China in South Asia: A Case for a Predominant Power?

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Abstract:

Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have predicted during his time that China would one day awake from slumber and “astonish the world”. Although Napoleon might have steered away from victory towards the end of his reign, he seems to have been right about China. There are widespread concerns on the potential for China to emerge as a power that can change the international order. This is given the rapid nature of China’s economic growth until recently, its resilience in the face of the ongoing pandemic, sustained strengthening of military capabilities, slowing economies elsewhere, the prospect of China’s wealth and power despite the ongoing health crisis, and the US’ decrease in political and economic status in the region.

Extrapolating China’s future foreign policy moves remains a challenge. However preliminary overviews of China’s behaviour over the last decade or so displays its potentially dominant intentions- be it peaceful or coercive. When Deng Xiao-ping addressed the United Nations General Assembly in New York, 1974, the Chinese Defence White Paper denied any intention of the country seeking hegemonic dominance by stating: “China will never seek hegemony or engage in military expansion now or in the future, no matter how developed it becomes.” While China might not seek to become a global hegemon, there is no clear indication that it will not attempt to seek superiority or dominance over a specific region. China’s attention on the Doklam issue, Aksai Chin, etc., depicts their possible coercive intentions, while its soft power outreach and large economic investment projects in the South Asian region display an institutional rise. Confronted with diverging trajectories in China’s recent international relations, and assuming its continued rise post COVID19, it becomes essential to attempt to examine to an extent, China’s intentions and strategies, alongside how it will ultimately project its rise in the South Asian region- as a predominant power.

Though from Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and now to Xi Jinping, China has pursued the image of a power in status quo in the global sphere, its inherent border conflicts and contentions with its South Asian neighbours, particularly India, displays signs of China’s coercive intentions. With the rise of China’s political, economic, and military capabilities, it remains to be on the verge of constantly raising a challenge to strong powers like India. With this kind of growth, it is only imperative that one questions the rise of China, specifically as a predominant power in South Asia. Thus, this study aims to argue that China’s predominant rise might operate among the coercive, institutional, or cultural style. The paper also focuses on each of the three styles.

With competing strategies for China’s rise to power, it is important to learn and predict China’s leanings in the South Asian region. On one hand, China’s strategy leans towards the coercive style particularly with countries where it maintains a security tight relationship. The Sri Lankan government’s transfer of operations of the Hambantota Port to a Chinese majority-held joint venture for 99 years, its military interventions in Sikkim, China’s debt-trap diplomacy, and its land and border disputes with Bhutan, India, etc. find China’s coercive style ebbing.

On the other hand, China’s geopolitical rise in power and its scope of expanding in the region inevitably motivates it to shape the South Asian region in an organised and institutionalised pattern. The country’s investments in projects like the One Belt One Road (OBOR), Maritime Silk Road (MSR), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor (BCIM), and the China-Pakistan Occupied Kashmir Economic Corridor (CPoKEC) point towards its potential capability of mastering institutional statecraft, through infrastructural investments. Besides, China’s interest in SAARC gives it an edge in developing strong institutional ties with its South Asian neighbours.

Thirdly, China’s focus has always remained on constructing a powerful image for itself, through tactics that employ culture and soft power. On October 11, 2019, the visit of Chinese
Premier Xi Jinping to Mamallapuram, India opened up cultural ties between the Chinese Dragon and the Indian Elephant. This visit stood as an indicator of how both India and China played their cards of diplomacy through culture and soft power tactics. Further, China has concentrated on promoting the importance of its national language Mandarin. Today, all across the South Asian region, students study Mandarin funded by the Chinese State. With more consumption of Chinese goods, the common man in the South Asian region is quite familiar with the label “Made in China”, the Chinese government seeks to attract people in the region, with its culture, values, and products. Further, China’s emphasis on “Asia for Asians” since 2014 is also another indicator of its potential of employing culturally sound tactics to become a dominant power in the South Asian region.

The Chinese grand strategy has focussed on supplanting the dominance of the United States as the supreme military and economic power. However, this sheds light on the immediate question in hand. If the Chinese grand strategy aims at global dominance, then what are its aims as an emerging power in South Asia? The question is whether China would supersede South Asian countries through aggressive posturing, or project a benign yet influential presence in the region. On the other hand, there is a question of whether it will follow the route of institutionalised order.

Research Questions:

1. How could China rise to be a predominant power in the South Asian region?
2. Keeping in mind its rise in South Asia so far, how will it proceed in its trajectory? Will it pursue its current trajectory, or will it alter it?
3. If China alters its trajectory, which one is it likely to pursue-coercive, institutional, or cultural style?
4. What could China’s path be concerning India in the South Asian region, post COVID19?

Introduction:

“To see victory only when it is within the ken of the common herd is not the acme of excellence...What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins but excels in winning with ease.” - Sun Tzu

The South Asian countries are the site for diverse political, economic, and societal similarities and differences. With five of these eight countries bordering China, the extent of Chinese influence on them cannot be ignored. Thus, a critical study examining the extent of China’s role as a predominant player in the region is crucial.

Since China’s opening up and reforming its economy in 1978, it has averaged a 6.3 percent growth rate, one of the highest growth rates in the world. In 1978, China accounted for less than one percent of the world economy. Today, it is the second-largest economy and produces about 9.3% of the global GDP. Working its way consistently, China stepped into the world economy, renouncing its previously pursued isolation policy. With a subtle increase in China’s growth, the rest of the world began to become wary of China’s intentions. To continue to avail the profits of capitalism, Xiaoping promoted and projected the characteristic nature of China’s foreign policy as peaceful and diplomatic. With this one step, Xiaoping combined for his country both economic development and an openness to the international framework that was largely capitalistic. With this announcement, the South Asian countries like India viewed China, not as a threat to its dominance in the region, but as an ally. This was visible in India’s

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friendly policies like the “Panchsheel,” towards China. This further allowed China to leap forward and gain access to the South Asian region. Deng Xiaoping’s leadership style became a tradition that was followed by successive Chinese statesmen. Since then, China has continued to propagate an image of itself as a status-quo power, however with peaceful intentions. Be it Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao or China’s current premier Xi Jinping, this particular image of China has been maintained with high standards.

By June 2004, almost a hundred million people in China had access to the internet. For a country that didn’t have any mobile telecommunication services in the late twentieth century, this access was a giant leap forward for China’s growth from the perspective of globalisation and information technology. In this time, many scholars wrote contrasting articles about China’s rise. Some bought into China’s image of a peaceful rise, while many others, particularly American scholars compared it to the rise of Germany in the late nineteenth century, or Napoleonic France during the 18th and 19th centuries, thus creating a Chinese threat perception. Whichever way the scholars wrote, one thing remained certain, China’s growth in information technology was speedy and reached an average growth rate of 20%. During this rise, The Global Recession of 2008 hit, leaving China unscathed. This recession turned the tables for China. From being a dormant player in the global arena, it transformed into a lender for the world, particularly the Asian countries. Though Asia wasn’t hit as badly as the west, its financial sector wasn’t spared. Despite the shortcomings from the recession, Asia saw a rise in the auto-sector, the airlines, consumer goods, and services grew due to the growth of middle-income. That drove demand across borders within Asia. Despite being affected mildly by this recession, China saw the Asian growth as an opportunity. To extract the full potential from such an opportunity, China acted swiftly and introduced aids and economic assistance to the countries, not only stabilising itself but also reviving the Chinese economy. With this revival, China became a ventilator for the rest of Asia, as well. At this point, China was no longer dormant and had a substantial influence on South Asia. Its role as a lender for the entire world, including the Western powers, and its ownership of national bonds added to its great power perception in the South Asian region.

China’s rise since that period has been large in all fronts be it economy, military or political influence. Since then, while the rest of South Asia endorsed or criticised China’s growth, China did not look at the South Asian countries with equanimity or as allies. Though it established friendly relations with countries like Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, etc. it did so to achieve its national strategies, while setting foot into the South Asian region and heightening the pre-existing tensions and rivalries with India in the region. Even today, China’s friendships are based on the same criteria- to achieve its grand strategy and balance out the power politics between India and itself. India’s nuclear power status also challenges China’s position in the South Asian region.

In contrast, the effect of China wasn’t restricted to the South Asian region alone. It began to stand on par with powerful states in the international system, like the United States and the United Kingdom. The debate on the US-China trade war is a good example and continues to be an ongoing debate in 2020. Such a debate asserted China as a power capable of challenging
the global dominance of the United States of America. With this in mind, it becomes necessary to ascertain that as China enters the race to be a globally dominant power, what will be its impact on its immediate neighbours in the South Asian region? Such a query allows us to pay attention and critically analyse and examine the nature and type of China’s intentions and the path it will assume, critically.

China might assume one or a combination of three potential trajectories to become a predominant player in the region of South Asia:

- The first based on a strength-based, aggressive, coercive style, similar to that of Imperial Japan or Napoleonic France.
- Second, based on a leadership acquired through institutions, treaties, norms, alliances, similar to the strategies of Britain and France between 1945 and 1963. This can span across military might, economy, or social institutionalisation.
- The third possible trajectory for China is the Cultural style. China is known for its ability to spread its influence through soft power; the Ping Pong Diplomacy, its new Belt and Road Initiative, etc., through which it aims to strengthen its hard and soft infrastructure and cultural ties.

The second and third paths exhibit characteristics of a well-determined and status-quo driven player, focussed mostly on profiting from globalisation. Accordingly, this type of trajectory acts in pursuit of goals, self-interests like the Soviet Union during the cold war period, i.e. of enhancing the perception of the country as a dominant and stable one in the region.

Provided China continues to pursue these goals post COVID19, this paper aims to explore the course of its trajectory. Depending upon its course, the impacts it has on South Asia will be discovered. This paper will first begin by establishing dimensions, followed by workable definitions for these styles that China might assume, which are central to this study. Next, the study will contextualise China’s interests, goals, and strategies for a rising regionally dominant power. Thirdly, the paper will try to establish the consequences of either style or trajectory that China might choose. In this step, the study will analyse the movement in China’s regional affairs, depending on the path it is most likely to pick, keeping China’s intentions and goals in mind. As a result of these, we will ultimately determine which trajectory China will pick and how these influences will impact the South Asian region. The final section will summarise the findings of China’s future as a regional and globally predominant power.

**Dimensions of China’s Predominance and Power:**

The argument that China will emerge as a predominant power in the South Asian region is based on assumptions that it’s political, economic and military capacities have expanded considerably, and will continue to expand on a rate higher than the others in the South Asian region, post the COVID19 pandemic outbreak. In such a case, such a predominance is all but assured.

In that context, owing to the distinct nature of states in the South Asian sphere, it is important to identify the varying degrees of power that each of them encapsulates. There is a clear sign that states in this region, as states outside the region are competing, and constantly aiming to preserve a balance of power, while tilting it to their favour on several occasions. The threat of

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7 (How will the Belt and Road Initiative advance China’s interests?)
disrupting this balance has loomed over centuries, and is mentioned clearly in Mortan Kaplan’s *System and Process in International Politics*, as one of his rules being that “all the states fight rather than passing an opportunity to increase their capabilities.” This confirms the fact that while every state holds varying degrees of power, they are in a constant fight to balance it out to their favour. This balance results in a difference in every state’s international leverage and influences their success in achieving their national goals. Therefore, every state extends its leverage and influences on other states to primarily achieve these national goals and interests. To understand the role of states concerning their regional and/or global interests, scholars categorise and conceptualise a framework, based on the state’s choice of influences, and its existing international leverage. In this respect, it is pertinent to question China’s influence in the South Asian region, based on its national interests and goals. To answer this question, an analysis of the current trends and dimensions by which China has risen or might rise in the region is to be learned. The following are the basis by which we can assess China’s potential in becoming a predominant power in the region of South Asia, post the COVID19 pandemic:

A. China’s Economic Position:

The COVID19 outbreak has caused massive damage to life and property, across the globe. With the loss of lives, it also brought about a fall in the economies of states. With China’s role as an economic powerhouse in the international system, it is reasonable to assess its current economic position and developments.

An analysis from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), stated that “The world economy will go into recession this year with a predicted loss of trillions of dollars of global income due to the coronavirus pandemic, spelling serious trouble for developing countries with the likely exception of India and China.” This report brings to the front noteworthy observations.

- The first observation is that while the world might suffer from an economic slowdown, the UNCTAD predicts that the developing countries are likely to be the worst hit. Most countries in the South Asian region fall under the label of developing or emerging countries. This means that all of these countries are going to fall prey to a sizeable economic slowdown. However, UNCTAD’s analysis bars India and China, two giant powers in the Asian region as exceptions to this recession. This draws attention to the question of China’s bearings on the countries of South Asia. It also raises questions about the dynamics between China and India.

- The second observation lies in analysing China’s strengths that might benefit from reviving its economic slowdown. Currently, China’s strength lies in the generation of trade and jobs, particularly in the service sector. But more importantly, its deep penetration into every market in the South Asian region makes it almost impossible to remain isolated. The results of this penetration are crucial for its economic recovery, as the countries in the region must engage with it, to prevent their economies from crashing entirely.

- Reports suggest that China is getting back on track with its manufacturing sector. If this is true, China’s economic revival is not a distant dream, but one that would result in South Asia rethinking its idea of globalisation. In the manner China consolidated its economic position in the 9/11 crisis and the 2008 Global recession, this would be the

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8 (Andrew Scobell)
third instance in which the dragon would have turned an adverse economic situation to its advantage.

▪ Now, regardless of whether China remains an exception to the recession or not, to pursue their own goals, the South Asian nations are likely to turn either towards the United States or China to facilitate trade, as these are the only two effective trade dynamos that can provide movement in the economic sphere. So, China does hold an upper hand from its current economic standpoint, in the region of South Asia.

B. China’s strategic timeline- remains or delayed:

China’s rapid, yet consistent developments over the decade is a result of the execution of well-thought-out strategies and goals. The country is known to adhere to its plans based on set timeframes. Before the COVID19 outbreak, China’s grand strategy has been to secure a balance between economic development and military modernisation. Post COVID19, the question of whether these will remain core to China’s strategy rises. In an attempt to shape the future for conducive development, China is set to release a new plan in 2020 called “China Standards 2035” laying out ambitious new standards for next gen-technologies. This seems to be China’s next step following the “Made in China 2025” global manufacturing plan. This projects China’s shift in focus to technologies, which are seen as defining the post-COVID world order.

C. China and India: Cooperation or Contention?

India was the first non-communist country in Asia to establish diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China in 1950. In the wake of the 70th-anniversary mark for Sin-Indian relations, the COVID19 pandemic has raised many new questions around the current and future relations between the two giant powers. With the virus originating from the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province of China, India’s skepticism towards the country has been reinforced. This skepticism has been reflected in India’s import of medical supplies from China. Beijing’s approach has reinforced India’s pharmaceutical sector’s overdependence on China and has pushed it towards boosting domestic production. Also, India has squared China with its announcement of restrictions on foreign direct investment from bordering countries. As India stays out of the BRI, the Post COVID19 South Asia might find this decision of India echoing throughout the SAARC nations, barring Pakistan. Some probing questions remain- will countries in South Asia stay or pull out of this initiative post COVID19. India’s bilateral Indo-Pacific engagements might further balance or soften China’s dominance in the World Health Organisation.

From the diplomatic purview, India seems to be playing a balancing act with China. Though India has been very vocal in its criticisms against China, the Indian foreign minister Dr. Jaisankar’s decision of not naming the Coronavirus as the “Wuhan Virus”, despite nudges from several retired foreign ministers to do so, displays India’s pragmatic approach towards China. The challenge for China lies in identifying how India will bounce back post COVID19 if it wishes to secure a tight spot as a predominant power in the South Asian region.

Identifying these trends creates a foundation for examining how China will seek to regain its trust and amplify its status as a dominant power in the South Asian region. The next step lies in determining the other dimensions by which China might assert its predominance in the South Asian region. This predominance could be unipolar, benevolent, organised or aggressive depending upon the most dominant tool it uses to assert dominance. Whichever system China chooses to pursue, the tools it might employ to reach such status are - coercive, institutional, cultural, or a combination of the former three, or focus on one as the dominant tool, while giving the other tools the complementary status.
As we discussed earlier, China has been a dominant power in the South-East Asian region for centuries, even before the arrival of the Western powers in the nineteenth century. Now, once again, China is poised and in a potentially strong position to take its place as a dominant power in not only the South-East Asian region but in the South Asian region as a whole. However, to do so, it must be game to compete with other rising powers in the region such as India, Philippines, Indonesia, so on and so forth. In an attempt to challenge other powers in the region, there is a potential chance that China will not be restricted to staying as a predominant power, but might be viewed as a hegemonic power, similar to how the United Kingdom was viewed in the European region during its time. This goes to say, that even if China does not have plans of being a regional hegemon, it might appear to other states that it is so, due to the nature of the sizeable power differences in the region. While what a state might aim to achieve could be different, the inferred perception of that aim could be different. For this analysis, a state will be granted the status of dominant, when it is the sole great power in the region. Every other power will be big powers, but still lacking the requirement to overtake the sole great power.

To decipher and elucidate China’s future course and action for its regional predominance, three possible trajectories are offered. These come from the view that the term dominance is aligned with the worldview and national interest and goals of a leading power in the international system. In turn, these goals may manifest in various styles and degrees along a continuum. This spectrum may range from coercive, or institutional or cultural dominance. Then, one can expect the result to be one or a combination, thereof, of the three possible hegemonic paths. Either of these paths will enable the actor, in this case, China, to overcome the “Tragedy of Commons” or the “Prisoners Dilemma”. Before the path is determined, it is first imperative to find workable definitions for these proposed paths.

Tools of Predominance and Hegemony

Coercive Style:

The Coercive Style of predominance is one that is best understood when looked at as relative to the benevolent style. The benevolent style proposed by Charles Kindleberger is of the image that in this kind of trajectory, the leadership takes the responsibility of maintaining and ensuring stability in the international system. Kindleberger’s theory acts as an extension to Olson’s theory, thereby adding the term benevolence to it, and international relations. While on the one hand, the benevolent style focuses on responsibility, stability, and capacity of the predominant actor, the coercive style puts greater focus on the severe nature of the actor against other actors in the specific system. In this type of trajectory, the actor discards benevolence and altruism by imposing it on other countries and refuses to pay net costs imposed upon itself. It behaves in a way where national interest is its primary and only goal and maximising it is its only way forward. Besides, since this type of actor also possesses greater capabilities, it enforces its will upon smaller actors whenever there are conflicts of interest. The provision of public goods, services, and schemes, alongside its participation in uniting world institutions are seen only as an opportunity to maximise its profits or seek to attain their own goals. According to Gilpin in his book on the dynamics of the international system in 1981, public goods are supplied only as a result to seek revenue from it. This means that leadership that follows this path is not a benevolent messiah, but rather strict powers instead. So, unlike the theory of Kindleberger, Gilpin believes that responsibility is observed by a leader in this style only when it is profitable to do so. The negative connotation of this style comes from these theories of Gilpin who transposes the theory of the international economy to a broader study of international relations.
These debates by Kindleberger and Gilpin marked the beginnings that assisted in providing a clear demarcation between the ideas of coercive and benevolent style leadership and predominance. Gramsci suggests that the coercive style in many cases leans toward “hard” hegemony or strength hegemony. Leadership that is self-interested and aims at realising its own goals, even at the cost of coercive strategies and tactics over other another entity in the international system qualifies under this category. This is done to seek its goals and interests while hiding its aspirations. Thus, in the coercive leadership style there are two essential features:

a) Such actors operate by employing power instruments as tools reshape, construct or end certain rules, regulations, norms, treaties, etc., that might not align in their favour. Military and technological soundness is often the most common indicator of the use of this coercive style leadership.

b) In this respect, such a path rests solely on a careful balance between coercion and the employment of power to appear or behave coercively to impose the will of one’s state or leadership upon other world actors.

**Institutional Style:**

The traditional idea of dominance asserts a single country’s propensity to dispense power among other countries. However, the concept of institutionalism states the ability of a country to participate in multilateral, and/or bilateral agreements and arrangements to overcome any areas that may be lacking for a country to assume a relatively greater weight in the international system. The strengths of institutions and regimes in the world system support the models of powerful states. Through these bodies of institutions, a state attempts to seek dominance. Thus, institutionalism becomes a tool of dominance, rather than dominance itself. In this context, unlike the coercive style, the “state” is not the referent object. Instead, the institutions that the state participates in becomes the central referent object.

The Institutional style focuses on the specific set of rules, regulations, and norms, the embodiment of institutions and regimes to provide dominance, through cooperation in the international system. Institutional dominance is considered a benevolent form of hegemony when compared to coercive hegemony, which is, by and large, a more aggressive a tool. International institutions and regional institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, BRICS, ASEAN, etc., need the support of great powers to function smoothly. If we assume that power is concentrated in a handful of states, then the status quo of these in specific regions exhibits the role that the states have on institutions and their roles in constructing or maintaining a state's dominance.

Institutional hegemony specifies the necessary institutional features that enable a country to maintain a high status when compared with the rest. Though this style of dominance has its gaps, it is seen as a tool for countries to reach hegemonic status in the international realm of the globalised world order. A few broad gaps within this format are:

- First, the existence of institutions alone does not generate the dominance of a state. It supplements it. It is quite rare that one country controls the entire institutional system. Though for the past years, the United States of America has had a great role in the
functioning of the global institutions, there is no proof that it is the only nation that is central to the functioning of the institutional systems.

- Secondly, the problem is that institutions in regions are too large to accommodate flexibility in decision making, for the participation and sovereignty of every country is at play. Besides, institutions that form the international community are mostly democratic by nature and this makes decision making and execution a slow, and often delayed process.

- The third shortcoming of institutions lies in the supremacy of a rule, regulation, or norm and the sovereignty of each state to follow or choose to disregard it. The dilemma comes when choosing between Pareto-optimum equilibria, a point at which no player has any incentive to change its current behaviour. This makes coordination difficult and rule-breaking common.

Despite the gaps in the institutional style, this model defines how a state brings its power through an institutional order or arrangement to reach a Pareto frontier or overall dominance within or beyond the scope of the institution. Generally, institutional hegemones mostly focus on military or economic dominance, like the NATO, the ASEAN, or the European Union.

**Cultural Style:**

Antonio Gramsci’s work on political philosophy and his prison books have led to theoretical illumination. Scholars continue to pore over his ideas of hegemony and make use of his concepts, writing and re-writing their effects in modern society. In this light, one of Gramsci’s most fascinating ideas has been the concept of dominance with relations to culture.

Before we go further, it is pertinent to define culture. There are several definitions to culture, but here are the most accepted ones-

- the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group
  - also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time
- the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization
- the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic

Using these definitions and ideas of culture, Gramsci expands on how culture and power are related and how they have an effect on the economy. Gramsci believed that dominance can turn two ways- either stay coercive and have direct control over the masses of society or consensual control- which is when the society as a whole accepts the world views of the dominant group in society. Though Gramsci’s translated writings don’t have an accurate definition of cultural dominance and expand on the concept instead, many scholars have given it precision. From that respect, the cultural style can be understood as the control of culture through the domination of social groups, via social institutions. The cultural style aims to police society in a way to direct them on what to think and how to think about it. Most often than not, such a direction is provided to benefit the dominant class in society.

10 (Lears)
When we view this from a global concept, this same definition can be extrapolated from the concept of class struggles within society to the concept of balance of powers in an international setting. A state that succeeds in policing other states to move in a way that profits their power status through social institutions is cultural dominance on the macro scale. From this perspective, a clear example of a country that attained the status quo also through cultural dominance is China. The pervasive belief in the “BRI”, investments in the Chinese New Year Temple Fair in Kathmandu, Nepal (January 2017), or the Chinese Cultural Fair in Colombo, Sri Lanka (February 2017), etc., are viewed as a long term investment in the South Asian region. Having said that, this isn’t to say that dominance through culture is such a bad thing.

The cultural style creates and promotes cultural appropriation that adds to the power of the dominant state, and/or society. This can be achieved in many ways, such as the control of the media, education, legislation, entertainment, medicine, religion, politics, economics, etc. both within and outside the region. In this sense, an ideology attains dominant status and then becomes common sense to everyone and is absorbed into the culture. When such a thing happens, the status quo of a particular state gains a certain sense of longevity, because cultural appropriation does not end in short term effects.

Now, this type of style is usually intangible, this invisibility in its spread pushes us to a question. “If cultural dominance is invisible, how do we identify it?” One way to answer this question will be to understand that it is rare that one group attains global cultural dominance. According to Gramsci, there is a term called counter-hegemonic cultures. This states that there will always be groups that will oppose the idea of the dominant culture. It is within these counter-cultures that we find a shift in ideologies as supposed to the ones provided and followed by the dominant state or group. This offers a sense of visibility in understanding the extent to which a state uses cultural dominance to reflect its influence and power.

Though it is most likely that one state cannot establish complete global cultural dominance, the question that we are looking at is the degree to which China uses this cultural style as a tool to attain power, influence, and status in the regional sphere of South Asia. Whether or not the counter-cultural groups in the region of South Asia will have the potential to conflict with the ideologies of a state like China is another question that this paper will address.

Thus, in this paper, dominance is understood as a searching mechanism for regional optima through actions in a collective and dynamic landscape, where every possible combination results in the acquiring, maintaining or increasing of power, status, and resources. So far, no country has been able to plan or design an overarching dominant design encompassing the entire world. This difficulty in world domination pushes leading powers to focus on creating a dominant presence in their regional framework.

**China’s Scope for Regional Dominance: Interests, Goals, and Strategies:**

A requisite to understand the Chinese grand strategy would be to deep dive into the method by which different leadership contributes to policy building. If we dig a little into China’s previous leaders, starting from Mao Zedong- determining the foundation of his policy was fairly straightforward. Be it the civilians or the military, or the members of the government, the ideology of Marxism Leninism laid the foundations for policy building. However, with Deng Xiaoping’s rule, this foundation increased in complexity. It focussed on “socialism with

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11 (Gwen Sharp)
12 (Min)
Chinese characteristics”. This was a huge shift from The Soviet or Western understandings of socialism. The Chinese ideology that formed the framework of its foreign policy grew more intricate with Deng’s successor Jiang Zemin- who allowed capitalists to enter the equation with his “Three Represents”. However, in all of these leaders’ policies, one thing remained rigid- the degree of China’s growth was restricted to the central government’s sanctioning of official policies. It did not allow or provide a space for gargantuan scaling up. However, Xi Jinping’s policy of the Chinese Dream changed the tight scope of China’s policy. Unlike the western understanding of the American Dream, the Chinese Dream by Xi Jinping was based on both Confucianist ideals and modern commercial capitalism. This meant that the politics and economics of China were a combination of rigid and flexible and involved high scales of self-independence. Instead of teaching the Chinese endless sacrifice to attain their goals, the Chinese shifted to learn to dream and stay self-sufficient. This historical difference in China’s policy building gives us insight into how China views the rest of the world, and where it sees itself in the landscape. With big dreams, come bigger ambitions. China’s strategy toward South Asia is thus the fallout of its overarching strategy for the world.

The relationship between China and the South Asian nations appears to be entering a new phase. Though China’s economic interests were fuelled by consistent trade and investments in the pre-COVID world, domestic consumption in the South Asian region is the main driving force, now. However, countries have begun to adopt protective measures, raising questions of whether China’s penetration into the markets is extensive and long-term, or otherwise. This question does not restrict its scope to the economics but echoes its way through the bilateral relations between the countries as well.

On the one hand, China’s exposure to South Asia has been on a constant rise for over a decade, however, recent shifts in trends display increasing exposure of South Asian countries to China. This is a powerful reflection of China’s strategy to create a balance in the region. Besides, China’s technological value chains have integrated the region in many ways. This integration gives China an edge to achieving predominance in the South Asian region. To identify China’s strategies and interests in the South Asian region, it is key to look at three primary processes:

- To determine China’s vital security and national interests.
- To identify the threats to those interests.
- To decide how China plans to employ political, military, and economic tools to protect those interests.

The three criteria are based on the fact that China will continue to leverage its influence to fulfill its national interests, with the same or perhaps more vigour in the Post-COVID19 world. This assumption is built from the current actions of China in the South Asian region. Growing border conflicts with India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh’s engagement with both the Indian and Chinese government indicate an independent foreign interest to promote their national interests; this dual engagement puts China and India on a parallel level playing field from which both powers can operate.

China’s interests in South Asia are a result of a host of factors, to monetise the region’s geo-economic and geo-strategic significance, strategic encirclement13, and to benefit from strategic, and economic partnerships. Considering the vast scope in analysing Chinese strategy, it is imperative to set a time frame for a better grasp on the same. Thus, this study will explore China’s interests until 2035, i.e., for fifteen years.

13 (Bommakanti)
China’s grand strategy, like every other country’s strategy, is likely to remain the same post the COVID19 lockdown. However, the only change being in the timeline by which this strategy might be accomplished, and the possible variation in means of execution of these strategies. While the COVID19 pandemic has taken the world by storm, a populous region like that of South Asia has taken a big hit. Even as it recovers from the pandemic, the threat of a rough economic depression is looming. This is most likely to destabilise the region, thus, altering existing relations with the neighbours.

From this perspective, a few trends that China might follow closely, to maintain or increase its hold over the South Asian region are-

1. **BRI and CPokEC**: The Belt and Road Initiative is Xi Jinping’s signature infrastructure policy. Beijing will pool in all its might to ensure this policy comes to effect. However, it will currently focus on pressurising India to lift its threshold in the China-Pakistan Occupied Kashmir Economic Corridor and the other border conflicts that might come in the way of fracturing China’s infrastructure plans.

2. **Economic Partnerships**: The growing pandemic is a sign of the countries’ increasing need to restore and protect its falling economies. To do this, states like Pakistan and Sri Lanka are likely to turn toward China for economic relief. Beijing will turn this to an opportunity of rescuing these indebted countries, in exchange for its pound of flesh. This is typical of China, considering its aggressive debt trap policy.

3. **The Indian Ocean Region**: China’s interest and participation in the conversation regarding the Indian Ocean are likely to become more complex. This is credited to India’s powerful position in the Indian Ocean. India’s support to the Maldives, Mauritius, Comoros, Seychelles, and Madagascar in responding to the COVID19 pandemic adds to maintaining its stand in the region. So, under its new 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative, establishing China’s footprint on the region is not only complex but will affect its position in the South Asian region, as well.

4. **Restoring Reputation**: The novel Coronavirus finds its roots in China’s Wuhan. It is unlikely that this will be forgotten, especially by China’s neighbours. For many years China has bolstered a particular image of power in the international system. But, since the entry of the virus, China’s image has been hurt. Thus, one of the main focuses for the Chinese government will be to bring back or restore their image, as well as bring in goodwill. This will be China’s immediate strategy that will help establish its space in not only the South Asian region but also the entire international system.

This study will be chiefly based on China’s own timeline. Since Xi Jinping’s rise to power, China has focussed on a “two-stage development plan”. The first stage is what this study will mainly focus on as it spans from 2020 to 2035. In this stage, China’s primary goal is to build on the bedrock of China’s modern economy. To achieve the first stage, China will need to secure a fairly dominant position in the South Asian region to up its economic strength. When this is achieved, China will enter the second stage- where it seeks to become a state with substantial global influence. This second stage – between the years 2035 to 2050, acts as an indicator for China’s desire to rise to a degree of more power than it currently possesses. Being second only to the United States of America in many fields, one can assume that the second stage reveals China’s intentions to be a global power. Thus, this study will base its strategies mainly till the first stage, 2035, but will briefly cover factors that might influence the second stage.
China’s Intentions and the Coercive Style:

The states in the international system are often divided between two primary components. The two components are best understood when examined from the Game Theory purview. The Game Theory is the study of models of strategic interaction between players to mathematically analyse the results of victories and losses. So, this theory suggests that there are two main types of games that can be played:

a. Finite Games: Games with a limited set of rules and the possibility of victory
b. Infinite Games: Games that are played to ensure continuum, i.e., that do not have clear victors or losers.

Now, the reason Game theory is important is because the states in the international system are often divided into these two groups—States that plan their Grand Strategies as infinite models, and States that design their Grand Strategies as finite models. If one looks closely, it will be clear that countries like India and Pakistan base their policies on finite models. An example of this would be visible by the fact that with a change in governments, policies also change. However, China and the United States fall into the framework of infinite models—be it the American Dream or the Chinese Dream, or the focus on China’s sovereignty, social and economic development, and security have remained unchanged. The heterogeneity in the two models creates instability and the need for one particular model to supersede the other, intending to create homogeneity in the system.

From that context, if China’s strategy is global domination, it by its nature means establishing the infinite model. When it comes to the South Asian region, the anatomy of most countries is dominated by the finite structure. This means that China’s heightened coercion is a result of an aspiration to establish its version of the infinite model in the region—which will in course of time, mean its predominance in the South Asian region. The next component that must be factored in is concrete cases where this coercion is detectable:

- **The String of Pearls Doctrine:** China’s interest in the South Asian region is prominent in this Chinese doctrine. The String of Pearls’ doctrine is a geopolitical theory that is based on China’s intentions in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This specifically refers to its military, communications, and diplomatic networks falling on the countries that share its borders with the Indian Ocean—pointedly between the Chinese mainland and Port Sudan. The CPEC and the BRI are seen as part of this military doctrine. Based on this doctrine, China has centred its facilities in Chittagong (Bangladesh), Karachi and Gwadar Port (Pakistan), and at Hambantota and Colombo (Sri Lanka), encircling India from all sides. Also, China has established its military base in the Maldives, a naval base in Seychelles, and is increasing its maritime base with Myanmar in the Kyaukpyu Port, as well. All of these point toward China’s aim to set foot as a predominant power in the South Asian region, or at the least replace India from its current position.

- **Modernisation of the People’s Liberation Army:** Within Xi Jinping’s first stage of its two-stage development plan falls military and technological development. The Chinese government has thus been focussing on ways to make its military stronger, technologically advanced, and more efficient. But more importantly, it is doing so to become the top-tier force within this time frame. There is no doubt that the PLA ranks high with respect to its anti-ship ballistic missiles and military intelligence—specifically in artificial intelligence. However, increased development and modernisation of the PLA means increased assertiveness in the South Asian region, especially in conflicted zones. In his discourse on the Chinese Dream, Xi clarifies his intentions of not
modernising the PLA alone, but to make it a “world-class force”. This means that if China’s intentions are fulfilled, the Chinese threat perception in the South Asian region becomes more prevalent than it has ever been before.

- **Border Conflicts:** China has been having border conflicts for a long time, in South Asia—particularly with India and Tibet. The former has been fighting wars for disputed territory, while the latter for legal status. Either way, China’s influence in the region is not merely military, but political in many ways. This makes these border disputes all the more critical. Whether the Sino-Indian border dispute is deliberately an infinite game played by the two states, or whether it is finite on one end and infinite on the other, the implication of this dispute remains catastrophic to the South Asian region. The recent Ladakh standoff, the Doklam issue, etc., has sparked a power struggle between India and China. This has led to both these countries trying to prove their metal—while on the one hand, India aims to maintain its reputation within the region, China wants to establish one in the same space. These ambitions give rise to coercive intentions that are strenuous and difficult to end. The question that arises is how far and how long will the two states standoff, especially if one is playing finite vs the infinite game.

China’s use of coercion and military force is currently prevalent. However, it is very specific. This means that China’s use of force is not arbitrary, but a well-deliberated move. While coercion is employed as a common tool by China, the state’s linear focus on economics suggests the employment of other tools to fulfill its grand strategy.

**China’s Intentions and the Institutional Style:**

States in the international system remain cordial and connected through the many provisions that the international system provides. Among these provisions, one that helps strike a balance of powers is the institutions. Every state leverages the provisions of these institutions to fulfill their national interests. Borrowing from the existing setup, many states such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and China have shaped their respective forms of institutionalism. Since our focus is on China, this section will illuminate China’s emerging institutional statecraft and its implications on South Asia.

China’s rise in the international system has been one of the most dynamic events to have taken place in the sphere of international relations, in the twenty-first century. However, unlike any other state, this rise has not been a result of winning wars or with the use of military force, but has been by and large through its reliance on multilateral institutions—regional and global, thus giving it due for its claim to a “peaceful rise”. However, China as a state is well-versed in the institutional ways—its growth in the sphere is evidence enough. This awareness is because “institutions” emerge out of centralised monolithic control. This is especially true when it comes to institutions within the domestic sphere of China. That said, there is an expansion of this concept to the international, as well. A simple example of this would acknowledge that institutions like the International Monetary Fund are highly weighted to the west, due to its contribution— that provides its greater scope of influence within the institution than other participating states. In this respect, China’s ways of institutionalisation stand apart. Most states predominantly display their institutional craft within existing international institutions, especially the states within the South Asian region. However, China establishes security and infrastructure projects that eventually convert themselves into institutional formats. They may or may not be long-term, depending on the goals that a certain project aims to fulfill. The BRI is a classic example. Despite being an infrastructure project and investment, China’s ability to convert its workings to an institutional format, garnering participation from several countries
is a formidable strategy. This throws light on China’s mastery to transform its national interests to an international objective.

Another important angle is the effect of leadership, the method by which the polit bureau encompasses clicks that accommodate each other and control different dimensions of the formulated institutional system. This does not mean that China’s participation in existing institutional setups is remiss. China’s focus on pulling off the balancing act is what makes it a first-rate power in the international system. China’s focus on South Asia has been limited in its scope, as its interests are on the larger periphery. The region as mentioned earlier garners attention only as a consequence of China’s interest in the global sphere. This limited nucleus becomes one of the key reasons why the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is the most comprehensive institution between China and the South Asian region. This further goes to explain China’s interest in requesting the change of status from observer to participant.

At this juncture, China’s institutional presence in South Asia is restricted to its influence on common existing institutions. The only high-ranking influence comes from its bilateral relations with states in the region, alongside its sway on fulfilling its opus-magnum project the BRI. The results from institutional projects like these will lay down or dismantle the foundations of China’s institutional influence in the South Asian region.

**China’s Intentions and the Cultural Style:**

Depending on the position of a state in the international system, every state uses different tools to project its power. While many states use hard power tools, others use soft power tools to do the same. The pertinent part is to understand why a state picks one over the other or uses one tool more than the other. The answer to this again comes from observing the results or the gains that these tools provide. In the case of soft power, a state like the United States will utilise it to legitimise its projections of hard power, in the international realm. However, when it comes to rising powers, like China, one of the primary uses of the cultural tool or soft power is likely to be to enhance its image in the global sphere.

Needless to say, China is an ancient civilization with a grand cultural landscape. The same is true of the countries in South Asia. China’s advantage remains in the fact that South Asian countries have shared a long-standing relationship with its civilisation. Be it for martial arts, religions such as Buddhism, long-standing architecture, so on and so forth. This commonality provides China cause to become a strong power in South Asia, contesting alongside its border-sharing neighbour India.

One of the first cases that bring China closer to South Asia is its history with trade routes. The legacy of the Silk Route created a promising link that connected and continues to connect China with South Asia. From bringing silk and fabric, eventually, a wave of immigrants began to exchange technologies among each other. Cultural transfers ensured religions like Buddhism spread, while many South Asian countries grew closer to learning Mandarin.

The difference between China’s use and a Western nation’s use of cultural tools is this: in the west, the cultural power echos the hard power projections. For example, President Obama’s administration reacted strongly against many Middle Eastern nations’ attempts to curb the use of the internet, eventually supporting the Arab Spring. This cultural support through the support of the internet reflects America’s “freedom of expression”. For countries like China, their administration and foreign policy reflect their cultural framework, rather than the other way around. For instance, China brought to South Asia Confucius institutes to impart its presence in the South Asian world, through its language and philosophies.
China’s use of cultural tools with Bangladesh goes back to 1979, where they signed the Agreement of Cooperation to improve and strengthen their bilateral relations through culture, media, education, and sports. Over seventy scholarships were provided to Bangladesh, varying in different fields- from military to cooperation. China has increased its diplomatic ties with the Nepal administration by regularly sending journalists, diplomats, academics, to improve its public diplomacy campaign in the region. The China-Nepal Youth Exchange Mechanism is one example of their cultural exchange. China’s relations with Pakistan have been close with respect to both hard and soft power. Aside from being a strong beneficiary for Pakistan, China has been keen on promoting transportation, information technology, etc. The CPEC is seen not just as economic exchange, but the runner for increased cultural exchange between the two nations, as well. Afghanistan has signed an Agreement of Cultural Cooperation with China. It focuses on natural resources to improve their cultural ties. China’s cultural forays in Sri Lanka have been formidable. Bonded strongly by their religion, the two countries have maintained strong cultural ties with each other. With the recent Hambantota proceedings, this tie is only bound to get tighter. Recently, China has begun to provide attention to its ties with the Maldives, as well. In 2008, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the two countries to build understanding and friendship among sporting communities. Due to proximity, Myanmar and China also share close cultural ties that many times end up in frictions. However, the question that remains is whether all these agreements and exchanges will replace India’s cultural ties with its neighbours?

Culture forms an important ingredient in a society’s creation of moral identities. These moral identities later go on to help determine an individual or group’s role in the larger framework of a nation. In this vein, understanding China’s cultural pegs to create society’s blueprint of morals is key. This is particularly a result of the formation of an individual’s faithfulness or patriotism toward a nation. Culture plays a major role in creating or breaking the idea of a patriotic society. China’s culture, be it through Confucianism or simply routine culture, is based on rigidity and inflexibility when it comes to one’s patriotism for the country. Adding to the cultural bias is its communist regime which only amplifies this strong identity. This is important because this extreme sense of patriotism acts out even to bolster China’s expansionist or revisionist aspirations. Culturally guided identities are more deeply rooted and, thus, the threat in case of ambitions for dominance is complex.

In a post-COVID world order, with everything going online, China’s technological capabilities and cultural influences have a strong chance of providing more cultural content to civilians, without having to pass through government administration. If this happens, there is a possibility that change in public opinion might reflect in foreign policy changes.

**Conclusion:**

It is one thing to know that China’s rise in the international system is imminent. However, determining the tools it uses, and the implications this rise might have is essential. This is particularly important, considering the recent trends that China pursues in the South Asian region. Be it the renting of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, the CPEC project with Pakistan or the creation of a war-like situation with Ladakh in India, China’s agenda towards South Asia does not come across as peaceful or without hidden agenda. From this standpoint, China’s use of coercion is substantial. China’s bilateral relations and its non-conformance to what is portrayed as universal norms add to the impression of its coercive stance.

China’s launching of the Belt and Road Initiative suggests its ambition to institutionalise its governance to influence states outside its territory, particularly South Asian states. This ensures an increase in surplus markets and exports, while also ensuring stable domestic energy supplies.
So, China’s focus on institutionalisation finds its proximity to its trade and resource enhancements. The state’s decision to underplay the geostrategic importance and the domestic implications of the BRI displays its maturity in exercising judgment regarding the tool it uses. China’s sensitivity in knowing when to use coercion or institutionalism makes it a formidable power to be aware of.

China’s pride in its cultural identity, for instance, its use of the “made in China” label, the creations of its social morality affect its relations with states outside the border. For instance, China’s cultural traditions are visible in many parts of the Sino-Indian border, the Sino-Nepal border, etc. Whether this spread of Chinese culture is a result of the trickle-down effect or is premeditated, China’s capability to use that as a bargaining chip for expansionist intentions is conceivable. The use of this cultural aspect brings strain to the South Asian nations concerning their sovereignty and territorial integrity. A good example of this is Arunachal Pradesh and its increased bilateral relations with Nepal.

In conclusion, it is imperative to point out China’s dexterity in the use of certain tools to establish dominance over a specific region. The chances of China being a fierce or menacing presence in South Asia are high. However, there is no necessary evidence that it will be the sole power, overtaking India in the region by 2035. China’s case for hegemony in South Asia is a far-fetched idea, however, there is no doubt that its participation in South Asian politics can be overlooked. With the current pandemic outbreak and economic slump, expecting cooperation between the states is most likely. China’s long-term relations with India point toward cordial, rather than friendly, in light of the recent military standoffs. Whether China is simply testing its waters, or whether it is clashing with India with calculated intentions, the implications are going to be manifold and tempered. The fragility of China alongside the South Asian states amidst this rising pandemic makes manoeuvring within the region tricky and severely limited. To be a predominant presence in South Asia, China will have to creatively restructure its geopolitical strategy and evolve new terms of engagement with its neighbours, terms which reflect the mixed reality of the anti-China and pro-China sentiments, to have a stake in their success.

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