

Revisiting the Regional Security Complex of South Asia

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Abstract— *The paper criticises the existing theoretical framework of regional security complex of South Asia based on the primary research question: in what ways has the Chinese presence in South Asia reinforced or reiterated the major security concerns: bilateral relations of small states with India, Indian security concerns, maritime security, state sovereignty, issues created by debt diplomacy that affects the South Asian regional security complex? The regional security complex understands China as an external power which penetrates the regional security complex of South Asia based on the rivalry of India and Pakistan. However, the Chinese involvement in South Asia, particularly with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has changed these relationships. In this context, the paper argues China can be understood as an internal member of the complex, based on the criteria for categorising internal members. Therefore, the paper brings the case study of BRI and the selection of the case study method to conduct the research has constructed a broader scope to consider BRI and its development projects in South Asia and its effects over the security architecture of South Asia in terms of debt diplomacy and the influence of China on bilateral relations of India vis-à-vis small states of South Asia. In conclusion, the paper remarks that China is no longer penetrating the regional security complex based on power rivalry of Indo-Pakistan, but China is playing a pivotal role in the South Asian context by maintaining strong security interdependency with the members of the security complex while defining the complex.*

Keywords: *Belt and Road Initiative, China, Regional Security Complex, Security, South Asia*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since 2003, Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese politburo have talked of “rejuvenation” of the nation to restore what has been lost. Once China was regarded as the highest civilisation, and in 1800 China’s power reached its peak with the Qing dynasty: the Chinese economy dwarfed all other civilisations and “it was ten times larger than the Japanese economy and substantially mightier than the combined economies of Europe. China was indisputably the leading power in Asia, holding sway over a vast area of land and sea and dominating the social order” (Miller, 2017, p. 5).

The idea of Chinese rejuvenation should be understood in the light of historical facts. In 1949, after securing its

victory over Chiang Nationalist Party by the communists, the party came with the national slogan of rebuilding the nation after years of carnage and destruction. Since the national rejuvenation, rebuilding the country and claims all the communist leaders in China have invoked the glorious past. Subsequently, in the 1990s, the Chinese foreign policy was shaped by the Deng Xiaoping doctrine based on the principle of “hide your strength and bide your time” (Vito, 2007, p. 45). However, President Jinping changed the three-decade-long policy of keeping a low profile by introducing the “Chinese dream of rejuvenation” (Miller, 2017, p. 8). President Jinping’s agenda of rejuvenation: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first introduced in 2013, acknowledges the necessity for a robust economy to play a dynamic military role for self-defence and maintain influential connectivities with its neighbouring states.

Jinping stressed that “we must preserve the bond between rich countries and active military and strive to build a consolidated national defence” (Bougon, 2018, p. 4). The BRI conveyed Chinese influence to the South Asian region through its massive port developments and economic corridor projects. The Chinese government proposed several land and maritime routes under the BRI, including China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, China-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, Antwerp port, Piraeus port, the port of Djibouti, Gwadar port, Hambantota port development project, Colombo Port City in Sri Lanka (Macaes, 2019). A number of these projects are laid across the Indian Ocean and link countries in South Asia with other regions, and it is “expected to impact more than 60 countries, which is home to about 4.4 billion people, represents about 63 per cent of the world’s population” (Friends of the Earth U.S, 2016, p. 3).

II. THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX OF SOUTH ASIA

Buzan and others describe the idea of South Asian regional security complex *The Regions and Power*, and they define the complex based on the military tension between India and Pakistan in post-partition and particularly their power struggle over the Kashmir. The continuation of military pressure in border areas and Kashmir; several military outbreaks including first Kashmir war in 1947, India-Pakistan war 1965 and 1971 and Kargil war between India-Pakistan has shaped the regional security complex of South Asia. Significantly after successful nuclear tests of

the two countries, the regional security complex is shaped by the Indo-Pak rivalry.

According to Buzan and Waever, "South Asia is a clear example of a security complex centred on the rivalry between India and Pakistan" (Buzan, Waever, & Wilde, 1998, p. 14) and this rivalry invited many external powers to penetrate the region including China. With the Cold War politics, many external powers penetrate/influence to the regional security complex of South Asia, but none of these powers were able to define, reshape, organise or re-arrange the security patterns of the complex.

However, the paper attempts to identify the dynamic changes of the regional security complex of South Asia, particularly with the announcement of the Chinese led Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI has linked with many countries in South Asia, significantly with the small states in the region including Sri Lanka and Nepal. The arrival of BRI into South Asia has changed the dynamics of the regional security complex in some ways. Primarily, it diverted the centre of South Asian regional security complex towards smaller nations from Indo-Pakistan tension. The bilateral relations of small countries *vis-à-vis* India and the impact of security formations of small states gained substantial attention with the BRI. It does not mean that the security-military tension between India-Pakistan ceased to matter in the regional security complex of South Asia.

First, the smaller states in the region were all in one way or another tied to regional security complex because of their economic and social entanglements with India. Their collective weight would not begin to balance against India, and also these states do not want to bandwagon entirely with India. Even though many countries want to balance the power against India, "these nations could not do that due to economic and political interdependency over India and the size of the Indian market, economy, political power and territory" (Dahiya & Behuria, 2012).

The equation has changed with the BRI projects and particularly with the national interests of small states and their political desires to reduce dependency on India being acknowledged by China while providing massive financial, infrastructural and other political, military, economic assistance. These assistances have facilitated small states to reduce their dependency over India. Chinese government looked at South Asia as a geopolitical solution for the maritime issues in Malacca because countries like Sri Lanka could open new maritime trade routes for China to continue its trade while bypassing Malacca. In this context, BRI has altered the security patterns of the regional security complex and most significantly the bilateral relations *vis-à-vis* India and small states.

Second, the involvement of China in South Asia has questioned the current understanding of China as an external power which penetrates the regional security complex of South Asia. Chinese "creditor imperialism and debt diplomacy (Pandalai, 2018, p. 1)" have created new security issues within the small states while consolidating China's position in strategically advance geopolitical locations in the region. For instance, the BRI projects in Sri Lanka, including Hambantota and Colombo Port City has locked Sri Lanka into Chinese debt diplomacy while forcing local government to lease these ports back to China. "Similar policy has locked Nepal in an economic crisis, the Trans-Himalayan railway development projects, financial aid has questioned the sovereignty of the country, and China gains considerable political power in Nepal" (Regmi, 2017). However, the political behaviour of small states still welcomes China as an alternative to India despite its debt diplomacy. Indian interference at the domestic issues of small states and the mistrust of India on its neighbours have questioned the equation of bilateral relations of India with small states of the region. In this context, small states welcome China based on the mid and long term national and development interests of countries by bearing the cost of debt diplomacy. According to Miller, Chinese BRI is a necessary evil for small states of South Asia to secure their security and economic needs in the 21st century (Miller, 2017). These deviations of security patterns reshaped the bilateral relations of smaller states *vis-à-vis* India, and BRI projects linked China with the regional security complex of South Asia while creating deep interdependencies with the members of the complex.

The current theoretical understanding considers China as an external member of the regional security complex of South Asia. However, with the BRI, it is impossible to look at South Asian regional security complex while considering China as an external member due to massive Chinese engagement with the small states of South Asia and its impact on the security relations of the complex. China is no longer penetrating the regional security complex based on power rivalry of Indo-Pakistan, but China is playing a pivotal role in South Asian context by maintaining strong security interdependency with the members of the security complex while defining the complex. Therefore, the paper attempts to understand the regional security complex of South Asia while bringing China in as an internal member of the security complex. The primary research question is: in what ways has a Chinese presence in South Asia reinforced or reiterated the major security concerns: bilateral relations of small states with India, Indian security concerns and supremacy of the region, maritime security, state sovereignty, issues created by debt diplomacy that affects the South Asian regional security complex?

A. Strategic Positioning of Sri Lanka and BRI

The Indian Ocean region has turned an active zone of the current wave of international politics in many terms. With massive changes in the world economy, global trade, the Indian Ocean is becoming a vital energy and trade channel to connect Asian countries with West Asia and Europe. The Asia-Pacific region is upgrading its strategic value in terms of maritime connectivity route while moving towards the core of the world trade system while connecting the Gulf and African regions and other resource centres. Currently, the Indian Ocean region is listed as the most intensive sea trade route in the world (Jaishankar, 2017). Petroleum and the trade channels in the Indian Ocean can be considered as a strategic lifeline for many countries to secure their national interests, national security, international trade, and connectivity.

Sri Lanka is positioned in a geopolitically strategic location in the Indian Ocean, and historically the country marked connections with its trading partners: from China to the Middle East and Europe since the third century B.C as a pivotal player of the old silk route. As the third-largest body of water in the world, the Indian Ocean has strategic advantages and these advantages multiplied by Sri Lanka's natural deep-water harbour facilities which can handle the world's largest ships. "With the improvement of port and other infrastructure, Sri Lanka's strategic importance concerning sea-lane security and trade relations in Indian will rise further" (Weihua, 2018, p. 2).

From a strategic point of view, the island nation straddles a strategically important shipping lane, which is deemed as the busiest trade route in the world and it encouraged the Chinese BRI projects to be tied with Sri Lanka. Mainly China heavily depends on sea transportation to export its commodities to Europe and the rest of the world. Some 64 per cent of the global oil trade passes through the Indian Ocean, and China alone imports nearly two-thirds of its oil through this maritime corridor (Grace & Hao, 2018).

B. Intertwined National Interests: Sri Lanka and BRI

The primary assumption of the regional security complex theory is that "local sets of states exist whose security perceptions and concerns link together sufficiently close that their national security problems cannot realistically be considered apart from one another" (Buzan, 1991, p. 190). A set of countries have to maintain strong-durable amity/enmity relationships, and greater interdependency with each other to qualify as an internal member of the security complex and these countries cannot realistically address their national security problems without concerning others. These theoretical assumptions validate by the political decision of two countries: Sri Lanka and

China to be partners of the BRI based on the intertwining of these national interests.

First, dynamic changes in bilateral relations of Sri Lanka vis-à-vis India encouraged the post-civil war government of Sri Lanka to find alternatives to address and secure the national interests of the country. Notably, military victory against LTTE increased international pressure over the government of Sri Lanka. The USA, along with western countries, brought the resolution: Promoting Reconciliation and Accountability in Sri Lanka against the government of Sri Lanka. The Rajapaksa regime had sought political support from India to defeat the UN resolution. However, in 2012, during the Human Rights session, the government of India decided to vote against Sri Lanka. "Indian support over UNHRC resolution on human rights issues has significantly damaged the core values of bilateral relations between the two countries" (Kandaudahewa, 2014, p. 83). In this situation, the Sri Lankan government decided to strengthen its relationship with China to counter the resolutions by using Chinese veto power.

The foreign policymakers of the Rajapaksa regime stressed that "political, defence, security, economic, trade and the national survival will be the higher priorities of the government and to achieve that, Sri Lanka will preserve pragmatic foreign affairs with Asian nations comprising China, Japan and Pakistan" (Epa, 2016, p. 4). With that, Sri Lanka welcomed China and its BRI projects while creating a significant dependency and healthy relationship with China.

Similarly, Chinese national interests and the security concerns were intertwined with Sri Lanka, particularly in terms of geopolitical advancements. Chinese intention was to cut down their trade-in Malacca Strait due to the high cost, competition and the threats manifested by the western world, including the USA, UK and Japan. The political, military, economic and trade competition between USA and China increased the fear within the Chinese political body since 64 per cent of their maritime trade was conducted via Malacca Strait which was controlled by the USA. In that case, BRI targeted strategically important Hambantota: it is 4 212 nautical miles from Shenzhen, 3 862 nautical miles from Suez port, and close to Kenyan port and a gateway to the east and central Africa (Tonchev, 2018). The strategic presence of China in the Hambantota harbour cut down the trade cost of China. They can use it as a service midpoint of trade while improving supply chains across the region and it contributes to considerable growth in trade volumes. "This megaproject would slash approximately 1, 200 miles off the sea route from Suez to China and re-direct business

away from the Malacca Strait and Singapore” (Tonchev, 2018).

Before the construction of Hambantota harbour, the Colombo port served as a midpoint for international ships and cargo vessels, and it provided dockyard facilities for ships to refill food, water, fuel and services. However, limited operational power of Colombo port forced international ships to use ports in South India as a midpoint, and it had reduced the economic benefits for Sri Lanka. Therefore, the government of Sri Lanka decided to construct a new port which is located much closer to the international sea routes and can provide a wide range of facilities. The geopolitical location of Hambantota harbour is addressing the political and economic interests of Sri Lanka, and international ships can reach Hambantota harbour easily since it is located close to the shipping routes compared to other ports in Sri Lanka.

The criteria to qualify as internal members of the regional security complex theory have pointed out to the necessity of maintaining a high degree of interdependency and amity/enmity relationships. The intertwining national interests of Sri Lanka and China created a greater interdependency between the two states. The current theoretical understanding of the regional security complex of South Asia understand China as an external member, and according to the theory, external members cannot define, organise, construct or reshape the security patterns. The Chinese presence in Sri Lanka, intertwined national interests, the interdependency of two countries shifted Sri Lanka’s dependency away from India while creating a considerable military threat to India. Similarly, BRI projects in Sri Lanka have reduced the equation of bilateral relations of Sri Lanka *vis-à-vis* India. For example, during the 2009-2015 period, Sri Lanka did not sign a single MOU or any trade, economic agreement with India. However, the government of Sri Lanka had signed more than 18 MOUs in political, economic, military, trade and tourism sector with China including the eight major MOUs signed by two countries during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Sri Lanka in 2014 (Chaudhury, 2018). The changes in the security posture of South Asian regional security complex deepened the security concerns of India, while smaller states adjoined with China and its BRI. This helps China to reshape the security patterns of the region. From a Chinese perspective, building a strong interdependency with Sri Lanka was “a logical step for China as it confers a strategic advantage in protecting its interests in Indian Ocean region while providing strategic pivot in the underbelly of India” (Hariharan, 2013, p. 34).

For instance, “Chinese military participation in the Sri Lanka joint services exercise ‘Cormorant III- 2012’ which was conducted in Eastern coast of Sri Lanka aimed at

honing joint operational skills with the air force and navy in counterterrorism operations with the presence of military personnel from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Maldives” (ibid). This was recorded as one of the critical military exercises which were held in the Indian Ocean region with the absence of India. The continued military operations conducted by China along with smaller nations of South Asia and Pakistan with the absence of India has created a red alert for the security concerns of India. Notably, Chinese military activities in Hambantota harbour and the Indian Ocean region has reshaped the security patterns of the regional security complex of South Asia by changing the security and military alignments of smaller nations of South Asia. Previously, smaller states of South Asia considered India as the primary security provider and stability of the region was shaped by India as the regional hegemon. However, China was able to reshape these patterns through BRI.

C. Chinese Debt Diplomacy and Sri Lanka’s Strategic Bargaining with India

The BRI projects provided substantial space to China to redefine, reorganise the security region of South Asia. Mainly, the debt diplomacy and creditor imperialist aspects of the BRI projects has created security issues in smaller states of South Asia, and it forced countries to reorganise their security patterns and concerns in both bilateral and regional levels. The current financial crisis of Sri Lanka due to the debt diplomacy of China can be taken as one of the case studies to analyse the changing patterns of security within the South Asian regional security complex.

The debt aspects of the BRI projects have questioned the security of Sri Lanka in many ways. From a financial perspective, the debts can collapse the economic growth of the country, and in this context, the newly elected government (2015-present) was forced to open their market to competitive investments. “When government borrowing is not accompanied by enough economic growth and revenue generation to fully service the debts, it can generate a downward spiral that inevitably ends in the need for debts restructuring or reductions” (Hurley, Morries, & Portelance, 2018, p. 3).

Nevertheless, for Sri Lanka as a middle-income country, the redirection of the FDIs and infrastructure investments will cut down the debts and by 2025 national debts will be reduced by 8.9 per cent (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2018). Evidence in many countries including Argentina (2001), Ethiopia (1990-2011) and lessons of Latin American debt crisis appears to support the idea that debt-financed infrastructure investment can play a crucial role in catalysing economic growth. What matters is that the BRI projects in Sri Lanka created new security issues within the

country and particularly it has reshaped the current patterns of security relations of the region.

First, the Chinese control over the Hambantota port has questioned the sovereign decision making power and the territorial integrity of the country. Mainly, Chinese naval vessels and submarines started appearing in Sri Lankan ports and this created security issues within the Indian Ocean region, and mainly it challenged the security concerns of India. The gradual increase of Chinese military and political appearance in Sri Lanka forced India to change their foreign policy towards Sri Lanka to address the national security priorities of India while maintaining the order of regional security complex. Rather than promoting the ethnic lines between Sri Lankan Tamils and TamilNadu, the central government of India decided to strengthen state to state relations with the newly elected government of Sri Lanka. The government of India decided to enhance economic and political relations with Sri Lanka while carrying a moderate opinion on the issues of ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka. Notably, after 2016, the Indian investments in Sri Lanka spread across the entire country rather than focusing on the Northern part of Sri Lanka. For instance, the Indian government-funded emergency ambulance services which operate in major cities in Sri Lanka including Colombo, Galle, Matara and Kandy.

Second, foreign policy shifted in New Delhi, towards Sri Lanka, to avoid miscalculations or indifference because it can lead to China gaining a foothold in Hambantota and many other areas and sectors in Sri Lanka. "New Delhi realised that matching dollar to dollar in terms of investments or trade creation should not be the priority, but being seen as honest and considerate of Sri Lankan peoples interests and rights while changing the negative prospect towards India which constructed throughout the history (Jacob, 2015)."

The Chinese BRI projects and its involvement in Sri Lanka forced two governments: India and Sri Lanka to rethink, reshape bilateral relations between the two countries. The continuous Chinese presence and debt diplomacy of China forced the Sri Lankan government to develop their interdependency and relationship with India to secure its economy and the security concerns. From the Indian perspective, continued military presence and territorial claims of China over Sri Lanka forced the Indian government to reshape and reorganise their security relations with Sri Lanka.

In this context, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Sri Lanka in 2015, and the government decided to build 27000 new homes in Jaffna (Singh, 2018). To gain geopolitical advantage and to balance the Chinese development projects in Sri Lanka, the Indian government

decided to offer massive development projects in Sri Lanka including the development of railway lines from Trincomalee to Medawachchiya, Kankesanthurai Harbour development project and the oil excavation in Trincomalee harbour sea (Aliff, 2017).

The regional security complex highlights that internal members of the security complex cannot understand their national security without considering other partners due to high interdependency between one another. China led BRI projects to match with this theoretical presumption because of the BRI and Chinese presence in Sri Lanka. Mainly, the Chinese activities in Sri Lanka stressed that neither India nor Sri Lanka could address their security issues without each other and similarly, it proves that these two countries are not so independent as to neglect China. The selected case study pointed out that these security concerns of three states are intertwined with each other, and none of the countries could address their national security requirements realistically without concerning each other. In a broader context, China is a challenge to the security patterns of South Asia while gaining the control of strategically essential geolocations in the region. The BRI projects in Sri Lanka changed the military structure of the Indian Ocean, and now the Indian Ocean is turning to Sino-Indian Ocean (Niharika & Goyal, 2017).

With the BRI, countries like Sri Lanka are entangled with China, and it can be considered as a change of the security patterns. It has challenged the military supremacy of India while creating a military competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean region. The regional security complex theory of South Asia understood China as an external member which penetrates South Asian regional security complex. The contemporary security alignments and interdependency of Sri Lanka and China through BRI highlights that China can reorganise, redefine and rearrange the security patterns of the regional complex and especially bilateral relations of Sri Lanka *vis-à-vis* India. In this context, the case study identifies China as a part of the complex based on the criteria identified by Buzan et al. for having a clear understanding of the regional security complex of South Asia.

III. CONCLUSION

The regional security complex theory functions as a useful tool to analyse Chinese involvement and BRI effects on the security dynamics of South Asia. The theory has stressed that the external powers could penetrate a regional security complex, and Buzan et al. brought the example of Cold War politics to validate this argument. For instance, the Cold War politics and rivalry of India-Pakistan created a window for external powers to penetrate the regional security complex of South Asia. However, these external

powers are not capable of redefining, reorganising or reshaping the patterns of a regional security complex and without an invitation from an internal member which is involved with a regional power race, these external powers could not alter the dynamics in a particular regional security complex.

The conventional understanding of the theory did not identify the ability of external powers to reshape existing security patterns within a given complex. The paper has questioned the conventional understanding of theory and grounded China as an internal member of the regional security complex of South Asia. The political shift of China under the President Xi Jinping has introduced an umbrella of massive development projects: Belt and Road Initiative to reclaim its political supremacy of the world, particularly within the neighbouring regions including South Asia. The paper has looked at the BRI projects and its role in the context of small states of the region, significantly how it has changed the security posture of the small states.

The geopolitical reality of South Asia highlights that the small states are inevitably depending on India to address their political, economic and security needs. In this context, the small states are unavoidably subjected to the dominant power of India. Particularly India has interfered in the domestic politics of small states and India offered assistance to Nepal based on Indian political calculations while neglecting the needs of the government of Nepal (Regmi, 2017). Similar claims have been made by Sri Lanka during the post-civil war period, and notably, the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa criticised the political role of India and the decision of India to neglect Sri Lanka in the platform of UN.

The arrival of BRI into small states of South Asia can be understood within the framework of regional security complex theory. To qualify as an internal member of a particular regional security complex the individual players need to fit in the primary criteria of the theory which is "the local sets of states exist whose security perceptions and concerns link together sufficiently close that their national security problems cannot realistically be considered apart from one another (Buzan, Rizvi, & Foot, 1986, p. 21)." The national interest of the small states in South Asia and the national interest of the Chinese government under BRI mutually coexist with each other. For instance, the Chinese, through BRI, attempt to win the strategic position in Hambantota Sri Lanka: one of the critical geolocation in the maritime silk route as an alternative to Malacca dilemma. Sri Lanka welcomed BRI to reduce its dependency over India while maintaining healthy relations with China to secure the position of Sri Lanka in the UN. The massive infrastructure and substantial financial aid and assistance, which is placed on

small nations in South Asia under the BRI created a strong relationship between these South Asian countries and China. These relations and BRI projects have changed the Chinese role in the regional security complex of South Asia to a proactive member of the region who redefined the security patterns of the complex, particularly the bilateral relations of smaller states *vis-à-vis* India.

For instance, the massive debt of Sri Lanka under BRI and Chinese military presence in Sri Lanka forced India to change their foreign policy perspectives towards Sri Lanka. Previously, India has seen small states of the region as dependent on India and with the security issues which from BRI, India had to see the strategic values of the small states of South Asia, particularly strategic values of Sri Lanka and Nepal (Saran, 2017). Nepal's shift towards China brings political power next to Indian borders. In this context, the Chinese BRI projects forced the Indian government to maintain state-to-state relations with its neighbouring countries rather than shaping its foreign policy based on ethnic lines. According to the regional security complex theory, the BRI projects placed China in a strong position which could define, organise, and construct the security patterns of the regional security complex. The role of BRI in the South Asian region stressed that India could not think about its security without considering China and the behaviour of small states of South Asia. In this context, the paper emphasises that security perceptions and concerns of these countries are linked together sufficiently close, and their national security problems cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.

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