic tradition that has been struggling in India (Sahni, 2009). (Sahni, 2009). It will be difficult, if not impossible, to separate signals from noise unless we establish patterns of Chinese discursive similarity or difference across regions.

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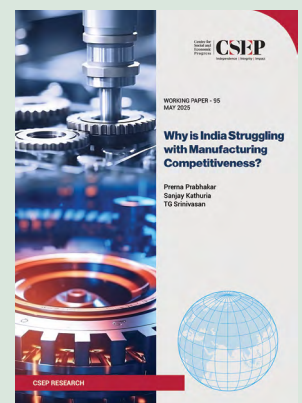
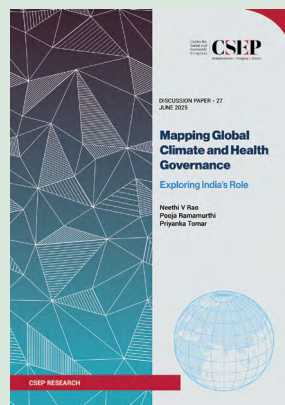
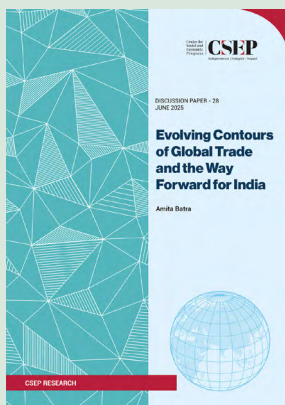
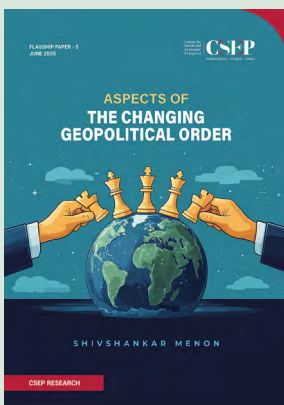
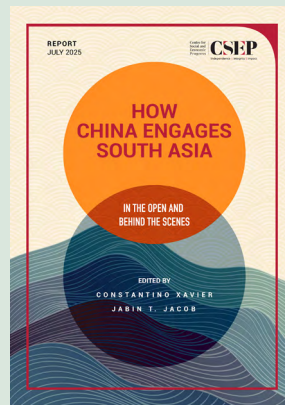
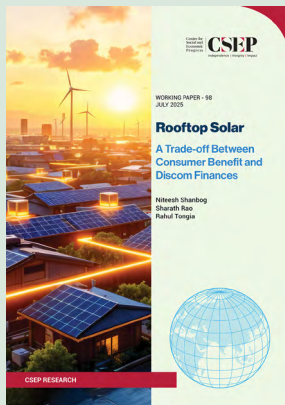
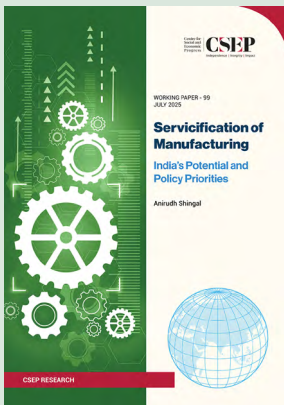
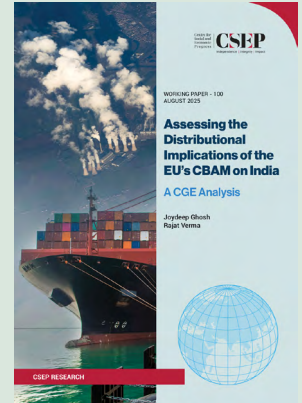
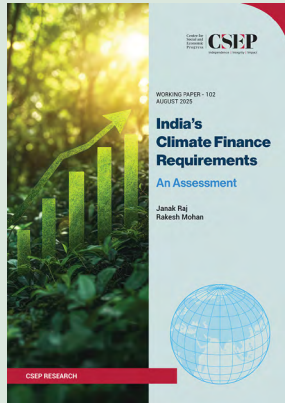


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