

# China in India's Neighbourhood

Shifting Regional Narratives



EDITED BY ANITA SENGUPTA AND PRIYA SINGH

# CHINA IN INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD

This book explores the scope and extent of the growing Chinese influence in India's neighbourhood and its impact on India as well as on Asian power politics.

Through theoretical narratives and detailed case studies, it examines Chinese bilateral relationships in the Indian neighbourhood and looks at the extent and significance of Chinese influence through the lens of strategic, economic and infrastructural arrangements and Chinese interventions in South, Southeast, and Central Asia. The book takes into account regional voices and domestic political compulsions in understanding what they make of the Chinese narrative and examines how and whether the narrative has changed in recent years through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an instrument of Chinese public diplomacy. The volume also discusses how domestic narratives and compulsions in the Indian neighbourhood remain significant and how these, in turn, would impact the trajectory of Chinese public diplomacy. Intertwined through all these themes is a focus on the extent to which these could become potential flashpoints for India.

This book will be a useful resource for academics and researchers working on Asian geopolitics and geo-economics, Chinese foreign policy, Chinese politics, international relations of Asia, Asian dynamics and Asian studies.

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*Edited by Anita Sengupta and Priya Singh*

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Anita Sengupta*

A neighbourhood is defined as the area that surrounds someone's home or the people who live in this area. While neighbourhood remains a prominent point of analysis in contemporary studies, particularly urban studies, its delimitation remains unclear, and in any case there are always questions about whether it really matters in a globalised world. With the broadening of neighbourhoods to regional and global scales, further complexities are introduced. Here, strategic neighbourhoods multiply and contract, often encompassing diverse areas across multiple geographic spaces. Neighbourhoods are complicated by cultural landscapes that transcend boundaries and are constrained by political relationships that are ever changing. In certain senses, for an understanding of geopolitical neighbourhoods, mathematical definitions of the neighbourhood of a point, as a set of points where one can move some amount in any direction away from a point without leaving the set, seems more appropriate if the set itself is accepted as dynamic. Whether valuable or problematic, neighbourhoods remain a reality conceptually and in actual terms and it is assumed that prioritising and synergising relationships in the neighbourhood assumes significance and provides mutual benefit.

In India's case, the neighbourhood is complicated by problematic and competitive relations that have their roots in a fractured history and a group of intermediate states that are compelled to choose between alternatives. India now acknowledges primacy in the neighbourhood as critical for credibility in the global arena, which is reflected in her "Neighbourhood First" policy. This is, however, constrained by China's enhanced global stature and its growing presence in India's immediate and extended neighbourhood across South, Southeast, and Central Asia. This can be gauged through policies

adopted by Beijing towards countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the Central Asian republics, all of which, barring Bhutan, have also joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A combination of infrastructural financing and trade is being put in place by China to create new realms of influence across regions, which includes providing aid and investments at competitive interest rates. The surging requirement for humanitarian assistance, in the wake of the global pandemic and the concomitant isolationist stance of the United States and Europe, as well as the emergence of nongovernmental soft power in its ranks, has significantly abetted China in rewriting its narrative and strengthening its influence in various countries through foreign aid. Packaged as "gifts" reflecting the Chinese nation's tradition of internationalism and its ideal of universal harmony, and projected in terms of South-South cooperation, these have been accompanied by a narrative and an evolving set of practices that stress a parity of relationships that beguiles reality and aims at creating influence.

Recent developments in India's neighbourhood, like the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, created further possibilities for China, allowing a combination of political and economic interests to come into play. China's key interest in Afghanistan is access and Afghanistan offers China the opportunity to access not just Iran and Pakistan, but also the Middle East and Africa. However, there has been a certain level of caution in the level of Chinese engagement, given its experiences with pursuing investment opportunities in infrastructure in areas of endemic violence. The winding up of the American presence in Afghanistan and the subsequent American focus on contiguous Central Asian states has also posed questions for the Chinese in Central Asia, as there are substantial Chinese investments in rail and road connectivity, energy connectivity, trade promotion, and industrial development and people-to-people projects. China's attempts to create new realms of influence through infrastructure finance, the creation of multilateral development funds and banks like Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and markets have played a complex role in determining the contours of the relationship between the Central Asian states and China. A similar combination of partnerships in banking, telecommunications, ports, railways, and other projects in Iran is moving towards creating a Chinese foothold in the country. All of these are in addition to China's growing influence in South and Southeast Asia and are potential flashpoints for India in her neighbourhood.

There has, however, always remained a note of caution about these 'infrastructural alliances,' with the recognition that dependence on the Chinese comes at a price. Like in other parts of the world, with greater involvement of the Chinese, debt has been mounting, leading to failure of debt servicing. This has become a major problem in many Asian countries like Sri Lanka

and Nepal, where the level of Chinese control over the lion's share of the economy has been increasing. There has also been rising anger and discontent among local populations against Chinese economic ventures or infrastructure development, which are not being perceived as beneficial for local economies. Even in Pakistan, Chinese penetration of the economy without any noticeable benefits to the local population has elicited a negative reaction, leading to the closure of consular services in the Chinese Embassy at Islamabad in February 2023. Finally, Chinese border incursions have been occurring even in countries like Nepal and Bhutan, which have led to local protests putting the pro-China lobbies in the government in a spot. Despite this, Chinese influence has strengthened over the subcontinent and beyond in an unprecedented manner and scale. During the last round of border stand-off between India and China, India's immediate neighbours not only did not take sides, but some, such as Nepal and Pakistan, have even taken steps that have been far from friendly. The dragon's footsteps have never been more entrenched in India's neighbourhood, and it warrants being studied in greater detail for that reason alone, since it would influence India's own position in the neighbourhood.

This volume deliberates on the scope and extent of Chinese penetration in India's neighbourhood through theoretical narratives and detailed case studies that examine Chinese bilateral relationships in the Indian neighbourhood and the extent and significance of Chinese influence through the lens of strategic, economic, and infrastructural arrangements and Chinese interventions in South, Southeast, and Central Asia. The focus is not on the Chinese narrative, but on what India's neighbourhood makes of that narrative and therefore the extent to which it affects the Indian position within the extended neighbourhood. It is also about the extent and significance of these narratives in terms of the wider storylines of the changing global order, for instance, considering China's focus on integrating an economically interconnected South Asia and the extent to which asymmetric power relations have affected this remaking, particularly in terms of the pandemic years. There is also a focus on how and whether the narrative has changed in recent years through debates on the changing nature of the BRI as an instrument of Chinese public diplomacy. In essence, it is about how regional narratives and domestic political debates centred around Chinese presence would have an impact on the larger Asian power politics and on India in particular.

The volume combines historic narratives of an extended neighbourhood and interlinked social and economic relations with an understanding of how diplomacy and politics transformed these narratives to reflect policy prescriptions. Individual articles focus on comprehensive Chinese partnerships in the neighbourhood, reflecting a range of common, conflicting, and parallel interests and declared common policies on significant international

and regional issues. The volume illustrates how the reimagining of these relationships that the Belt and Road Initiative envisages and the significance of transit capacity and trade in this equation is balanced with a carefully calibrated soft power policy and alternative financial institutions. However, the focus is also on how domestic narratives and compulsions in the Indian neighbourhood remain significant and how these in turn would impact the trajectory of Chinese public diplomacy. Intertwined through all of these themes is a focus on the extent to which these could become potential flash-points for India.

The volume begins with an understanding that neighbourhoods have a dynamic of their own that defines great power politics and then moves on to examine this in terms of various neighbourhoods. It concludes with a final chapter that provides an interesting comparison of the evolving nature of Chinese relationship in the immediate neighbourhood of the Asian regions in Central Europe, where a similar pattern of domestic political compulsions drives the narratives and nature of bilateral relationships. It examines these themes in their entirety across a neighbourhood that spreads from the south and southeast of Asia to the north and northwest of India. Much of the contemporary literature is focused on engagements in particular Asian regions, whereas a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese policy – and therefore its impact on Asian power politics in general and India in particular (given the reality of India's pivotal geographic position) – would require a focus on both the continental and the maritime regions in the Indian neighbourhood. The volume selects certain states from each of the regions as representative examples.

While individual chapters bring into focus social, cultural, political, and economic narratives that come into play in the understanding of China's relations with India's neighbourhood, this introductory chapter looks into the complexities of India's relationship with China in her neighbourhood and how that in turn impacts Asian geopolitics. Given the fact that the Indian neighbourhood extends across both the continental and maritime spheres, this introduction begins with an understanding of this interactive dyad that constrains Asian geopolitics.

### **Asian neighbourhoods as interactive dyads**

Luis Simon notes that Asian geopolitics must be visualised as an 'interactive dyad' and argues that the Indo-Pacific axis cannot be isolated from the continental dynamics as well as from other maritime regions beyond the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Simon 2013). Asia is today considered an interconnected geopolitical whole. This is evident from the fact that continental Asian powers like China are linking development in the interior of the continent

with the projection of maritime security. How the withdrawal of American troops from continental Asia would impact its largely maritime influence in the region remains to be seen, but Simon argues that this would lead to greater geopolitical volatility. In terms of the Indian position, this would mean connecting the Eurasian hinterland to the Indian Ocean by creating maritime routes in the Indian Ocean and overland connectivity between the Indian Ocean and its hinterland. The maritime space is not well connected to the interior of the continent, with the consequence of domination by extraregional powers to the exclusion of regional Eurasian land powers. As American withdrawal makes the possibility of increasing Chinese influence over continental Asia a distinct possibility, the necessity of increasing strategic depth in the Indian Ocean is becoming important for India. There is a variance between the official Chinese and Indian visions. The Chinese policy is based on the narrative that China is developing national projects, which it hopes will collectively deliver the aim of overland and maritime connectivity for China. India, on the other hand, professed the aim of regional development both in the Eurasian and the Bay of Bengal/Indo-Pacific regions that will connect the landlocked regions with maritime regions and lead to a better sense of community and connectivity that also existed historically. For India, this geopolitical framework is known as SAGAR, which stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region.

In this connection, it is necessary to take note of Indian alternatives in the background of the many popularly named “New Silk Road” initiatives, which refer to a variety of visions for formalising transit flows across Asia. Among them are the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative, the American “New Silk Roads,” and the Russian-led efforts to reconnect through the Eurasian Economic Community. Financial institutions, like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), set up with 57 Asian, European, South American, and African states, including China and India, have been supporting these logistical developments. AIIB supports China’s logistic vision of the BRI, with the aim to bring South Asian economies closer to China, Central Asia, and West Asia. The various New Silk Road initiatives also provide opportunities for exploring the multifaceted impact of trans-state corridors of human, resource, and ideational transit, and are contingent on the assumed acquiescence of the participating states to varied modes of overland transit in the interest of collective gain (Sengupta 2019). Within the framework of the New Silk Roads, there were a number of strategies. The New Silk Road strategies were planned by the United States and the European Union in view of the opportunities for overland connection between China, India, the Middle East, Europe, and Russia, which would result in revenue formation for the Central Asian states and particularly sustainable development of Afghanistan after US withdrawal (US Dept. of State

2016).<sup>1</sup> From the US perspective, a South Asia-Central Asia transit corridor was foreshadowed by the Northern and Southern Distribution Networks for the provision of supplies for Afghanistan's military operations and included a number of infrastructural projects to facilitate the transport of resources (Samaddar and Sengupta 2019).

While the Chinese alternative vector of trade and transit has been in place ever since the independence of the Central Asian states, it was expressed in terms of a consolidated "Silk Road" during President Xi's multistate tour of the states (Sengupta 2016). The explicit use of the term was predicted by many years of intense economic engagement, where trade grew from \$527 million in 1992 to \$40 billion in 2012 (Diener 2015). As Samaddar and Sengupta (2019) argue, as this trade required infrastructural development, it also offered a vector of mobility. Rail lines, roads, airports, and pipelines were part of this infrastructural initiative. The Kazakhstan-China pipeline, which is China's first direct import pipeline and the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, was one of its most significant efforts. One Belt One Road (OBOR) or BRI has a transcontinental (Silk Road Economic Belt) and maritime (Maritime Silk Route) component. Much of the transcontinental route falls within areas of traditional Russian influence and regions where Russia is bidding to refashion a common economic zone in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (Sengupta 2017).

Global logistic visions that encompass entire continents and beyond are one part of the present-day logistics story; the other part of logistics are the significant geopolitical and geo-economic challenges to connectivity in areas where these infrastructural projects operate. The Indian neighbourhood is no exception. India would have to negotiate its own logistical space against the backdrop of these complexities, both in terms of the emergence of transcontinental logistics spaces and numerous "Silk Road" strategies supported by a number of states (Sengupta 2019). Here, India has been faced with constant negotiation between its spaces to the east and southeast and its alternative connects in the west and northwest based on its "pivotal" geographical position, which allows access to both its east and west on the one hand, and to maritime and continental routes on the other (Sengupta 2019). Within this context, one needs to examine India's ability to connect with broader and sometimes competing logistics visions, like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, for instance, that provides an alternative north-south connect to the International North-South Transport Corridor that India supports. Given the global reality of a China centred trade network overlapping with a Russian-led economic community engulfing both Asian overland and maritime routes on the one hand, and the emerging rules and regulations that would govern global

trade on the other, either the development of a logistic alternative or connecting with the existing frameworks would be an essential enabler for India's agenda of connecting with the regions to the northwest and southeast (Sengupta 2019). And here, an understanding of the Chinese agenda for both the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (the overland connect) and the port of Hambantota is significant.

Part of the BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was one of President Xi's flagship projects. CPEC was projected as symbolic of the long-term cooperation between the two states. It began in 2015 with an initial investment of \$46 billion which was subsequently increased to \$62 billion in two years. Though beset with problematic issues, including the economic disparity between China and Pakistan and security issues and opposition in Pakistan, it has not been discontinued. Also, CPEC, which aims to connect Xinjiang with the Pakistani port of Gwadar, passes through difficult earthquake-prone regions, partly through territory that is disputed. Added to this is the lack of infrastructure and finance for infrastructure in Pakistan, which creates uncertainty about Pakistan's ability to return the loans and complete dependence on Chinese investment. Gwadar is located in Baluchistan, opposite Oman and the Strait of Hormuz. About 70 kilometres to the west is the Iranian border, where the port of Chabahar is being developed by India. Gwadar is also situated at a distance from Pakistan's principal industrial centres and was until recently a fishing village in an enclave that Pakistan bought from Oman in 1958. Given its situation, linking the port to China would mean crossing the entire length of Pakistan, including the Karakoram Range in the north, which is extremely difficult terrain for building a pipeline. Added to this is the fact that the pipeline is highly susceptible to terror attacks from the Baluch nationalists who are opposed to the corridor. Ensuring security would mean the deployment of high numbers of security personnel. The port would also have to be dredged in order to accommodate oil tankers and its handling capacity would have to be increased. All of these factors bring into focus the necessity of an analysis of China's intense interest in the project.

Here, most analysts point to geopolitical reasons. David Brewster, for instance, argues that the establishment of the overland corridor to the Indian Ocean would radically transform the Indian Ocean region by opening it up to Chinese influence. He notes that this opening could create unprecedented geopolitical consequences for the region where India is now increasingly attempting to play a more dominant role. Also, it remains to be seen whether this corridor would provide better access to the interior parts of China (Brewster 2017). Here, the general argument tends towards the fact that the proposed pipeline and transportation corridor is more a symbol of cooperation than a fully achievable goal. Jeremy Garlick argues that the aim

of Chinese engagement with Pakistan through the CPEC is an attempt at balancing its regional rival, India, based on a long-term strategic assessment of physical geography, which he terms as geositional balancing. Garlick goes on to argue:

This concept is based on traditional Chinese notions of geographical space, and is developed, as Henry Kissinger points out, from the tactics of encirclement in the Chinese game of *weiqi* (called *go* in Japan). Geositional balancing is a system of putting dozen ‘marker’ stones in key geographical positions for potential future use and as hedge against possible conflicts. The aim is for China to strengthen its long term long term geopolitical position vis-à-vis rivals (in this case India) without great risk and despite appearances to the contrary, excessive financial expense.

(Garlick 2018)

Another motivation for the CPEC was to build an alternative to the chokepoint at the Strait of Malacca and the South China Seas. The Strait of Malacca is identified as a stretch of water that can be blockaded, thus preventing vital supplies from reaching China. This is significant, as around 89% of China’s oil and gas supplies come through the strait. In economic terms also, there is some claim that the overland route is cheaper and shorter. Also, Gwadar is situated on the Persian Gulf next to Iran and this, along with the recent 25-year China-Iran deal, would signify that China is keen to transport at least part of its oil and gas through this pipeline. However, as Garlick argues, it is geositional balancing that seems to be the most important reason for the Chinese involvement in the port. According to Garlick, geositional balancing seeks to establish “physical footholds in selected countries, with a view to establishing a stronger long term geo strategic position with regard to a regionally more powerful rival, in this case India.” Its aim is to maintain a non-military position at selected sites such as commercial ports.

However, not all studies reflect the negative aspects of the Corridor. While pointing to some of the difficulties that the Corridor would encounter (which includes the opposition to the Corridor in Baluchistan and resultant security threats; terrorism from insurgent groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Xinjiang; challenges from other powers interested in the region; geographical conditions like high altitude and poor weather), Riaz Ahmad et al. argue that CPEC is a comprehensive development agreement. It not only establishes “economic and strategic connectivity between China and Pakistan but has the potential to involve other sub-regions of Asia that could play a key role in improving the area’s strategic and economic environment” (Ahmad 2020). They go on to argue that CPEC will pave the way for the integration of remote markets in the South Asian regions and also create the possibility of financial investments in addition to creating better people-to-people

contacts and relations between the two states (Ahmad 2020). Similarly, Massarrat Abid and Ayesha Ashfaq argue that the Corridor is a “game changer project” that will function as a “primary gateway for trade between China and Africa and the Middle East” and be beneficial for Pakistan (Abid and Ashfaq 2015). In their article “Betting Big on CPEC,” Xiangming Chen et al. note that, given the economic potential and social impact of the project, the government in Pakistan would remain committed to the project despite leadership changes (Joseph and Tariq 2018).

Similarly, the port of Hambantota is now part of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) proposed by Chinese president Xi Jinping in October 2013 during a speech to the Indonesian Parliament. This Maritime Silk Road passes through the cities of Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Haikou, Beihai, Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Colombo, Kolkata, Nairobi, Athens, and Venice. Its maritime space includes the East China Sea, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea. In Indian strategic thinking, the Maritime Route has been identified as a repackaging of the “string of pearls” strategy. This position is a reflection of the position taken by C. Raja Mohan in his *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*. Here, he argues that the land competition between China and India will spill out to the ocean and the Indo-Pacific is becoming a new geographical space for this contest (Mohan 2012). It has deepened maritime competition between India and China, as India is apprehensive about greater Chinese engagement in its neighbourhood. China, on the other hand, is impeded by the absence of naval bases, which restricts its capacity to provide security in the Indian Ocean region as well as to protect its energy routes (Holmes and Yoshihara 2008).

China’s promotion of two corridors (continental and MSR) as part of its evolving regional geostrategy and the fact that India lies on both the Maritime Silk Route and the Southern Silk Route poses opportunities and challenges for India. Samaddar and Sengupta (2019) argue that a refusal by India and the MSR’s acceptance by ASEAN and a majority of South Asian states would leave India as an outlier and send a clear signal of India being opposed to China. India’s own declared intent to attract massive Chinese investment capital in several industrial parks across the country has perhaps further complicated the issue. Such contradictions suggest that India would look closely at the evolution of the MSR proposal, as it needs to be an essential part of an emerging new geo-economic trend in Asia’s political economy. According to analysts, India has the option of simultaneously conceptualising other strategic options with Japan and ASEAN to present alternative regional initiatives and looking for collaboration with organisations like the SCO. It is further argued that if through the MSR important neighbours like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka drift into the Chinese orbit, it would signify a grave setback to India’s traditional conception of the subcontinent as a

privileged sphere. This would in effect mean that nearly every Indian neighbour in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) littoral would have strong economic ties with mainland China, making it difficult for these smaller states to resist internalising Chinese norms for Asian security (Samaddar and Sengupta 2019). In view of this new “geography of logistics,” analysts like Deborah Cowen have argued that security will be reimagined in the context of production and trade.

No longer lodged in a conflict between territorial borders and global flows, national security is increasingly a project of securing supranational systems. The maritime border has been a crucial site for experimentation and a spate of new policy is blurring “inside” and “outside” national space, reconfiguring border security and reorganizing citizenship and labour rights.

*(Cowen 2010)*

This also implies a reimagination of Asian neighbourhoods, which the next section will focus on.

### **Reimagining Asian neighbourhoods**

Conceptually, advancing maritime connectivity in the Indo-Pacific and extending it further to East Africa and on to the Mediterranean is in accordance with India’s own broader maritime economic vision. However, according to the prevalent narrative, MSR should be understood as part of a rising China’s attempt to “reorder Asia”. Analysts note that China is attempting to create trade and economic relationships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries through trade, port, and continental land bridges to counteract the United States’ influence and to draw the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) littorals within its sphere of influence. This line of thinking underlines Chinese proposals to develop the Kunming Railway to connect China–Singapore and other countries in Southeast Asia, as well as the recently commissioned oil and gas pipelines and proposed railway line connecting the Rakhine coast of Myanmar with Kunming. The MSR proposal complements infrastructural initiatives and allows landlocked southwest China’s access to markets in Southeast Asia. Some analysts also perceive that the MSR is part of a Chinese reassurance stance to “diffuse the tension” on China’s maritime periphery after a period of uncertainty over Chinese maritime behaviour. It is moreover viewed as a policy to complicate the US’s rebalancing strategy by “softening” ASEAN elites’ renewed interest in reaching out to the US, Japan, and, perhaps, even India (Singh 2014).

The Maritime Silk Route envisages a system of linked ports, infrastructural projects, and special economic zones in Southeast Asia and the northern Indian Ocean. As David Brewster argues, while much of the discussion is focused on ports, infrastructure, and manufacturing facilities, probably of greater significance is the development of new production and distribution chains across the region, with China at its centre. He goes on to argue that, if implemented, it could bind countries of the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean closer to the Chinese economy (Brewster 2014). Several states in the Bay of Bengal region, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives, have expressed their desire to be part of the Maritime Silk Route and in principle agreed to Chinese investments in ports and infrastructure. Brewster argues that, while the Chinese position has been that these investments are purely economic, it is clear that this economic involvement with the Bay of Bengal littoral states and control over port facilities would have a strategic impact. However, he goes on to note that these relationships have not been without their problems. Despite a close defence and strategic relationship, Myanmar has never allowed China to develop a military presence in the country, Bangladesh has opted for international investors for the Sonadia and other ports, and fears of “debt trap diplomacy” have become significant in Sri Lankan nationalist narrative, with demands for the return of control of the Hambantota port.

The port of Hambantota was intended to transform a small fishing village into a major shipping hub with Chinese financing. However, Sri Lanka could not pay back the loans and, in what was seen as a debt-for-equity swap in 2017, control over the port was handed over to China through a 99-year lease. Chinese official news agencies marked this as “another milestone on the path of Belt and Road” (Hilman 2018). However, it has been argued that the port lease was not actually a classic debt-for-equity swap, as there was no cancellation of the five loans that Sri Lanka took from Exim Bank of China to construct the port. 70 percent stake of the port was leased to strengthen the country’s foreign reserves and pay off short-term debt payments. Umesh Moramudali argues that there was no cancellation of debt and no change of ownership. On the other hand, the leasing of the port reflects a far deeper economic issue stemming from reduction of trade and budget deficit (Moramudali 2020). However, this purely commercial explanation is not supported by all analysts. Maria Abi Habib, in an article called “How China got Sri Lanka to cough up a port,” notes that from the very beginning Sri Lankan officials said that “intelligence and strategic possibilities of the port’s location was part of the negotiations. She writes,

Initially moderate terms for lending on the port project became more onerous as Sri Lankan officials asked to renegotiate the timeline and add more financing. And as Sri Lankan officials became desperate to get

the debt off their books in recent years, the Chinese demands centered on handing over equity in the port rather than allowing any easing of terms.

*(Abi Habib 2018)*

This, along with the fact that the port is struggling to attract ships that prefer to dock at the nearby Colombo port, brings into question the viability of a new port at Hambantota. In fact, Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean has been interpreted both as a reflection of expanding trade interest and also as a means to increase its regional influence. Zack Cooper, for instance, argues that Chinese operations in the Indian Ocean during peacetime may resemble those of other great powers, with protection of trade routes being the main objective. However, he notes that Chinese shipping routes will be particularly vulnerable, as the sea lines of communication from the Middle East to China cannot be protected without substantial naval presence. In times of conflict, Cooper argues they are likely to create vulnerabilities as they pass close to Indian facilities at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the US facilities at Diego Garcia, and Australian facilities at Cocos and the Christmas Islands (Cooper 2018).

From India's maritime and naval perspective, with the full evolution of the MSR, additional access points and facilities would have to be developed straddling the proposed Chinese MSR (Scott 2013). The decision to accelerate India's collaboration in the construction of Chabahar Port on Iran's Makran coast by the Modi government could also have been partially driven by this quest to seek top-notch transit points in the Indian Ocean Rim. Moreover, in order to ensure greater durability and sustainability for its own power projection and expeditionary roles, India will need to invest more in long-haul vessels. Since the late 1990s, China has been pushing for a land corridor – termed the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). The BCIM will initially provide road connectivity between India's northeast and China's Kunming province, and later, rail connectivity. Despite an established track-2 BCIM dialogue, Delhi was lukewarm about the proposal. In view of India's restive northeast and complex relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar, Delhi was reticent because of two factors: the fear of Chinese economic domination in border regions and India's security concerns about its sensitive northeast. Moreover, an eventual fruition of the BCIM corridor would imply not only improved trade and connectivity, but could also open the door for China to upgrade infrastructure in port facilities in Bangladesh and Myanmar, key hubs in a potential MSR.

It is in this connection that India's effort to develop the Iranian port of Chabahar assumes significance. The port reflects Indian ambitions as a driver of infrastructure development and improved regional connectivity, particularly with Afghanistan (Pant 2018). The Chabahar port has been designed

to serve as an essential node to a multimodal transportation network for the movement of goods and passengers between Iran, Afghanistan, and India. During the final phase of its development, the port would be able to handle about 20 million tonnes of trade annually. Chabahar was imagined as an alternative north-south corridor linking India by sea to Afghanistan. It is therefore important to India both as a first step towards projecting itself as a regional infrastructure developer but also as a means to develop closer relations with Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. A trilateral transit agreement was signed with Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016 that allows passage of Indian exports through Iran to Afghanistan. Part of the International North South Corridor (between India, Iran, and Russia), the port is vital for India and Iran to reduce dependence on the Suez Canal. Chabahar is also situated on the South Asia Corridor, which links Southeast Asia to Europe.

Alleviating the bottleneck that Pakistan poses in terms of India's connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia has been identified as a significant alternative to Chinese efforts to redraw regional boundaries through the BRI (Pant 2018). China is trying to link with the Indian Ocean through Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal; it is also promoting the cause of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor and financing major projects in other littorals like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. India, in contrast, having grasped the changed geopolitical situation in relation to the security architecture of the Bay, has begun to engage and pay attention to the problems and apprehensions of the littorals. Along with its role as the major security provider in the region by regular patrols through the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), it has also embraced a strategy of developing a sense of community among the littorals along the Bay region. Participation is being encouraged through forums such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and Exercise MILAN (biennial naval exercise) that have ensured participation of the navies of the littorals. Another initiative is the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), for greater awareness to respond to any maritime challenge, particularly due to the existence of important Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in the Bay region. With the ever-increasing strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal region, there is a growing desire among the littorals that India should consolidate its relationships across the expanse. At the same time, India should realise and acknowledge increased Chinese presence as a given fact and accommodate this while continuing to mould a Bay of Bengal community.

With the recognition that the Bay is a strategic space with a shared history and "regional" institutions, the necessity of creation of boundaries and a model of governance has been brought into focus. On the other hand, the recognition of the Bay of Bengal as a "region" also reconceptualises South and Southeast Asia as distinct spaces traditionally divided by a line running through the middle of the Bay. Both underline the recognition that an