

## South Asian Regional Integration: The Role of China

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### Abstract:

This study examines China's integration initiatives and their impact on South Asian regional integration, focusing on economic ties, security dynamics, and diplomatic strategies. Applying neo-functionalism as a theoretical framework, the research highlights the role of Chinese investments in enhancing infrastructure, connectivity, and regional integration in South Asia while addressing challenges such as debt dependency and geopolitical tensions. The findings reveal a nuanced interplay between economic opportunities and strategic competition, particularly involving India as a regional power and USA and Russia as global power competitors.

**Key Words:** South Asia, BRI, CPEC, Neofunctionalism, Economic cooperation, Geopolitics, Indo Pak Rivalry .

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### Introduction

South Asia is considered the least integrated region in the world. The value of trade integration is less than one-third of its actual potential, as reported by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, which estimated trade integrity as \$26.9 billion in 2014 against a potential of \$81.3 billion (Mobley, 2019). This disparity highlights that more than 68% of the potential remains unexploited. Recently, trade integration was found to be 5.1% by the World Bank (2019), which is lower than that in East Asia and the Pacific region.

One notable effort for South Asian integration was the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. The SAARC aimed to promote economic and regional integration without any involvement in the political affairs of the state. However, despite its apolitical objectives, the Indo-Pakistan political rivalry has served as a major impediment to its functioning, rendering the organization nearly ineffective (Batra, 2004). The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), established in 2004 under SAARC, aimed to reduce trade barriers and promote economic cooperation among member countries. SAFTA sought to facilitate cross-border trade through tariff reductions, elimination of trade barriers, and harmonization of standards. However, the SAFTA could not fully achieved its potential due to political and economic challenges. Intra-regional trade remains low, hampered by issues such as lack of infrastructure, non-tariff barriers, and political tensions among member states (Hameed (2018)).

In contrast to the SAARC, the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have successfully integrated their regions through strong institutional frameworks and consistent economic and political cooperation. The EU, established in the aftermath of World War II, has

achieved significant economic and political integration, including a single market and a common currency for many of its member states. ASEAN, founded in 1967, has also made strides in regional integration through initiatives like the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), which has significantly reduced tariffs among member countries and promoted economic cooperation (Neuendorf, 2018). In both cases of regional integration, the role of international actors in facilitating institutional building and economic empowerment is pivotal. In the context of the onset of the Cold War, the financial assistance, provided through the Marshall Plan, and the American institutional and ideological support to liberal democracy in Western Europe provided impetus to the process of European integration. Similarly, the American military, monetary and political investment in the Asia-Pacific region and the EU diplomatic and financial support to ASEAN countries played a critical role in making ASEAN a success story (Floristall, 2017; Tarnoff, 2018).

In the case of SAARC, however, there is not much attention to the role of these international actors. Given that China is a growing global power and shared borders with four of the eight states of South Asia, it is timely to investigate the role of China in South Asian integration. China's involvement in the region, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), presents new dynamics and opportunities for regional integration. This research focuses on two primary objectives: to analyze how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and related projects contribute to economic ties and integration in South Asia, and to investigate the security challenges and opportunities presented by China's military and strategic presence in South Asia, and how this influence regional stability and the collective regional policies of South Asian nations.

The remainder of the study is organized as: the second section introduces the theory of neo-functionalism which provided the main theoretical foundation for this research. The third section describes “The BRI and CPEC: Potential impact on South Asian integration”. Whereas, the fourth section explains the “Chinese military and strategic support to South Asian states”. In section fifth, this investigation describes the possible challenges: The China-US competition. Further, section six describes the possible challenges regarding the China-India rivalry. Moreover, results are discussed in section seven and last section ends up on the conclusion.

## 2. Neo-Functional theory of regional integration

Neo-Functional Theory sheds light on how regional cooperation evolves through economic and political integration. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are examined for their transformative effects on regional connectivity and development. Additionally, the influence of Chinese military and strategic support is analyzed, with a focus on how the China-US and China-India rivalries complicate regional stability and growth. The findings and conclusion then weave these elements together, providing actionable insights and forward-looking recommendations. The sections delve into the intricate dynamics of South Asian integration and geopolitics.

Neo-functionalism provides a compelling lens through which to examine regional integration, emphasizing how targeted cooperation in specific sectors can catalyze broader political and economic unity. Originating from the study of European integration, this theory highlights how initial efforts in areas like trade or transportation can set off a chain reaction, prompting further integration. At its core, neo-functionalism relies on the idea of spillover, where advancements in one sector lead to increased cooperation in others, and elite socialization, where influential leaders who champion integration foster a broader regional commitment (Nijkamp et al., 2009; and Maneli, 2024).

In South Asia, this theoretical framework offers a valuable perspective on the region's integration journey. Despite ambitious initiatives like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and efforts such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), the integration process has been uneven. According to neo-functionalism, successful economic cooperation should ideally spur progress in other areas, such as energy and environmental policies (Wunderlich, 2020; Sultan & Mehmood, 2020). For instance, collaborative projects in these fields could create interdependencies that drive further regional cooperation.

However, applying neo-functionalism to South Asia reveals significant hurdles. Political tensions, especially between India and Pakistan, have stymied

the anticipated spillover effects, preventing economic cooperation from translating into deeper political integration. Unlike the European model, South Asia's political rivalries and the lack of robust supranational institutions have limited the impact of these cooperative efforts. The challenges faced by SAARC, which lacks the authority and resources to enforce comprehensive regional policies, underscore these difficulties.

The concept of elite socialization also plays a crucial role. In South Asia, regional leaders who are engaged in integration efforts could drive further cooperation by advocating for its benefits. Yet, nationalist sentiments and ongoing political rivalries often overshadow these efforts, hindering the development of a unified regional identity. Strengthening regional institutions and fostering trust among South Asian elites are essential to overcoming these barriers and advancing integration.

Finally, neo-functionalism underscores the importance of strong supranational institutions in facilitating integration (Zhao et al., 2019; Fang and Qamruzzaman, 2021; Anwar, 2020). In South Asia, the absence of such institutions has constrained the effectiveness of regional cooperation. While SAARC provides a platform for dialogue, it lacks the power and resources to enforce regional policies effectively. Developing stronger regional institutions or enhancing existing ones could align with neo-functionalism's vision and help advance South Asian integration. Hence, neo-functionalism offers insightful perspectives on South Asian integration, revealing both its potential and its challenges. By focusing on the dynamic interplay of sectoral cooperation, elite influence, and institutional strength, this theory sheds light on the path forward for deeper regional integration in South Asia.

Regional development encompasses the geographical distribution of welfare and the strategies for its enhancement, forming a critical aspect of regional economics, economic growth, and economic geography (Nijkamp et al., 2009). It aims to improve living standards across various states, including urban and rural areas, thereby contributing to national performance and societal resilience.

Neo-functionalism further elaborates that regional cooperation creates momentum for broader integration, with China's engagement in South Asia exemplifying this dynamic (Wunderlich (2020).

The spillover concept, as associated with Ernst B. Haas, describes how integration in one policy area can lead to integration in others. According to the spillover concept, integration in a specific economic area can generate dynamics that foster further integration in other areas. Haas (2020) argued that initial economic cooperation in sectors like coal and steel could lead to spillover effects in politics and security. China's infrastructure and economic projects in South Asia, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), may

encourage spillover effects into political and strategic areas (Sultan & Mehmood, 2020). The spillover concept suggests that success in one sector can create incentives for broader cooperation, reflecting Haas's idea of generating wider integration dynamics.

### **3. The BRI and CPEC: Potential impact on South Asian integration**

South is the main focal point for China for its BRI project. BRI covers the sea routes named Maritime Silk Roads. China is currently planning to get access to the Indian Ocean through South Asia to expand its political and economic integration to Western provinces. China is looking forward to bringing opportunities for the western hinterland (Gong, 2019; Brazys and Dukalskis, 2019; Saimum, 2020; Lu and Wolszczak-Derlacz, 2024). Due to all such reasons, South Asia countries that serve as gateways to Western, European, and Gulf countries are useful for China. The main focus of China was relying on linking these maritime with the mainland of China. To achieve success in this objective, it is continuously investing in the infrastructure of countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as this infrastructure does not only connect China to South Asia and the West (Zhao et al., 2019).

The BRI, initiated in 2013, aims to bolster connectivity with central, South, and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe. The initiative, with an unprecedented investment of over \$4.4 billion in around 138 countries, has the potential to play a significant role in the sustainable development of the South Asian region if its policies are effectively implemented (Liu, 2022). The infrastructure provided by the BRI has helped many countries benefit from free trade and investments.

BRI has the potential to stabilize regional integration in South Asia with its effective infrastructure, energy, and transport projects. CPEC is one of the major projects and initiatives of BRI that supports Pakistan in stabilizing its economic crises and improvement. In the current world, the trade encompasses more than 19.09 trillion US dollars in 2018, where the natural border holds notable significance as compared to the transactional association. In this regard, the direct investment made by China across the CPEC project is widely considered as the one having a notable contribution to modernizing the regressive infrastructure of Pakistan (Khetran and Saeed, 2017). CPEC is one of the core visionary projects for joining the market and accessing the assets, which might represent the interface of the China-Pakistan relationship (Fang and Qamruzzaman, 2021).

South Asia, requiring peaceful development for rapid and sustainable economic growth, may find the BRI to be a viable choice, as it is associated with job opportunities and skill development (World Bank, 2019). The potential of BRI to increase trade between 2.5% to 9.9% in partner countries and 1.9% to 6.2% globally highlights its significance (Mobley, 2019).

However, the initiative also raises security concerns, ranging from traditional conflicts to competition with India, and poses risks of corruption and social tension due to poor loan regulations (Baqai and Mehreen 2021). Specifically, while the BRI boosts trade and infrastructure, persistent trade imbalances—where imports from China exceed exports—remain a challenge. Addressing these imbalances and improving trade facilitation are crucial for deeper regional integration (Saimum, 2020).

Trade relations between South Asia and China reveal a significant interdependence, driven by China's manufacturing prowess. The BRI has intensified this dependence, increasing China's exports to South Asia while South Asian exports to China have decreased (Lu and Wolszczak-Derlacz (2024)). Studies by Zhao et al. (2019) and Fang and Qamruzzaman (2021)) confirm this trend, noting that China's exports of manufactured goods complement South Asia's exports of raw materials. Li and Lei (2019) identify partial complementarity with countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, and both complementarity and competition with India. Despite these dynamics, research by Singh (2024) suggests that the BRI could boost South Asian trade by 3-10% and improve global trade efficiency by 12%, provided that environmental and infrastructure challenges are effectively managed (Balandina, 2017).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a core BRI project that supports Pakistan in stabilizing its economic crises and improving its infrastructure. This direct investment by China is seen as crucial for modernizing Pakistan's infrastructure and enhancing the China-Pakistan relationship (Wunderlich 2020; and Common 2021). CPEC is likely to enhance regional cooperation and stability, benefiting neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan and Iran. However, challenges such as debt sustainability and socio-economic disparities remain (Rustam et al., 2019).

### **4. Chinese military and strategic support to South Asian states**

China's military engagement in South Asia is a significant facet of its strategic vision, reflecting a range of projects and support mechanisms aimed at bolstering regional security, fostering defense partnerships, and expanding its influence. This involvement manifests through several key dimensions, each contributing to China's broader geopolitical goals.

China's military aid to South Asian countries encompasses a broad spectrum of support, including the provision of advanced military hardware and technology. Nations such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives have received Chinese military equipment, which includes naval vessels, aircraft, and other defense systems. For instance, China has equipped Bangladesh with advanced patrol boats and submarines, enhancing its maritime defense

capabilities. In Sri Lanka, Chinese support includes radar systems and naval vessels, aimed at strengthening the country's maritime security (Balandina, 2017; Ullah Khan et al., 2020).

In Nepal, military assistance from China involves both equipment and training, which bolster the country's defense infrastructure and improve its operational capabilities. This support extends to joint training exercises, which foster closer defense ties and enhance the interoperability of South Asian and Chinese armed forces.

China's military support is not limited to hardware but also includes strategic defense partnerships. The long-standing military alliance between China and Pakistan is a prime example of this collaboration. This partnership features extensive defense cooperation, joint projects, and mutual military exercises, aimed at enhancing the operational capabilities of both nations. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), includes elements that support defense logistics and regional security, further cementing the strategic relationship (Balcerowicz et al., 2022; Boni, 2019).

Similarly, China's engagement with Nepal includes strategic defense collaborations that focus on improving border security and addressing regional threats. These partnerships involve joint military exercises and strategic consultations, enhancing Nepal's defense capabilities and aligning its security strategies with Chinese interests.

China leverages military diplomacy to strengthen its influence across South Asia. This involves hosting defense officials from South Asian nations, conducting joint military drills, and participating in strategic dialogues. Through these initiatives, China builds robust relationships with regional military leaders, shares expertise, and promotes its advanced defense technologies. Joint exercises often focus on critical areas such as counter-terrorism, maritime security, and disaster relief, enhancing the operational readiness of participating countries and aligning their defense strategies with China's goals.

In addition to diplomatic efforts, China provides military training programs to South Asian armed forces. These programs cover various aspects of military operations, from tactical training to advanced technology use. By offering this training, China helps build the capacity of South Asian militaries, aligning them more closely with Chinese defense practices and technology (Rustam et al., 2019).

China's military involvement in South Asia is intrinsically linked to its strategic interests. By enhancing the defense capabilities of South Asian nations, China aims to create a favorable security environment that supports its broader geopolitical objectives. This includes safeguarding trade routes, protecting investments, and countering regional rivals. The strategic presence of Chinese military projects also

serves to counterbalance the influence of other major powers, such as the United States and India.

The establishment of Chinese military bases and facilities, such as the naval base in Djibouti, underscores China's intent to secure global maritime routes and project power into the Indian Ocean. This presence supports China's interests in South Asia by enhancing its ability to protect maritime trade and strategic assets (Li and Lei, 2019).

China's military projects in South Asia bring both opportunities and challenges. While they enhance regional security and foster defense cooperation, they also pose potential risks. Issues such as debt dependency, strategic rivalries, and regional tensions can arise from China's extensive military involvement. The growing presence of Chinese military assets may lead to increased competition and friction with other regional powers, particularly India. Additionally, concerns over sovereignty and foreign influence can affect domestic politics within South Asian countries, shaping their foreign policy decisions.

China's growing involvement in South Asia, marked by infrastructure investments and loans in countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Maldives, underscores its strategic approach to regional economic development and connectivity (Zhao et al., 2019). These investments, while aimed at enhancing economic growth, have led to concerns about debt dependency and economic control, as evidenced by Sri Lanka's struggles with Chinese loans (Fang & Qamruzzaman, 2021).

China's soft power strategy includes cultural diplomacy and economic engagement, with initiatives like Confucius Institutes in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan promoting Chinese culture and language. This soft power, coupled with cultural events such as the Asia Arts Festival and a significant Chinese diaspora, enhances China's regional influence (Brazys and Dukalskis, 2019).

China's recent engagement in Afghanistan reflects its broader objective to foster regional stability and enhance connectivity with both South Asia and Central Asia (Anwar, 2020). This involvement also addresses security concerns related to China's Xinjiang region, highlighting its strategic interests in regional stability and economic development (Gong, 2019).

In summary, China's military initiatives in South Asia encompass a range of activities, from providing advanced equipment and technology to fostering strategic partnerships and engaging in military diplomacy. These efforts reflect China's strategic objectives in the region, enhancing its influence and contributing to regional security dynamics. However, the associated challenges highlight the complex interplay of regional politics and international relations (Singh, 2024; Haas, 2020; and Söderbaum, 2012).

## 5. Possible challenges: The China-US competition

The escalating rivalry between China and the United States is reshaping South Asia's geopolitical and economic landscape, presenting numerous challenges for the region. As these global giants vie for dominance, South Asian countries are grappling with a complex array of issues that affect their economic stability, strategic alliances, and diplomatic engagements (Spandler, 2020).

China's burgeoning influence in South Asia is evident through ambitious projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). These initiatives are perceived by the US as strategic moves aimed at expanding China's regional influence and altering the balance of power. In response, the US has intensified its engagement with South Asian nations, seeking to counter China's growing presence by bolstering diplomatic and economic ties with countries like India and Japan. This rivalry forces South Asian countries into a delicate position where they must balance their economic relationships with China against their security alliances with the US, often leading to increased regional tensions.

The economic ramifications of this competition are significant. The US-China trade conflict has disrupted global trade patterns, affecting South Asian economies that are heavily integrated into Chinese supply chains. In an effort to counterbalance China's economic clout, the US has proposed alternative trade deals and investment opportunities, but these come with their own set of requirements and implications. South Asian nations must navigate these economic shifts carefully, striving to sustain growth and stability amid the changing global trade environment (Chatterji, 2019).

Military aspects of the rivalry add another layer of complexity. Both superpowers are enhancing their military engagements in South Asia, which can lead to heightened regional tensions. The US has increased military assistance to its South Asian allies, such as India, through advanced weaponry and joint exercises aimed at countering China's military influence. Concurrently, China's military support to countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka strengthens its strategic foothold in the region. This arms race and increased military expenditures can escalate regional tensions and raise the risk of conflict.

Diplomatically, the competition introduces significant challenges for South Asia's stability. The region's countries often find themselves aligning with either China or the US to capitalize on economic or security benefits, which can create divisions and complicate collaborative efforts on regional issues. This alignment affects their participation in international forums and organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. The rivalry influences global policy-making processes, impacting South Asia's ability to address issues like climate change, terrorism, and border disputes effectively (Ullah Khan et al., 2020).

In addition, the China-US rivalry presents multifaceted challenges for South Asia, influencing its economic development, security dynamics, and diplomatic relationships. As the two superpowers vie for influence, South Asian countries must navigate their relationships with both China and the US, balancing the associated benefits and risks. The ongoing competition will continue to shape the region's policies and future prospects, with profound implications for its stability and growth.

## 6. Possible challenges: The China-India rivalry

The competition between China and India, two dominant forces in Asia, presents numerous challenges for South Asia, affecting not only their bilateral relations but also the broader regional landscape. This rivalry manifests in several critical areas, including territorial disputes, economic competition, and strategic maneuvering, all of which have significant implications for regional stability and development.

A primary source of friction between China and India is their unresolved border dispute, particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas. This contentious boundary has led to numerous confrontations and skirmishes, fostering an environment of distrust and hostility. These clashes strain diplomatic relations and heighten regional tensions, as both nations bolster their military presence and strengthen border defenses. The ongoing border disagreements perpetuate a cycle of military readiness and strategic posturing, contributing to an atmosphere of insecurity in the region (Hameed (2018); and Shahzad and Sunawar, 2023).

Economically, the rivalry influences South Asia's development trajectory. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to enhance regional connectivity and infrastructure through significant investments across Asia. However, India views the BRI with skepticism, perceiving it as a strategic attempt by China to extend its influence and challenge India's regional dominance. In response, India has pursued its own initiatives, such as the Act East Policy, which seeks to enhance economic ties with Southeast Asia and counterbalance China's influence. This competition for economic leverage drives both nations to seek out investment opportunities and trade partnerships, shaping the economic policies and development strategies of South Asian countries.

Strategically, the rivalry extends into military and diplomatic realms. Both China and India are modernizing their armed forces and forging strategic alliances to assert their influence. China's military cooperation with Pakistan, including arms transfers and joint exercises, is seen by India as a direct challenge to its security. Conversely, India's increasing strategic partnership with the United States and its involvement in security forums like the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) are perceived by China as efforts to curb its rise. This ongoing

competition fuels an arms race and escalates military expenditures, further straining regional relations and diverting resources from crucial development initiatives (Malecka, 2020).

The impact of the China-India rivalry also affects regional diplomacy and cooperation. South Asian countries often find themselves in a difficult position as they attempt to balance their relationships with both China and India. This geopolitical balancing act can lead to pressure on these countries to align with one side or the other, complicating their foreign policies and regional collaborations. For example, nations like Nepal and Sri Lanka must navigate their economic ties with China while maintaining strategic relationships with India. This delicate balance can create friction and hinder collective efforts to tackle regional issues, such as climate change, trade, and security. Meanwhile, the China-India rivalry poses significant challenges for South Asia, influencing its economic strategies, security dynamics, and diplomatic relations. The competition between these two major powers affects regional stability and development, highlighting the need for careful management of relationships and collaborative approaches to address shared challenges. Balancing these complex interactions is crucial for maintaining regional harmony and fostering sustainable growth amidst the ongoing geopolitical competition.

## Results

The analyses conducted by Fatima Shah and Dr. Rizwana Jabeen underscore the significant impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on South Asian integration. Both experts agree that while the BRI fosters economic ties through infrastructure projects, it also presents challenges such as debt dependency and geopolitical tensions. They highlight a noticeable shift in China's regional strategy and stress the necessity for managing regional relationships and geopolitical complexities to enhance stability and integration.

Dr. Jabeen emphasizes that China's infrastructure investments promise economic growth but also raise concerns about debt dependency and regional tensions. She notes that defense and strategic agreements with countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka deepen geopolitical ties but might exacerbate regional rivalries. Dr. Jabeen advocates for increased transparency and dialogue to improve Pakistan's diplomatic standing. Dr. Shah echoes these sentiments, recognizing the BRI's potential for economic development while cautioning against issues related to sovereignty and debt. She recommends managing strategic partnerships and navigating global influences to achieve regional stability and integration.

Dr. Shah's recommendations for enhancing South Asian integration include increasing economic collaboration, addressing historical grievances, and strengthening regional organizations like SAARC. She emphasizes fostering people-to-people connections and

exploring new cooperation avenues to improve regional stability and integration.

Safdar Siyal discusses China's evolving relationship with Afghanistan, noting historical security concerns and recent cautious engagement following the Taliban takeover. Despite a 2016 BRI agreement, project implementation has faced challenges due to instability. China's cautious approach aims to stabilize Afghanistan to support BRI and CPEC success, focusing on economic benefits and security while maintaining diplomatic flexibility.

Dr. Kaiser Bengali highlights the importance of resolving core regional issues, such as the Kashmir conflict, for South Asian integration. He critiques Pakistan's management of CPEC, noting problems with project planning and debt management that impact regional stability and integration. Dr. Shah and Dr. Bengali both stress the need for careful management of Pakistan's strategic partnerships and domestic stability to leverage economic opportunities fully.

Interviews with Dr. Malik Munir Ahmed Kasuri provide insights into China's strategic interests in South Asia. Dr. Munir discusses China's historical ties and strategic ambitions through the BRI, noting its role in countering global powers like the U.S. Dr. Kasuri elaborates on China's evolving role since the early 2000s, highlighting strategic competition with the U.S. and concerns over debt sustainability and geopolitical leverage.

Dr. Naeem contextualizes the evolution of Sino-South Asian relations, focusing on China's infrastructure investments and their implications for regional integration. He underscores the challenges posed by geopolitical rivalries and the lack of a cohesive framework, advising Pakistan to address internal stability to enhance its strategic value.

Dr. Nosheen points out that while China's economic resources and infrastructure contribute to regional development, they also create dependencies and complex political alliances. Dr. Naeem sees potential in BRI's investments for regional connectivity, provided South Asian countries align their policies. Yang (2014) and Ali (2020) support BRI's role in improving trade and economic zones, but Common (2021) and Hainz et al. (2020) caution about debt burdens and the need for transparent governance.

The interviews reveal the interconnected nature of economic, geopolitical, and diplomatic factors affecting South Asia's integration and China's role. Dr. Rizwana Jabeen suggests that Pakistan-China relations may evolve with South Asian integration, advocating for broadening diplomatic ties and engaging in regional initiatives. Dr. Munir highlights China's strategic ambitions and historical context, emphasizing the BRI's dual role in fostering integration while creating geopolitical tensions. Dr. Malik Munir Ahmed Kasuri discusses the BRI's potential to enhance

connectivity and reshape geopolitical relations. Dr. Fatima Agha Shah recommends strengthening regional cooperation and balancing engagement with varying national perspectives.

Overall, the interviews present a nuanced understanding of China's influence, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach to navigate regional dynamics and global influences. The complex interplay of economic opportunities, geopolitical rivalries, and strategic partnerships underscores the importance of careful management and regional cooperation for achieving South Asian integration.

### Conclusion:

This study investigates the multifaceted impacts of China on South Asian integration, particularly focusing on economic ties, regional security, and diplomatic strategies.

The BRI has significantly reshaped economic ties in South Asia by enhancing infrastructure and connectivity, as noted by Safdar Siyal. The initiative has spurred investments and improved trade facilitation across the region. However, there are concerns about the sustainability of these benefits due to potential debt dependency and the bilateral nature of many agreements, which could hinder multilateral regional integration. Nosheen Wasi adds historical context, highlighting how past geopolitical events, such as the Sino-Indian War of 1962, have influenced China's current economic strategies. This historical perspective underscores the BRI's role in securing China's energy supplies and strategic partnerships, while also revealing how historical rivalries shape current economic interactions.

China's strategic and military activities have notably impacted South Asian regional security. Qaisar Bangali emphasizes that China's defense agreements and infrastructure investments, such as the development of Gwadar Port, bolster its geopolitical influence and challenge India's dominance. This has introduced increased strategic competition and regional tensions. Dr. Rizwana Jabeen further explains that while China's defense engagements offer security benefits, they also pose risks of exacerbating existing geopolitical rivalries, especially with India. This dual impact highlights the complexity of China's role in regional security, balancing between enhancing strategic ties and contributing to regional friction.

China's diplomatic and trade strategies, particularly through the BRI, have complex implications for South Asian regional cohesion. In this regard, China's emphasis on bilateral agreements rather than a cohesive multilateral framework undermines its role in bringing any regional unity. Even in bilateral agreements, there is lack of transparent and balanced diplomatic efforts. Given the global power rivalries, particularly between China and USA, balancing relationships with major powers are crucial for regional stability in South Asia.

South Asian countries, particularly Pakistan, should adopt a balanced diplomatic strategy that leverages economic benefits from China while addressing regional security concerns and fostering multilateral cooperation. Enhanced transparency in agreements and active participation in regional initiatives are recommended to navigate the complexities of China's involvement and promote regional integration. Limitations of the study include potential biases in primary data and the challenge of generalizing findings from interviews to broader regional dynamics. The study's focus on specific perspectives may also limit the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

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