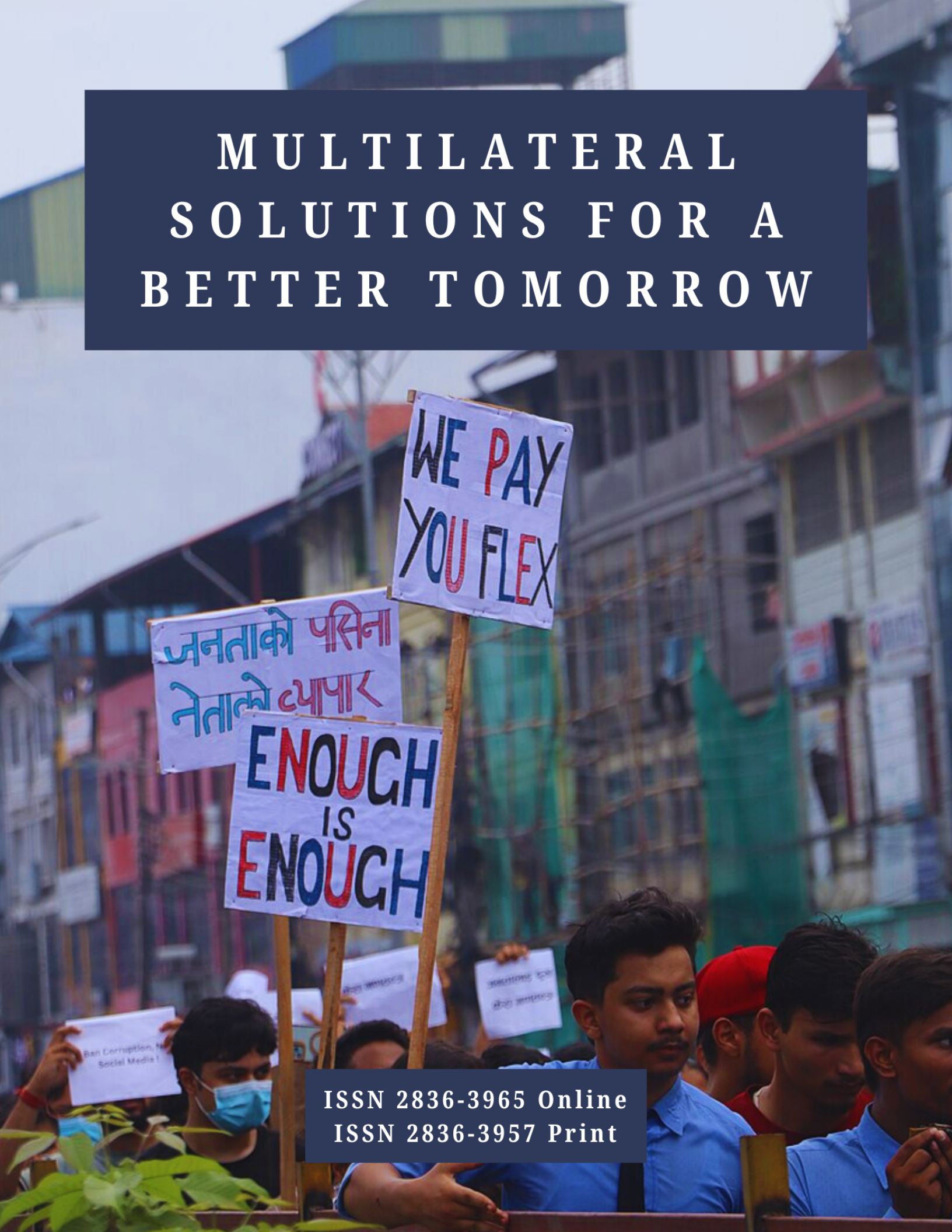
MULTILATERAL SOLUTIONS FOR A BETTER TOMORROW



ISSN 2836-3965 Online
ISSN 2836-3957 Print

MONOGRAPH BY THE SOUTH ASIA FORESIGHT NETWORK

South Asia Foresight Network Monographic Series
Volume 3

4421 Garrison Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016-4055
First published in Washington DC, 2024
This edition published February 2026
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ISSN 2836-3965 Online
ISSN 2836-3957 Print

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MULTILATERAL SOLUTIONS FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

14th February 2026

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South Asia Foresight Network (SAFN)
Washington DC

Monographic Series: Volume 3

Published By South Asia Foresight Network (SAFN)
The Millennium Project Washington DC

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Forward

South Asia enters the twenty-first century defined by a persistent paradox: immense potential alongside enduring fragility. Home to nearly a quarter of the world's population, the region possesses deep civilizational roots, demographic strength, and strategic importance. Yet political distrust, uneven development, climate vulnerability, and unresolved security tensions continue to constrain its collective progress. This monograph is timely, arriving at a moment when fragmented national responses are no longer sufficient to meet challenges that increasingly transcend borders.

The seven essays gathered here are unified by a central argument: South Asia's future will be shaped not only by national policies, but by the quality of cooperation and synergies among its states and societies. Climate change, digital transformation, labor mobility, and security threats do not respect sovereignty lines. Treating these issues in isolation weakens outcomes for all. The contributors therefore advance the idea of *synergy among nations*—that coordinated action can produce stability, resilience, and growth unattainable through unilateral approaches.

Across themes of governance, multilateralism, trust, infrastructure, technology, migration, and security, the essays converge on a shared insight: South Asia's core deficit is not capacity, but coordination. Constitutional reform and infrastructure development, often viewed as domestic concerns, carry regional consequences. Multilateralism, though under strain globally, remains indispensable, and South Asia—if aligned—can play a meaningful role in shaping its reform rather than passively adapting to it.

Trust emerges as a critical yet fragile foundation. While social and communal trust remains resilient, institutional and inter-state trust has eroded, undermining cooperation. Rebuilding trust is therefore not merely normative, but strategic—particularly in addressing techno-nationalism, migration governance, and complex security challenges where fragmented policies heighten vulnerability.

Curated by the South Asia Foresight Network (SAFN), this monograph is both analytical and forward-looking. As the CEO of The Millennium Project, I wish our regional network SAFN a successful 2026, marked by live, active, and impactful ongoing research that advances regional foresight and global understanding. In an era of accelerating uncertainty, South Asia's strength will lie in its ability to move beyond division and toward synergy—transforming shared challenges into a foundation for a more resilient, peaceful, and cooperative regional future.

Jerome C. Glenn

Co-Founder/CEO, The Millennium Project.

Introduction

It gives me immense pleasure to release this publication on 14 February 2026, marking the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Millennium Project—an institution that has shaped global foresight, strategic thinking, and international dialogue over three decades.

In the shifting landscape of the 21st century, South Asia stands at the intersection of promise and precarity. A region endowed with immense human capital, cultural richness, and strategic geography, it is also beset by overlapping crises—economic fragility, climate vulnerability, political instability, and intensifying global competition. Amid escalating geopolitical tensions across the Global South—from Venezuela to Iran—where sovereignty, sanctions, and strategic autonomy are increasingly contested, South Asia finds itself navigating a volatile external environment alongside deep internal pressures. Yet within these challenges lies the possibility of renewal through collaboration. This monograph, composed of eight analytical essays, examines the critical themes shaping the region's future—governance, trust, infrastructure, multilateralism, migration, and security—while underscoring a fundamental truth: the path forward for South Asia must be built upon a synergetic relationship among its nations, bound by shared destinies and mutual responsibilities. It gives me immense pleasure to release this publication on 14 February 2026, marking the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Millennium Project—an institution that has shaped global foresight, strategic thinking, and international dialogue over three decades.

The first essay from Nepal, *"A Perspective of Multilateralism: Nepal's Present Crisis and Stability; the Importance of Multilateralism,"* offers timely insight into how domestic political upheaval reshapes the multilateral behavior of small states, using Nepal's 2025 crisis as a critical case study. By integrating key international relations theories, it deepens understanding of how multilateralism serves as a source of legitimacy, security, and strategic agency amid internal instability. The study also provides policy-relevant lessons on the critical role of youth inclusion and governance reform in sustaining effective and credible foreign policy engagement.

The second essay, *"Constitutional Reforms and Infrastructure Development in South Asia,"* explores how institutional frameworks and constitutional reforms can unlock regional potential. Infrastructure—both physical and institutional—is presented not merely as an economic driver, but as the foundation of social and political stability. As South Asian nations confront rapid urbanization and widening inequality, the essay calls for harmonized regional strategies and multilateral investments that transcend national boundaries, arguing that equitable development depends on collective governance mechanisms rather than competitive national advancement.

The third essay, *"Reclaiming Multilateralism: Reforming Global Institutions for Tomorrow's Challenges,"* focuses on the global level. As international institutions struggle to respond effectively to pandemics, climate crises, and conflict, the paper contends that institutional reform is both urgent and unavoidable. It positions South Asia's collective engagement as a potential catalyst for inclusive multilateralism, enabling the region to shape—rather than merely absorb—the contours of the evolving global order.

The fourth essay, *"The State of Trust in South Asia,"* examines one of the most intangible yet indispensable foundations of regional cooperation. While interpersonal trust rooted in familial, religious, and communal ties remains resilient, institutional distrust—fueled by political manipulation, disinformation, and historical grievances—continues to undermine governance and regional collaboration. The essay argues that restoring trust between citizens and institutions, and among neighboring states, is essential to rebuilding the moral infrastructure for peace and sustainable cooperation.

China's expanding influence introduces a critical strategic dimension in the fifth essay, *"Techno-Nationalism and the Digital Silk Road: China's Expanding Sphere in the Indo-Pacific."* The paper analyzes how Beijing's techno-nationalist ambitions, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, are reshaping South Asia's geopolitical and digital landscape. It warns that fragmented national responses risk deepening dependency, and calls instead for a coordinated regional approach grounded in data sovereignty, transparency, and shared technological standards.

The sixth essay, *"South Asia's Polycrisis and Peripheral Resilience,"* situates the region within a global environment marked by interconnected and overlapping crises. Climate change, pandemics, inflation, and political volatility interact across borders, reinforcing vulnerability. Yet the essay emphasizes that peripheral and smaller states possess adaptive capacities that, if integrated through regional policy coordination and shared early-warning systems, can transform crisis into collective resilience.

Labor migration, a vital economic artery for South Asia, is the focus of the seventh essay, *"Towards a Multilateral Framework for Labor Mobility in South Asia."* Despite generating substantial remittance flows, migrant workers remain exposed due to fragmented bilateral agreements. The essay proposes a unified multilateral framework rooted in shared ethical and economic commitments, demonstrating how harmonized labor standards and collective negotiation can enhance protection, dignity, and developmental outcomes.

The final essay, *"The Balochistan Liberation Army and the Regional Security Complex,"* applies Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory to examine the intersection of insurgency, foreign influence, and regional rivalries. It underscores that domestic conflicts such as the BLA insurgency cannot be isolated from broader South Asian security dynamics, particularly where India–Pakistan tensions and China's strategic investments intersect. The study concludes by calling for collaborative intelligence-sharing and conflict-prevention mechanisms that recognize regional security as a shared, rather than zero-sum, responsibility.

Taken together, these eight contributions articulate a clear vision: South Asia's future depends on synergy—on the conscious recognition that collective action can transcend historical divides and contemporary distrust. The challenges confronting the region are not confined by borders; neither should the solutions be. Economic interdependence, environmental stewardship, and security cooperation must be pursued through frameworks that privilege mutual benefit over competitive nationalism.

The South Asia Foresight Network (SAFN), in curating this monograph, aspires to foster such a mindset of cooperative foresight. The essays herein are not merely academic reflections; they are

invitations to dialogue, urging policymakers, scholars, and citizens to think beyond sovereignty as isolation and toward sovereignty as shared responsibility. Through constitutional reform, multilateral innovation, and the rebuilding of trust, the nations of South Asia can move from coexistence to genuine partnership.

In an age of accelerating uncertainty, the strength of the region will lie not in its divisions but in its capacity for synergy—where collaboration replaces suspicion, and shared purpose transcends difference. This monograph stands as both an analysis and a call to action: to reimagine South Asia not as a collection of competing states, but as a community of destiny, united by the will to build a resilient, peaceful, and prosperous future.

Asanga Abeyagoonasekera

Executive Director, South Asia Foresight Network (SAFN)
Editor

1

A Perspective of multilateralism: Nepal's present crisis and stability; the importance of multilateralism

Sharon Bhattarai

Abstract

This study is centered on the impact of Nepal's 2025 political upheaval, the events that followed the social-media ban and nationwide Gen Z protests, on its multilateral approach. The crisis situation revealed deep-rooted weaknesses in governance but also created new demands for accountability and rights. Nepal, a small state, is still turning to multilateral structures such as the UN, non-alignment, peacekeeping, and LDC diplomacy to defend its interests amid domestic unrest. By incorporating Small State Theory, Neoliberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism, the article depicts how Nepal seeks multilateralism for safety, legitimacy, and global recognition. It ends by saying that Nepal's future capacity to act effectively in multilateral organizations will be determined by the country's political stability at home and the government's skill in integrating youth-driven demands into a consistent foreign policy.

The contemporary discourse on multilateralism in Nepal cannot be disentangled from the country's rapidly evolving domestic political landscape. In September 2025, Nepal witnessed one of its most consequential episodes of civil unrest in recent history after the government imposed a sweeping ban on 26 major social media platforms. What initially appeared as a regulatory measure quickly escalated into a national crisis. The ban provoked widespread mobilization led predominantly by Gen Z citizens who interpreted the decision not only as an infringement upon digital rights but also as symptomatic of deeper structural and governance deficiencies. As protests intensified and clashes turned violent, resulting in at least nineteen fatalities, Nepal's political turmoil captured international attention. Although the government eventually reversed the ban, the political and societal repercussions had already become profound and irreversible[1].

This moment of crisis offers an important analytical lens for assessing Nepal's engagement with multilateral norms and institutions. The state's handling of digital governance, human rights concerns, crisis management, and public accountability reflects broader tensions between domestic political imperatives and Nepal's longstanding commitments to multilateral values. Understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating how Nepal positions itself within the shifting global

[1] *Reuters*, "Nepal Lifts Social Media Ban after Protests Leave 19 Dead, Minister Says," September 9, 2025.

order, particularly at a time when multilateralism itself faces unprecedented strain from geopolitical rivalries, technological disruptions, and rising domestic contestations.

Politically, Nepal remains in a fragile and transitional phase. The interim government, which is committed to holding "free, fair, and secure" elections, has also opened corruption investigations related to the protest period[2]. However, the youth movement's factionalism and the resistance of the traditional political parties have made the negotiations difficult. The conflicts here highlight the issues of how far the demands raised by the protesters can bring about real institutional changes. In brief, the Gen Z protest has already brought about changes in Nepal's political landscape that led to the resignation of the prime minister, youth-oriented electoral reforms, and the need for an interim administration. Nevertheless, the permanency of these changes is contingent upon how the state handles the pre-election period and whether the youth's mobilization will remain united and politically influential in the coming months.

Nepal's Evolving Commitment to Multilateralism Amid Domestic Political Upheaval

Nepal's commitment to multilateralism remains a central pillar of its foreign policy, even amidst political upheaval. The foundation of Nepal's foreign policy, as per the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is the United Nations Charter, non-alignment, and international law. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs underscores that Nepal anchors its multilateral diplomacy in the UN's pillars of peace and security, development, and human rights, reflecting its long-standing faith in collective global norms[3]. In addition, Kathmandu places strong emphasis on reforming global governance: Nepal has called for a more inclusive United Nations, complete disarmament, and a rules-based economic order that better recognizes the needs of developing nations[4]. Nepal has reasserted its belief in this in the last couple of years: its foreign affairs report for 2022-2023 emphasizes that despite the increasing geopolitical divisions (for instance, the war in Ukraine), Nepal still considers a "stronger, more accountable, inclusive "United Nations" as indispensable for global peace and sustainable development."

In practice, Nepal uses multilateral forums to project its voice on global issues, particularly those affecting smaller or developing countries. As a non-permanent contributor to UN peacekeeping, Nepal underscores its commitment to global security while enhancing its diplomatic prestige. It also plays an active role in LDC (least developed countries) diplomacy: from 2023 to 2026, Nepal is chairing the Global Coordination Bureau of LDCs, leveraging this to push for fairer global economic governance. Nepal engages in multilateral platforms to raise its concerns about global

[2] *Times of India*, "Responsible for Addressing Voice of Gen Z: Nepal PM Karki Pledges Free, Fair Polls," 2025.

[3] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Nepal's Multilateral Affairs," MOFA Nepal.

[4] Institute of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Policy of Nepal: Orientation & Priorities*, 23.

issues, especially those that have a disproportionate impact on smaller or developing countries. As a non-permanent contributor to UN peacekeeping, Nepal highlights its obligation to global security at the same time that it raises its diplomatic prestige. In addition, it is very active in LDC (least developed countries) diplomacy: Nepal chairs the Global Coordination Bureau of LDCs from 2023 to 2026, leveraging this to push for fairer global economic governance. At the regional level, Nepal's multilateral approach is influenced by its strategic location between India and China. Rather than aligning exclusively with one, Nepali foreign policy promotes "constructive neutrality" or strategic hedging, by which the country uses regional groupings such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and other multilateral platforms to partner with more countries. Experts say this strategy becomes more and more significant as a result of the geo-economics competition that is getting more intense in South Asia: Nepal is willing to take the risk of over-dependence only to be able to take the advantages of infrastructure, trade, and investment opportunities.

On the other hand, multilateralism in Nepal is struggling with some serious issues. Political instability and frequent changes of government (there have been a large number of changes in prime ministers) have been the main reasons for foreign policy inconsistency that has been short-term in nature and thus leading to a situation in which it is very difficult for Nepal to maintain its commitments in multilateral institutions[5]. Besides, there is a concern about institutional capacity - the foreign policy is often in a reactive mode to the short-term pressures rather than being driven by structured, long-term diplomatic planning. Additionally, Nepal has been advocating for UN reform, especially in terms of a more democratic Security Council and the enhanced role of developing countries. Nepal's upheaval in politics has been mainly due to Gen Z protests and the setting up of an interim government, and these factors have made the country's multilateral engagement a mix of both challenges and opportunities[6]. The local upheaval may dampen Nepal's ability to negotiate, but the upsurge of youth activism could compel the state to be more involved in global issues like transparency, digital rights, and participatory development. So multilateralism stays an important stage for Nepal to voice its views and cooperate with the states that are pushing for reforms. In general, Nepal is quite a cautious but still willing supporter of multilateralism. Overall, Nepal maintains a cautious but steady commitment to multilateralism, though its effectiveness will depend on internal political stability and the integration of protest-driven demands into foreign policy.

Nepal's engagement in multilateralism is a mixture of long-standing commitments and new challenges which have been influenced by its changing domestic surroundings. Despite the fact that the country is using international institutions to promote development, security, and fair economic governance, political unrest at home and frequent changes in government make it

[5] For an overview of Nepal's political instability and frequent government turnover, see Aditya Adhikari, *The Bullet and the Ballot Box: The Story of Nepal's Maoist Revolution* (London: Verso, 2014).

[6] Nepal's long-standing advocacy for UN reform, especially Security Council democratization is discussed in Dinesh Bhattarai, "United Nations and Nepal: Commitment to Multilateralism," *Nepal Council of World Affairs Occasional Paper* (2021).

difficult for the country to have a consistent diplomatic stance. Nevertheless, the recent wave of youth-led political activism, therefore, implies a possible shift to a more transparent, accountable, and globally responsive policymaking environment. Nepal's ability to maintain an effective multilateral strategy while going through the elections and adjusting its governance priorities will, therefore, be dependent on enhancing institutional capacity and delivering domestic aspirations into foreign policy that is consistent.

Theoretical Framework: Multilateralism and Small-State Foreign Policy

The conceptual models that depict the behavior of small states in the world system elucidate Nepal's multilateralism. According to Small State Theory, such states with limited material capabilities, e.g., military strength, economic size, or geopolitical influence, must depend on international institutions to ensure their interests[7]. Therefore, by existing in rule-based systems, small states not only reduce their risk but also increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis larger powers. Multilateral platforms, for Nepal, are a sort of protective buffer against the structural asymmetry that it has to battle with, particularly, because it is situated between two technologically advancing global giants, India and China.

From the viewpoint of Neoliberal Institutionalism; Multilateral institutions can be seen as the principal agents that remove uncertainty and thereby facilitate cooperation[8]. The organizations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and various regional bodies accomplish this by creating the rules, transparency measures, and dispute resolution procedures, among others. which are good for countries like Nepal[9]. These procedures provide Nepal with the capability of making agreements in areas such as financing for development, security cooperation, and gaining global recognition even though its bilateral leverage is limited. Besides that, Nepal's participation in peacekeeping is a demonstration of how small states can convert institutional engagement into diplomatic capital, prestige, and material rewards.

According to constructivist theory, identities, norms, and values are all factors that significantly influence foreign policy behavior[10]. The foreign policy identity of Nepal non-alignment, peaceful diplomacy, and moral leadership of the Global South has a great impact on its behavior in multilateral. By supporting the reform of the UN, disarmament, and fair development, it is simply

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[7] For the theoretical basis of small-state foreign policy in contemporary IR, see Baldur Thorhallsson, "Small States in the UN Security Council: Means of Influence?" *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 7, no. 2 (2012): 135–160.

[8] Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[9] John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992): 561–598.

[10] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

reflecting its normative commitments, not taking strategic moves. The country's image of itself as a peace and justice promoter is the underlying reason why it keeps taking part in peacekeeping and leading the bureau for coordination of LDC.

So, Nepal is a proponent of multilateralism due to its structural and normative orientation. The theoretical frameworks collectively indicate that Nepal leverages multilateralism not only as a survival strategy but also as a means of claiming agency, identity, and influence at the global level[11]. An understanding of this interplay is tantamount to having an analytical framework for Nepal's foreign policy during times of domestic upheaval and political transition.

Major Multilateral Challenges for Nepal, 2020–2025

Nepal's multilaterally engaged system has generally been negatively affected by several global and regional challenges during the last couple of years. Among these, the most important one is probably the geopolitically polarized world which, to some extent, is a result of increasing US–China strategic rivalry[12]. As a response to this rivalry, global institutions, especially the United Nations, are a victim of this mistrust and consequently are becoming more and more dysfunctional. In fact, it is increasingly difficult to reach agreements in the United Nations. For a country like Nepal that benefits a stable multilateral system, the division of global governance is not only shrinking its diplomatic possibilities but is also causing it to have policy contradiction[13].

Regionally speaking, South Asian multilateralism is suffering and tragic since the long-standing tension between India and Pakistan, thus, making SAARC a practically child paralyzed[14]. Due to the suspension of SAARC activities, Nepal is lacking a regional platform for security, connectivity, and economic cooperation. On the other side, though BIMSTEC is emerging a kind of substitute, structural and members' priorities differences are still causing it to face challenges and delays. As a result, Nepal is left with very few opportunities for regional diplomacy through institutional frameworks.

The next big challenge in front of Nepal is coming from its plan to leave the Least Developed Country (LDC) category by the year 2026. Graduation from LDC is positive as it indicates development, rather, it is also signaling that Nepal will no longer have a right to trade privileges

[11] Annette Baker Fox, *The Power of Small States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

[12] Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[13] Lok Raj Baral, *Nepal's Foreign Policy: Assessing Changing Dynamics* (Kathmandu: Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies, 2020).

[14] Aparna Pande, *Making India Great: The Promise of a Reluctant Global Power* (HarperCollins, 2020), esp. chapter on SAARC paralysis.

and concessional financing and will lose access to multilateral support mechanisms[15]. So Nepal should be doing it by making new trade deals and negotiating new financial terms fitting into the global economic governance system, while on the other hand, world inequality is getting worse and climate change impacts keep rising. This situation of Nepal's LDC diplomacy makes it very urgent and challenging at the same time.

Climate diplomacy is another area that raises significant concerns. The country is a mountainous and very vulnerable to climate change; therefore, the only way for Nepal is to rely on the global efforts towards climate finance and the provision of adaptation funds. However, at the same time, climate finance acts as a limiting factor for Nepal since it is a long process, highly competitive, and politicized. Nepal faces this dilemma while being the voice for the vulnerable Himalayan ecosystems that are adversely affected by climate change. Together, these issues reflect the challenges that Nepal faces in its multilateral environment. They also indicate how the domestic impact of global and regional changes are mixing and thus, influencing Nepal's capability of coming up with a consistent multilateral strategy during the political transition[16].

Opportunities for Nepal within Multilateralism

Nepal's multilateralism is strategic and can benefit the country in numerous ways. National development, global visibility, and diplomatic influence are some of the areas where such engagement can bring benefits to Nepal. The most groundbreaking area to use could be climate diplomacy. As a climate-vulnerable Himalayan country, Nepal is entitled to various advantages under global climate regimes[17]. The country may get the funding for the process of adaptation, package the protection of the mountain-ecosystem, and make the case for climate justice. Furthermore, Nepal's participation through global mountain alliances combined with its moral authority as one of the frontline climate-affected countries, enhances its share in COP negotiations[18].

Digital governance is another area where new opportunities are emerging. The Gen Z–led protests of 2025 emphasized that the digital rights and online freedoms of people have become the core of political legitimacy[19]. Multilateral forums give Nepal a chance to shape cyber norms, set the rules

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[15] UN Committee for Development Policy, *Nepal: LDC Graduation Report* (New York: United Nations, 2021).

[16] Government of Nepal, *National Climate Change Policy 2019* and statements at COP27 and COP28.

[17] IPCC, *Sixth Assessment Report: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022), chapters on the Hindu Kush–Himalaya region.

[18] ICIMOD, "Mountain Resilience and Regional Cooperation," *Himalayan Assessment Report* (Kathmandu: ICIMOD, 2021).

[19] Nepal's Digital Rights Movement and Gen Z Mobilization," *Himal Southasian*, October 2025

for digital privacy, and introduce the steps for safeguarding the democratic space- local demands getting harmonized with global governance reforms. Apart from that, this will be helpful in reviving international trust that was damaged due to the social media ban crisis.

Labor migration diplomacy remains the key focus of multilateral engagement. As remittances make up almost one-fourth of Nepal's GDP, Nepal is in a position to use such platforms as the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) and ILO to advocate for ethical recruitment, worker rights, and the opening of labor corridors[20]. Besides the inflow of foreign currencies, the strengthening of migration diplomacy will be instrumental in ensuring the safety of Nepali workers who are living and working abroad.

Meanwhile, peacekeeping is still the most prominent diplomatic capital of Nepal. Being a reliable peacekeeper, the Nepali Army acquires international prestige and other benefits such as training, resources, and global networks from the UN. Nepal may bring to the fore the issue of expanding the roles such as mediation, civilian protection, and post-conflict reconstruction, especially where conflicts are undergoing changes - in Africa and the Middle East, for instance.

In short, Nepal through the LDC Global Coordination Bureau Chair position (2023-2026) gets a very big leap in the leadership hierarchy. Hence, Kathmandu wields the authority to influence the agenda of the talks on financing for development, trade reforms, and South-South cooperation. Many such occasions unfold the idea that multilateralism is not just a foreign policy tool or a strategic route to Nepal's viability, reform, and global integration in the long run.

Conclusion

Nepal’s evolving encounter with multilateralism reveals a complex but ultimately promising trajectory shaped by both domestic turbulence and shifting global power dynamics. The social media ban and, as a result, the political crisis of 2025 uncovered a whole lot of issues with Nepal's government system. However, it also happened to be the time when the youth of the whole country broke out into an unprecedented wave of civic mobilization. The young people now have the power and the will to make the state more accountable and transparent and to be involved in the policy-making process.

This domestic upheaval inevitably intersects with Nepal’s external behavior, showing how internal political legitimacy and foreign policy coherence are increasingly intertwined. However, through it all, the country has not wavered from the principles mentioned in the UN Charter. It has kept up a dignified posture of neutrality, actively contributed to UN Peacekeeping Operations, and played the role of a leader amongst the least developed countries (LDCs)[21]. Multilateralism continues to be the core of Nepal's international orientation, as it is indispensable for a small state that has to face the strategic pressure of both India and China as well as the disintegration of global governance structures.

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[20] International Labour Organization, *ILO–Nepal Labour Migration Report 2024* (Geneva: ILO, 2024).

[21] Government of Nepal, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Policy White Paper 2024* (Kathmandu: MoFA, 2024).

Ultimately, the fate of Nepal's engagement in multilateralism will be decided by the country's prowess to bring some order into its domestic politics on one hand and to convert societal aspirations, mostly those of Gen-Z into a well-structured foreign policy on the other. If the Nepalese leadership manages to build up institutional strength, provide governance that is predictable, and bring harmony between the country's normative and strategic goals, it will be able to turn multilateralism from a defensive move into a proactive one that revitalizes the nation. From this perspective, multilateralism is not just an instrument employed on the outside; it is a democratically sustainable strategy, a way to maintain global relevance and achieve development goals in a time of profound national and international transition.

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2

Impact of Constitutional Reforms and Multilateral Investment Treaties within the South Asia: Importance of Strengthening the Infrastructure Development

Ishini Shashipraba

Abstract

Proper infrastructure development is a pivotal value addition to the prompt growth of an institution's economy and overall big picture. One of the many pressing issues within the South Asian region is inclusive of significant pressure due to the increase in poverty and adverse consequences of rapid urbanization. Although an improvement to a certain extent can be recognized recently, gaps can still be recognized due to corruption, poor application in legal rights etc. This essay is an exploration on the contribution of constitutional reforms in creating a promising environment for infrastructure development within the South Asia and how global multilateral treaties are assisted with the cause, further suggesting methods to ensure a better framework for an efficient and effective system for the people in South Asia.

Introduction

Although the countries within the South Asian region step into the verge of attention in the global trade as a result of privileged geographical location structures in combination with the rapidly increasing economic advancements, leading up to its inclusion among the top three main economic core areas globally, India sharing prominent boundaries with the rest of the countries in addition[22] , the level of provision in infrastructure facilities visibly placed behind.

Issues in relation to poor access to water, open defecation and lack of hygiene are in decrease to a lesser amount as opposed to past. Be that as it may, 610 million people up to the date follow open defecation and over 134 million people are not in access to clean drinking water. It is further believed that between 68 to 84 percent of water sources are contaminated. This paper is an attempt in addressing the influence in rising demand for standardized infrastructure to mitigate said scenarios. The recognition of imperative need for a multifaceted approach to come into action is further addressed. While Constitutional reforms in the South Asian Countries can improve the statutory background for the development of infrastructure, it is suggested that multilateral investments treaties on the other hand possess the ability to provide financial aid and technical

support to assist with large scaled projects which would potentially improve the overall condition of such South Asian Countries.

Constitutional Reforms

Constitutional reforms in South Asian countries are essential in transforming the region's infrastructure landscape. The collective goal of the reforms must be the enhancement of governance structures, improvement of regulatory frameworks, and assurance of efficiency in allocation and utilization, ultimately the provision of adequate quality service to citizens.

Few countries have made noticeable attempts in ensuring people having sufficient access to such proper infrastructure in the constitutions. Article 288 of the constitution of India ensures to not charge tax on electricity and water, thereby minimizing the living cost at least to an extent. Article 243ZD (3) (i) also ensures the district planning committees to consider matters of common interest in relation to sharing of water and other physical and natural resources, integrated development of infrastructure and environmental conservation in drafting the development plans. These provisions inevitably enable more targeted investments in areas like rural roads, sanitation, and local transport, addressing specific regional needs that were majorly overlooked.

Section 16 of part II of the constitution of Bangladesh ensures the adoption of effective measures by state in removing the disparity in standards of living between the people in urban areas with rural areas.

A relatively lengthy area is allocated in the constitution of Sri Lanka as opposed to many other constitutions within the South Asia, entirely for the said, deserving it a praise.

These constitutional obligations obligate governments to design and fund national sanitation programs and promote hygiene behaviour. Even though the attempts in legal reforms are visible, the statistics provide the results which shows the improper and inadequate application and implementation of such reforms.

Multilateral Investments

In addition to domestic reforms, South Asian countries further receive aid in intra asia nature and vice versa to overcome infrastructure deficits. Few instances to be provided, the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement came into action in 2016 with twelve Asian pacific members, addressing the need of closer regional integration for the promotion of sustainable growth, with increased trade and investment, consequently resulting in easier movement of goods, services, information and people, which is a popular trend in the world of global economy. South Asian countries further found Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016 as a multilateral development bank with the intention to eradicate the unresolved issues , where AIIB helps in covering projects in relation to sustainable infrastructure development including hydropower, transmission lines and water supply, rural roads, urban infrastructure renewal. In 2014 VI BRICS Summit, the New Development Bank (NDB), another multilateral development bank was declared aiming to mobilize resources to finance infrastructure and sustainable development projects in developing countries.

Setbacks in implementation

Although the Indonesia's National Strategic Projects, Vietnam's North-South Expressway, and Philippines' Build, Build, Build Program assert the overall growth in infrastructure scope of South Asia to a larger extent, occurrence in nepotism, bribery and fraud consequent in stagnation. Money granted internationally for the usage of public services received by the parties in power and eventually lead to misuse, often hits the poorest. One notable instance is 40,000 people in Pakistan getting defrauded of over US$13 million. The mistrust among investors in contribution becomes a given in such case. It is recommended to take sufficient measures to shield institutions such as the judiciary and anti-corruption commissions, from political influence in ensuring the proper division of aids among the relevant infrastructure projects appropriately.

Integration of the Constitutional Reforms and Multilateral Investment Treaties

The integration of above aspects would help in improving the results and effectiveness, where constitutional reforms create a conducive environment for investments by establishing clear regulations, better enforcement mechanisms, and improved transparency leading to the attraction of inter-asia and global investors and facilitate project execution due to effective legal frameworks and streamlined administrative processes. On the other hand, multilateral investment treaties can reinforce the need for further reforms additionally to the said motives by improving the quality of services in contributing in monetary and non monetary terms. The importance of the development of stern legal frameworks to support public and private partnerships and infrastructure investments between international funding agencies is essential and must receive the attention, to ensure efficient project execution, additionally investment in capacity building programs to equip local authorities with the skills and knowledge needed for effective infrastructure project management is recommended to improve the quality of life of the people in the South Asian region and such policy suggestions would improve the overall performance.

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3

Multilateralism For Tomorrow's Challenges

Mya Wint Kyaw

Abstract

This essay intends to discuss the long-standing principles of multilateralism through today's challenges to determine whether they can weather the crises of tomorrow. Multilateral institutions have come under fire in recent years as being insufficient in dealing with the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic or deadly conflict between nations. However, these institutions remain vital to international governance and must be reformed to effectively respond to current global problems.

Introduction

Multilateralism has enjoyed a long tenure as the predominantly accepted mode of international governance. It has been defined most notably by Robert Keohane who stated in *Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research* (Keohane, 1990), that multilateralism was "the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions." The end of the Second World War allowed for the flourishing of numerous multilateral institutions in the West as the world became interdependent and globalised. Amid the Cold War, multilateralism also made headway in the Indo-Pacific region allowing its nations to engage with each other in matters of regional cooperation, economic development, and security matters.

Since the start of the 21st century, the system of multilateralism has been repeatedly tested, from global financial crises and pandemics to armed conflicts, and the threat of the climate crisis. The legitimacy of top multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or the World Bank, have frequently been called into question due to perceived missteps addressing global challenges. And the previously unipolar world seems to be in the process of shifting into a multipolar system as geopolitical divides form and nations begin to strain against the status quo of the liberal and rules-based international order. The world in which multilateralism has thrived is transforming and if the multilateral system hopes to maintain its legitimacy, it needs to do the same.

In the last five years alone, the world has experienced several serious challenges that have stressed international cooperation, from the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the Gaza crisis. The mistakes or miscalculations of multilateral institutions to prevent or respond when faced with the effects of these crises have made visible the inadequacies of multilateralism today. And the outlook remains grim with the World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report 2023* (World Economic Forum, 2023) anticipating a 'polycrisis', where various crises geopolitical, socioeconomic and environmental converge "such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part", resulting in potential natural resource shortages. Recent years have also seen the resurgence of bilateralism among regional actors as a more efficient method of engagement. The multilateral system has increasingly come to be viewed as ineffective, indecisive and sluggish

when dealing with such challenges. And yet amid so many global issues and burgeoning distrust, multilateral governance remains the most viable method to deal with crises of such large scale. As Chikvaidze asserts in *Multilateralism: Its Past, Present and Future* "global challenges are also global opportunities: and they can only be addressed collectively…The United Nations remains the only truly global, truly neutral, truly legitimate table around which all stakeholders can come together to find solutions" (Chikvaidze & Likhotal, 2020).

Multilateralism in Southeast Asia

The Indo-Pacific region adopted multilateralism relatively late compared to other regions, and Asia has not integrated to form a supranational institution like the European Union or the African Union. Instead, multilateralism in Southeast Asia (SEA) and the greater Indo-Pacific region, has predominantly been guided by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an almost 60-year-old intergovernmental organization that requires looser political and economic integration from its 10 member states. ASEAN has been central to economic integration in Asia and has six free trade agreements with countries such as China, India, and Japan among others. It has also established partnerships with various external partners aiming to pursue shared goals and initiatives as well as promote sustainable development. ASEAN has also established multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asia Summit (EAS) to collaborate with many parties on regional issues.

Utilising its own multilateral approaches, ASEAN operates to address regional issues, promote economic growth, and maintain stability among its members. Decision-making is based on a consensus model, where decisions are made collectively with the agreement of all member states. Additionally, ASEAN's fundamental principle of non-interference has been a defining and integral characteristic of its policy since its inception, a unique feature of its multilateral approach. But the non-interference policy has also been seen as a double-edged sword when addressing regional security issues. ASEAN comprises a diverse group, including emerging middle powers and smaller states that have, for the most part, been able to avoid political disputes through this non-interference policy. The policy appeals to member states' sense of national sovereignty by steering clear of potentially touchy topics, maintaining stability and allowing members to focus on economic cooperation. However, the policy also hinders active involvement in member states' domestic affairs. Introducing mechanisms for faster response to events and ensuring that all member states, regardless of size or influence, have a voice in crucial decisions can bolster ASEAN's credibility and effectiveness.

This has led to ASEAN's struggles in transmitting a unified response when dealing with issues such as the South China Sea dispute, the conflict in Myanmar as well as just generally navigating the United States-China power competition. Criticism has especially been directed at the bloc's limited ability to enforce the Five-Point Consensus adopted in 2021 to hold the Myanmar junta accountable after the military coup, or to advance the South China Sea Code of Conduct negotiations, which have stalled for over two decades, there have been progressively louder calls for a reevaluation of this policy of non-interference.However, ASEAN has operated in the last six decades under this policy, maintaining a sensitivity to the delicate balance between its member nations. Changing its stance on its policy constitutes a fundamental change in its principle of non-interference and consensus. The act of doing so invites even more discord among a group of countries that naturally have little in common politically, culturally, and ethnically. If a member nation were to be isolated, it would be detrimental for the unity of the organization as a whole.

Previously, ASEAN has utilised its frameworks like the ARF and the EAS to tackle political or security issues without breaching its non-interference policy, it should continue to use these venues. While the effectiveness of ASEAN's intervention strategy needs to be addressed, it also needs to take a careful approach in addressing its crises to prevent further schism among its members.

Initiatives for ASEAN

As one of the leading multilateral institutions in SEA, ASEAN should also endeavour to level the playing field between its members. A development gap still exists between the founding members of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines compared to the countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam. ASEAN should expand its initiatives to narrow the development gap and better integrate its member states. In this way, ASEAN might better integrate its members and achieve greater regional competitiveness. ASEAN should also improve and maintain dialogue partnerships and strategic relationships with other countries and regional organisations to increase its legitimacy on the global stage.

In terms of UN initiatives, ASEAN has committed to several including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

The SDGs, established in 2015 and adopted by all UN members, represent a global call to action with the aim of improving peace and prosperity through reducing poverty, improving education and addressing climate change. They aim to reach the goals and promote sustainable development by 2030. Implementing such commitments requires a collaborative effort from actors to work for the collective good. With some nations lacking the tools to effectively monitor and report on the progress of the SDGs, regional cooperation is necessary for achievement of the goals. Similarly, ASEAN has committed to the Paris Agreement, pledging to reduce their emissions through 2030 to limit the rise of average global temperatures. Committing to these goals is particularly important for SEA nations as they are vulnerable to the effects of global warming such as rising sea levels and natural disasters.

Tomorrow's Multilateralism

In an increasingly multipolar world, SEA has far more to lose than gain if the current multilateral system were to decline. Institutions like ASEAN need to review and reform while being conscious to retain stability in order to contend with the changing times. While this essay has cast doubt on the adequacy of today's multilateralism multiple times, it does not doubt its potential under the right circumstances. When another global crisis occurs, the world will again turn to multilateral institutions to find a solution, regardless of great power competitions or multipolarity.

Should the 'polycrisis' descend upon the world in the near future, an objective and equitable multilateralism remains the approach with the best potential to overcome it. Thus, multilateralism needs to evolve and mature in preparation to better address the complexities of today's challenges. The ability to navigate the current and potential emerging risks in the coming decades demands a strong multilateral system. Organisations need to be reworked so they can respond to issues faster and effectively. What is required is a concentrated effort by international organisations, governments, non-governmental organisations and other actors to strengthen multilateral cooperation in order to collectively address global issues.

Coordination should be deepened between regional bodies like ASEAN and global frameworks that promote multilateralism, such as the UN, the WTO or the World Bank, particularly in areas of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and humanitarian initiatives. Institutional reform should be considered to strengthen and refine ASEAN's policies while maintaining its core values, to enable more decisive, timely intervention in regional issues. The landscape of tomorrow will continue to demand a multilateralist approach, as collective action is essential for meaningfully confronting global issues, and multilateral institutions must modernise and adapt if they are to face this challenge.

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4

State of Trust in South Asia

Yahya Khan and Puruesh Chaudhary

Abstract

The State of Trust in South Asia explores the complex character of trust in one of the most diverse regions in the world. The report takes a look at how trust is profoundly ingrained in familial and community structures, which have been influenced by cultural and religious traditions for millennia. It examines the effects of political manipulation, disinformation, and regional conflicts, juxtaposing interpersonal trust with the widespread distrust of governmental institutions. Furthermore, the paper addresses the difficulties of promoting international cooperation in the face of historical grievances and security concerns, as well as the economic interconnections that are conditioned upon trust. The analysis offers a thorough comprehension of the dynamics of trust in this intricate and multifaceted region.

Introduction

With a population of more than 1.9 billion as of 2024, South Asia is one of the most densely populated regions housing a quarter of the world's population. The population in the region is very diverse, and there is great variety in linguistic backgrounds, cultural traditions, and nationalities with the median age being mid to late twenties which portrays a strong workforce with between 60-65% of the population between the age of 15-64, 30% of the population being under 15 years of age and the elderly only comprising of 5-10% of South Asia's population demographics (UN, DESA 2022). The region now has more than 800 million Internet users, encompassing 50% of the region's population thereby showing development in internet usage and displaying the rapid expansion in the use of the internet and connectivity in this region. This however falls short of global standards with many developed nations having surpassed 80% of internet penetration amongst the masses (ITU, 2023). Trust in South Asia is a deeply ingrained social construct, shaped by millennia of cultural, religious, and historical influences. This region's unique fabric of trust manifests predominantly at the interpersonal level, thriving within the close-knit circles of family and community. Trust here is not merely a personal sentiment but a cultural ethos that binds individuals and communities through mutual support and social obligations. The discussion through this paper delves into the intricate nature of trust in South Asia, examining its foundations in familial and community structures, the role of religious and cultural traditions, and its implications for political manipulation, border conflicts, and international relations. Additionally, this paper contrasts the trust within communities and religious institutions with the pervasive distrust in social institutions such as government agencies, the legal system, and financial organizations. This analysis is supported by relevant statistics, facts, and scholarly perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of trust in this complex and diverse region.

Cultural and Familial Foundations of Trust

In South Asia, trust is fundamentally interpersonal, nourishing within the family and extended

kinship networks. Family relationships are crucial, with loyalty and obligations to close and extended family members serving as the foundation of social trust. This familial trust extends beyond the nuclear family to encompass a large network of kinship links spanning generations. For example, according to Brown's (2008) study of South Asian mothers, "they had often experienced barriers to effective communication between themselves and health professionals and this resulted in a lack of trust and confidence, sometimes with serious consequences in respect of accessing services and information."

Religious and cultural traditions serve to reinforce the sense of trust. Religious organizations such as temples, mosques, churches, and gurdwaras are seen as pillars of faith and moral authority. These institutions frequently act as mediators in community disputes, providers of social assistance, and keepers of moral standards. Religious leaders are trusted persons whose advice and decisions are respected and obeyed, fostering community cohesion and confidence. For instance, in India, local temples often serve as centers for dispute resolution and social welfare activities. Cultural activities like hospitality, respect for elders, and involvement in community festivals and rituals promote social cohesion. The tradition of hospitality, where guests are treated with utmost respect and kindness, demonstrates the social spirit and trust found in South Asian communities. Elders are valued, and their advice and actions carry tremendous weight, reinforcing trust within the social hierarchy.

Shared Experiences and Mutual Dependencies

Shared experiences and mutual dependencies frequently help build and reinforce trust among South Asian groups. In rural locations, agricultural tasks often necessitate a collaborative effort, with neighbours and extended families working together during planting and harvest seasons. This partnership develops interdependence and trust among community members, who rely on one another for support and assistance. "Within the broad notion of social capital, we pay particular attention to trust, cooperation, sense of community, and culture and tradition. All four dimensions play a critical role in agricultural and rural development as they affect how people relate to each other, organize themselves and interact for development (Rivera et al.)."

Urban areas, while different in structure, still maintain strong community relationships, especially among ethnic and religious enclaves where individuals share cultural histories and customs. For instance, in large cities like Karachi and Mumbai, ethnic communities form tight-knit networks that provide social and economic support to their members.

The Disinformation Dilemma

In South Asia, active disinformation operations have caused huge dents in public condence with social cohesiveness, healthcare, and government institutions. Political disinformation has largely prevailed, more so during electoral cycles. For instance, in the case of the 2019 general elections in India, a variety of distorted content and misleading information was broadcast across the country with an intention to influence voter behavior and discredit opponents (The Hindu, 2024). Similar strategies have been witnessed in Pakistan, whereby political organizations weakened competitors by spreading false information. The COVID-19 pandemic also portrayed how health-related disinformation can kill. Misinformation about the virus, vaccine safety, and fake treatments had piled up across social media platforms leading to mass hesitance regarding the need for vaccination, hence negatively influencing public health efforts (WHO, 2020). Prevalent fear and

unwillingness to get vaccinated because of news about the side effects of vaccines and dubious cures for the virus hampered India's pandemic response greatly due to which the country was amongst those most affected by the pandemic. Misinformation has incited social tensions and violence among communities; in Sri Lanka and India, misinformation targeting religious and ethnic minorities has served to widen societal pressures and instigate mob violence against these groups (The Diplomat, 2020 & The Washington Post, 2020). For example, in India, lynchings and riots have been instigated through fake news about forced religious conversions or cow slaughter, while in Sri Lanka, violent battles between ethnic groups have resulted from disinformation about minority communities. Cross-border disinformation has also proved instrumental in causing regional tensions and conflicts. There exist a lot of propaganda and disinformation campaigns run by the state and non-state actors in India and Pakistan against each other through social media, entailing an increase in tensions and distrust between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. In times of tension, such as after the 2019 Pulwama attack, the messages of fake news and misinformation, tested diplomatic relations by provoking public anger at both ends (UT Austin, 2019). Since the Rohingya crisis, similar misinformation has crossed borders between Bangladesh and Myanmar, influencing popular sentiment and national policy decisions in both countries.

Exploring Economic Interconnections

The economic interactions in South Asia are heavily reliant on trust, especially in the vast informal sector. Personal relationships and reputation often take precedence over formal contracts. Business dealings frequently rely on the trust established through repeated interactions, mutual respect, and the fulfillment of societal responsibilities. Entrepreneurs and traders prefer to conduct business with individuals and organizations they know and trust, as maintaining one's honor and integrity is critical. This trust-based approach also applies to micronance and informal lending practices, where community members pool their resources and provide loans based on personal confidence and social guarantees rather than formal collateral. Pradesh argues, “the industry [has] become no better than the widely despised village loan sharks it was intended to replace... The money lender lives in the community. At least you can burn down his house. With these companies, it is loot and scoot” (Polgreen and Bajaj 2010).

Familial ties and community networks often play an essential role in business. Many firms in South Asia are family-owned and controlled, and trust is a critical component of business operations. These businesses rely on a solid foundation of familial trust to manage operations, nances, and growth. Additionally, business communities, such as trade associations or professional guilds, rely on trust, with members supporting each other through shared knowledge, resources, and collective bargaining. There comes a point however, where group affiliation of businesses may exceed potential benets. For instance, membership in these diversified groups is widely associated with conflicts of interests between controlling family shareholders and minority shareholders. Common family ownership and trust may result in misallocation of capital for example or inefficient compensation (Khanna & Palepu, 2002).

In terms of international trade, building trust is necessary to encourage economic engagement, more so in regions that share resources and borders. However, the complex mistrust between people has fostered quite a number of barriers to commercial integration throughout South Asia. In addition, the existence of taris, non-tari barriers, and cumbersome customs procedures reduces the attractiveness of intraregional trade as compared to trading with far-flung partners. For example, India and Pakistan, though neighboring nations, have almost nil direct trade due to the

prevailing restrictive trade laws and political disturbances (Roy, 2016). The chance of a more integrated regional economy gets strangled by the fact that other South Asian countries share this condition, albeit at different levels.

Nepal relies on India as a major trading partner, but political conflicts like the 2015–2016 blockade have bruised confidence between the two countries. Despite economic interlinkage being high, political sensitivities around border and sovereignty concerns often get in the way of deeper economic integration (Gurung, 2021). Generally, Sri Lanka has pursued relatively friendly economic relations with its neighbours, but regional security concerns and historical grievances such as those related to the Tamil diaspora strain trust at times and hinder broader economic integration (Fernando, 2013). Although the economies of Nepal and Bhutan are essentially stable, their small size and remote location make significant economic integration very difficult. Trust building measures could further strengthen their economic links (Gurung, 2021). Economic integration between Pakistan and Afghanistan is marred by insurgent activities and border conflicts with the presence of smuggling and informal trade channels impacting trade routes and undermining revenue collection causing frequent closures of borders thus hindering any hope of significant economic relations between the two nations (Abbas, 2023).

Initiatives such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), to promote cooperation, remain ineffective and unreliable as mistrust prevails among member states. Meeting and any form of agreements stall and remain unimplemented due to political disagreements and cross border hostilities especially between India and Pakistan although this hindrance is prevalent across other regional borders as well. This lack of condence in itself is a factor that disables these nations from fully committing to regional projects with the potential to improve economic growth and development for all the member states; thus, South Asia remains one of the least economically interconnected areas in the world.

Distrust in Political Institutions

However, political trust in South Asia is often fragile due to historical legacies, corruption, and political manipulation. The politicization of religious identities has often led to communal violence, undermining societal trust. In India, the use of communal politics to garner votes has been a longstanding issue. Similarly, in Pakistan, political instability and military interventions have historically disrupted democratic processes, creating a trust deficit among the populace. Trust in social institutions such as government agencies, the legal system, and financial organizations varies greatly across the region. In many South Asian countries, there is a widespread sense of corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and political instability, undermining trust in government institutions. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2023 shows low scores for South Asian countries: India (39), Pakistan (29), and Bangladesh (24), indicating pervasive corruption (Transparency International, 2023).

Political distrust is deeply ingrained in Bangladesh owing to the protracted partisan rivalry between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s ruling party, the Awami League is accused of silencing opposing voices thus weakening the democratic process. Furthermore, allegations of fraud and electoral violence have further weakened democratic standards (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Recently the country has seen a surge in violent protests and instability owing to a quota being announced on government jobs, which has turned into nationwide riots with 280 people killed and thousands injured in clashes with political

institutions. However, the protests have been successful in overthrowing the government and forcing Prime Minister Hasina to resign after two decades in power and see the country. The decision to leave by Sheikh Hasina emphasizes the gravity of the political situation in Bangladesh and reflects the deep distrust that exists between people and political institutions or the government. This crisis highlights Bangladesh's problems with political violence, corruption, and repression of democratic processes causing severe instability and challenges to leadership. Furthermore, doubts concerning the efficiency and objectivity of governments are joined by the perceptions that the legal system is undermined by charges of bias and lack of independence (Human Rights Watch , 2024).

Since the end of its civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka has been subjected to much political instability and institutional mistrust. The public's trust in political leaders and institutions was damaged due to accusations relating to corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement of governance in the post-convict period. The Rajapaksa's family's prolonged reign of power had destroyed trust in the political system with accusations of authoritarianism and corruption (Jayasundara-Smits, 2020). The recent political crisis the country has gone through with its economic collapse and subsequent political unrest has further eroded confidence in Sri Lanka's institutions. Public outrage and protests against the government on its economic and governance policies have highlighted residual discontent among the general public vis- à-vis political leaders and efficiency of institutional safeguards (Fonseka, 2022). The lack of transparent and accountable governance continues to be a major concern for Sri Lankan citizens.

Distrust in Indian political institutions is a diverse and multilayered issue, with both historical and contemporary roots. The democratic institutions in the country have long been impacted by political manipulation, incompetence, and corruption. High-profile corruption scandals featuring public officials and major political parties have significantly influenced public trust (Anand, 2025). Moreover, the growing identity-based politics and political polarization have been further delegitimizing trust in institutions. Increasing polarization of political discourse along religious, caste, and regional lines has given rise to suspicions of bias and partiality in the government (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2020). The judiciary, while independent, is also perceived by some as being influenced by political considerations, which impacts the public's confidence in its neutrality and effectiveness (Verma, 2020).

Pakistan's historical political instability, military incursions, and corruption have contributed to a great deal of mistrust in institutions of government. During periodic military takeovers and military sway over political issues, democratic institutions have lost their legitimacy and durability (Zia-Ur-Rehman, 2023). The civilian governments are normally viewed as weak and corrupt, for they are unable to credibly address serious problems plaguing the nation, especially in the areas of security and economy (Muneer & Kumar Aryal, 2024). Allegations of rigging and manipulation have also undermined public faith in the electoral process with the court, constitutionally speaking, independent, but often criticized because of its inability to dispense justice equitably and, at times, susceptible to political pressure (Tripathi & Kumar, 2024). The combination of these factors contributes to widespread skepticism about the integrity and functionality of political institutions in Pakistan.

The political climate of Nepal has been marked by instability and frequent changes in leadership, which has caused a general mistrust of political institutions among the populace. Political fighting and many coalition governments have plagued the nation, impeding efficient governance and

policy implementation (Philip, 2024). The 2015 constitution, aimed at stabilizing the political climate, has faced backlash with various ethnic and religious groups feeling marginalized (Pingsdorf, 2019). Corruption and inefficiency in the government further exacerbate public skepticism, impacting the overall trust in Nepal's political institutions (Bhatta, 2020).

The military coup in February 2021, which overthrew Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically elected government, Myanmar's political institutions have faced several challenges. Widespread demonstrations, brutal crackdowns, and a sharp decline in popular confidence in political institutions have resulted from this political landscape (International Crisis Group, 2021). The growing military grip over politics, along with violent suppression of dissent, dealt serious blows to any residual faith in the political system. Ethnic conflicts and continued violations of human rights, especially directed towards the Rohingya community, serve as another evidence of Myanmar's pervasive mistrust and instability (Reuters , 2024).

Decades of conflict, corruption, and failures in governance have furrowed a deep distrust in the political landscape of Afghanistan. August 2021 saw the return to power of the Taliban, which more than anything has worsened this erosion of trust and, in the process, created an acute legitimacy crisis. It was a collapse of the then-prevailing government due to inefficiency and corruption that had already left a trust vacuum (Rubin, 2020). The Taliban's brutal history from 1996 to 2001 has instilled widespread fear, particularly among women and minorities, who dread a return to oppressive policies (Leclerc, Kennedy, & Campis, 2023). Public confidence has been further undermined by the subsequent humanitarian and economic crises, which have been made worse by foreign withdrawal and asset freezes. Obscurity and exclusivism of the Taliban government boost public distrust, especially with restrictions on women's rights and media freedom in violation of its outspoken moderation (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Owing to unreliable and erratic international assistance, a widespread spread of desertion and mistrust ensues, which impedes any efforts to stabilize government institutions. In order to overcome these obstacles and restore international confidence in Afghanistan, governance tactics must be reevaluated (Biddle, 2017).

Trust in the judicial system is another crucial factor, with perceptions of justice and fairness playing an important role. Being influenced by a colonial past and not much being done to introduce modern reforms, the judicial systems across South Asia are perceived to be outdated and disconnected from contemporary needs. The Indian Supreme Court itself, for example, which inherits a great deal from British colonial authority, is under severe criticism due to high-profile corruption scandals and inefficiencies, including the most recent allegations against some of its judges (Biswas, 2017; The Hindu, 2024). Likewise, corruption and political interference have also robbed the judiciary in Pakistan of public condence. Milestone historical events underlining the challenges of upholding judicial independence in wake of political pressure, including the 2007 dismissal of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry has caused widespread distrust in the judiciary (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Delays and corruption issues assail the judicial institutions credibility in Bangladesh, despite reforms like the Legal Aid Act of 2000, tending to free access to justice (Transparency International, 2023). The efficiency of Sri Lanka's judiciary is influenced by both its colonial heritage and political influence, in spite of its continuous reforming and efforts to promote transparency (International Crisis Group, 2009).

In many parts of South Asia, informal judicial processes such as jirgas or panchayats take precedence over formal legal institutions. These traditional methods are often regarded as more

responsive to local customs and more efficient than the social judiciary, which can be hampered by delays and perceived bias. Essentially, informal justice systems provide timely and culturally appropriate responses, maintaining trust through adherence to local norms. ". For example, "Pakhtun jirga in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan's Pakhtun populated districts is held in high esteem by the overwhelming majority - and is trusted more than other forms of informal dispute resolution systems (panchayat, faislo and Baloch jirga) in other parts of Pakistan." Still however, common perceptions favor the use of extended family, neighborhood, and clan - these too are informal institutions which, 'have shared a large burden of cases within both formal and informal justice systems (Shinwari, 2015).' In India Khap panchayats are unsocial forums that are widespread, especially in Haryana and a few other northern states, which address not only conflicts but also other social issues. Although they have been helpful in upholding regional traditions through the ages, sometimes their judgements go against established legal norms and human rights standards (Kumar, 2012). Shalish is a customary, community-based dispute resolution process used in Bangladesh. It has been resorted to in the settlement of most local conflicts, most commonly those related to family and property matters with the process perceived to be easily accessible and give communities a sense of justice (Hoque & Zarif, 2020). Islamic law governing personal status, regarding matters like marriage, divorce, and inheritance, is administered by the Quazi Courts in Sri Lanka. These courts supplement the social legal system and are particularly relevant to the Muslim community, offering a familiar and culturally appropriate way to settle family and personal disputes (Tegal & Isadeen, 2021).

This distrust in social institutions is often rooted in historical experiences with colonialism, political unrest, and economic difficulties. Despite this, local governance institutions, grassroots movements, and non-governmental organizations comparatively have levels of trust. 'The apprehension that because of their lack of basic education and previous political experience, the elected women would be manipulated by men has largely been disproved. Nevertheless, there have been some instances of men using the women representatives of their families as proxies, but these are more the exceptions than the rule. Indeed, the number of "no confidence" motions against elected women representatives, particularly from marginalized groups, has gone up precisely because they refused to compromise with the powerful sections of the rural community (FAO).

Trust in International Relations Over Security Concerns

Cross border relations in South Asia have been complicated, multidimensional and worrying issues. Historical grievances, colonial legacies, and present-day geopolitical rivalry have characterized the region. It is home to the world's most volatile and disputed borders with nations like Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, among others striking a fragile balance between power and diplomacy, where trust is always overshadowed by historical hostilities and strategic goals. These sensitive relations between the bordering nations often lead to military and diplomatic permutations, which have had an enduring influence on the peace, maintaining the stability of the region and its development even to this day. More importantly, beyond influencing their bilateral ties, their lack of mutual trust creates strong obstacles in the way of regional integration and cooperative efforts.

Border conflicts in South Asia significantly impact regional trust. The India-Pakistan border, particularly in the Kashmir region, is one of the most militarized zones in the world. There were over 5,000 ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LoC) in 2020 alone (Clary, 2024). Furthermore, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, allegedly perpetrated by Pakistan-based militants, and the

claim by Pakistan of India's interference in funding Balochistan based militants, show how cross-border terrorism raises tensions and makes common ground harder to end. What has further added to the urgency of this security lapse in the region is the fact that both these major South Asian players are now nuclear armed which provides deterrence to a certain extent but escalating conflicts and proxy wars across borders with time, have been testing this deterrence to a worrying limit. The Economic Times (2024) reports that both countries have significantly increased their military expenditures, reflecting heightened mutual suspicion. However, there are instances of trust- building measures, such as the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) between India and Pakistan, which has survived three wars between the two countries, demonstrating that trust can be built through practical and mutually beneficial agreements. There have been efforts in improving bilateral ties like the recent opening of the Kartarpur corridor by Pakistan which relies on religious harmony and cross border pilgrimage in improving ties as well as the release of Wing commander Abhinandan as a 'gesture of peace', after his fighter jet was shot down by the Pakistani Airforce in the country's airspace. Furthermore, historical agreements such as the Simla Agreement of 1972 and the Lahore Summit of 1999 were aimed at fostering peace, but these efforts have often been undermined by subsequent conflicts and terrorist incidents (Kumar, 2000).

The case of Myanmar and Bangladesh exemplifies how trust issues could gnaw at the roots of diplomatic relations, ultimately threatening regional stability. The exodus of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar to Bangladesh has created a humanitarian crisis and strained diplomatic relations (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The accusations of Bangladesh against Myanmar for human rights violations and Myanmar's reluctance to find a solution to the refugee crisis has aided this animosity. Mutual suspicion between the countries is a big factor that has so far limited any attempt at solving such a situation, affecting not only bilateral ties but also international actors to shape dynamics of trust and cooperation in the region. Bangladesh's calls for international intervention and pressure on Myanmar underscore the trust deficit and the challenge of resolving the crisis through bilateral means (Banerjee, 2023).

The relationship between India and Nepal also illustrates how trust impacts security dynamics. Recent disputes between the two countries in particular in the Kalpani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura areas have led to diplomatic tensions and nationalistic sentiments in both countries (Khanal, 2021) thus, badly damaging their otherwise friendly historical ties. Such strained trust is additionally fed by Nepal's concerns about Indian interference in its domestic affairs. Increasing anxiety for China and a backlash against the region's Indian influence make Nepal's relations with India complex. These challenges impact the overall regional security and hence Nepal's contacts and strategic decisions with other regional powers.

What makes matters more complex is the involvement of Afghanistan in the South Asian security dynamics. Decades of violence, which included the Soviet invasion, the rise of the Taliban to power, and the more recent frictions caused by the withdrawal of the U.S. and the reinstatement of the Taliban to power in 2021, have brought an amount of unpredictability into the Afghan security situation. The turmoil within Afghanistan contagiously affects each of its South Asian neighbours majorly. For example, historical grievances and security concerns have strained relations, with Pakistan being accused of supporting militant groups operating in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Again, the perceived support for Taliban by Pakistan has pitted it against India and other regional players, thus increasing the insecurity conditions within the region. Also, the differences over the Durand line, never formally recognized by Afghanistan between the

two nations, adds to the problems with cross-border skirmishes worsening matters and fueling instability. Issues related to border management and cross- border militant activities continue to be contentious, affecting regional stability and trust (Kaura, 2017).

Both foreign regional forces and local ethnic tensions determine Sri Lanka's security dynamics. Regional issues hinder the prolonged struggle with the Tamil Tigers and the ensuing efforts at reconciliation. Sri Lanka's security environment is made more complex by China's increasing influence through infrastructure projects and India's assistance for the Tamil cause. India and other regional stakeholders view Sri Lanka's deepening ties with China with apprehension, reflecting broader concerns about Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region. These dynamics underscore how internal political decisions can impact regional trust and security (Attanayake, 2024). The interplay between domestic issues and external factors influences the relationship between Sri Lanka and its neighbours.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals a complex landscape of trust in South Asia, one that is deeply woven into the social fabric of family, community, religious, and cultural traditions. This trust, rather than being vested in social institutions, is often manifested most in interpersonal and community interactions. In this region, social, economic, and political participation is effective only if the complex levels of trust are understood. A unique social milieu characterizes South Asia because of the dependence the region places on interpersonal relationships and communal ties, combined with a wary attitude toward governmental institutions. This ingrained faith in interpersonal and group relationships is indicative of the area's adaptation and resilience in the face of fast change. Growing internet connectivity across South Asia provides a unique opportunity to advance social cohesion and build trust in the region. Workshops at the community level and extensive training programs would imbue citizens with the skills needed to identify and reject the characteristics of information disorder. Open data portals and e-governance programs would help enhance accountability and transparency, reducing corruption and giving way to finally gaining confidence in public institutions. Online discussion forums and social media campaigns could provide for constructive exchange and cultural learning to achieve mutual respect and understanding across diverse audiences. Mechanisms for fact-checking need to be boosted through the support of independent fact-checking organizations and collaboration with technology companies that would create real-time disinformation checks. Fact checking groups like Boom Live and Alt News are therefore quite essential in confirming information and dispelling misinformation, while on the other hand, India's Digital India initiative will help to develop digital literacy and online services (CSC, 2024). Understanding the subtleties of trust in South Asia is critical for building productive social, economic, and political connections. Recognizing the unique dynamics of trust in South Asia can help governments, business leaders, and social actors navigate the complexities of this diverse and culturally rich region, promoting collaboration, stability, and fostering social, economic and political engagement.

5

China's Burgeoning Asia-Pacific Influence

Joshua Bowes

Abstract

As the era of global tech competition heats up, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has increasingly looked to South Asia and the Indo-Pacific to bring Beijing's techno-nationalist goals into fruition. As a result, the contentious Asia-Pacific, more specifically the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the South China Sea (SCS) and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan have emerged as spheres of influence for China's autocratic government. Through the colossal Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is able to advance this techno-nationalist agenda, threatening the security of the entire Asia-Pacific region and raising serious questions about the future of China's digital authoritarianism.

Introduction

China and South Asia are inextricably linked to one another by way of the Ancient Silk Road. It only seems fitting, then, that Beijing has increasingly looked to South Asia and the Indo-Pacific to burgeon the CCP's global power into a modern marvel. In doing so, China has cultivated a sphere of regional influence across sectors and industries, ultimately serving to extend the reach of the CCP's authoritarian tentacles. The fusing of truculent military activity with the weaponisation of economic and technological dexterity has become China's modus operandi. Modelled after its internal surveillance state, Beijing has sought to inflect its domestic control across borders, serving up enormous investment packages in return for a local foothold. The Digital Silk Road (DSR), a flagship project of China's colossal Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), is indicative of China's vigour for tech expansionism in the Asia-Pacific. At its core, the DSR threatens the sovereignty and integrity of the smaller Indo-Pacific states, as well as the interests of Western powers and intergovernmental institutions. A large portion of the DSR's sub-projects focus on the information and communications technology (ICT) market, including the construction of expansive high-tech transoceanic cable systems. Such control over the flow of critical intelligence facilitates opportunities for cyber espionage and data manipulation. Further, the direct involvement of China's state banks and corporations in BRI projects means that China's promises of great infrastructural development are enshrined in an agenda of digital authoritarianism. To this end, projects under the BRI banner simultaneously enrich the state and repress sovereign interests. With the advent of artificial intelligence, the capacity for the CCP to engage in nefarious activities is rendered more concrete. China's domineering presence in the Asia-Pacific dually amplifies Beijing's technological strength and its desire for hegemony.

The Digital Silk Road (DSR) and Chinese Techno-Nationalism

A cornerstone of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched in 2013, allowing China to lead enormous infrastructural development in over 150

countries across the globe. At its outset, BRI was created to enhance cross-regional integration and economic development in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Over ten years later, the BRI and its many sub-projects have failed to usher in a renewed sense of economic prosperity for any region. While it has struggled to get off the ground, the BRI, the Digital Silk Road (DSR) and all other projects under the BRI namesake embody the CCP's techno-nationalist foreign policy, designed to crush Western influence and exalt Chinese control (Patil & Gupta, 2024). The DSR is the tech arm of the BRI, emblematic of China's technological capabilities, strategically repressing the agency of the smaller Indo-Pacific states and elevating the CCP's control. Ultimately, the DSR is representative of China's vehemence for new-age hybrid warfare and information operations, waging pressure, intimidation and intelligence warfare against those it perceives as dissidents, including both individual figures and whole nations themselves, including Taiwan, Philippines, Tibet and much of the contentious South China Sea (SCS). While the DSR is not a project led by China's military, the project reflects the CCP's wargaming aggression, meant to simultaneously maximise national goals and thwart the ability of other nations to counteract Beijing's growing dominance in the Asia-Pacific. The DSR presents enormous security challenges in the region, not least of all is the threat of data manipulation. The DSR has facilitated the installation of 5G fibre optic cables and data facilities, as well as the provision of surveillance technology and artificial intelligence (AI) tools across the area (East Asia Forum, 2024). Chinese companies involved in the proliferation of the DSR include Hengtong and HMN Technologies in the construction of undersea communication networks, Hikvision and Dahua in the installation of CCTV cameras, and Unicom, China Mobile and Huawei in the development of regional 5G connectivity. Washington has previously raised grave concern over the involvement of state-owned Chinese companies in the DSR, most notably the capacity for China to conduct clandestine data collection and illegal surveillance. Hikvision and Dahua (Pacific Forum, 2024) have both been linked to severe human rights violations in China's Xinjiang province, a bleak history that has the potential to repeat itself as China expands its tech capabilities. In some nations, the number of cameras installed has risen to the hundreds of thousands. This technology also has remote-hijacking vulnerabilities, which, coupled with the upgrades offered by AI, presents major ethical and cybersecurity concerns (Patil & Gupta, 2024).

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Apart from the DSR, perhaps the largest of all the BRI flagship projects is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Beijing's 15-year, $62 billion infrastructure project focused on strengthening ties with Islamabad and forging modern and efficient trade routes across South Asia (Brookings, 2020). As described by the Government of Pakistan, CPEC is 'a framework of regional connectivity' (CPEC) designed to enhance geographical linkages between Pakistan and China by way of rail, road and air. Since its launch in 2015, CPEC has suffered from a severe lack of transparency. The project, like much of the BRI, has endured criticism from the international community over China's massive lending, which has been labelled 'predatory' by Washington (Brookings, 2020). The United States Department of State alleges that CPEC enriches Chinese companies and citizens to the detriment of the Pakistani people, further entrenching the state of Pakistan into an inescapable debt crisis (Brookings, 2020). On 26 July 2024, the government of Pakistan formally requested Chinese debt restructuring. During a visit to China (Times of India, 2024), Pakistan Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb sought an eight-year extension to repay energy debts, conversion of US dollar-based interest payments to Chinese currency, and reductions of interest rates for both CPEC and non-CPEC Chinese-funded projects. At the end of the last

fiscal year, Pakistan's outstanding payments to China increased by 44%, to total over RS401 billion (Tribune, 2024). On 24 July 2024, Donald Lu, the US Department of State Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, presented a budget request to Congress in the amount of $101 million (Mehmood, 2024). Lu asserted that the funding will be used to strengthen Pakistan's democratic processes, alleviate the heightened risk of terrorism, and slowly wean Islamabad away from Chinese influence. While there are signs that CPEC appears to be buckling under pressure, the project is the result of longstanding Pakistan-China diplomatic ties and is therefore of maximum concern to the United States and its allies, especially given China's history of support for Pakistan's military and weapons programs (United States Institute of Peace, 2023). In late April 2024 (Voice of America, 2024), Washington imposed sanctions on three Chinese companies and one Belarusian firm for alleged connections to Pakistan's ballistic missile program. As such, CPEC has served as an apparatus for China to fortify its military influence on Pakistan, a nation already riddled by deep-running military corruption. In the past three years, Beijing has provided Islamabad with a large amount of military assistance in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Here, China has catalysed the installation of highly-encrypted communication towers and underground cables along the contended Line of Control (LoC). The CCP has also provided Pakistan with critical intelligence support, administering high-powered radar systems, aerial combat vehicles, and truck-mounted weaponry. Since the advent of BRI, the Pakistan-China relationship has grown considerably. Facing growing pressure from the West and a struggling economy, Pakistan is aware it must lean on its domineering neighbour for support.

Debt Diplomacy and the Threat of Economic Collapse

As outlined by the United States House of Representatives Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, a multitude of Pacific island states have accrued tremendous debt under both Chinese BRI and non-BRI loans (ABC News, 2024). The constricting 'debt diplomacy' that many Indo-Pacific nations find themselves in is deeply troubling (Lowy Institute, 2019). So much so that Beijing's massive loans have been coined as a 'debt trap' (Hossain, 2024). For many of these countries, debt accruals have grown to amount to between 1.5 and 4.5 percent of their total GDP (Committee on the CCP, 2024). The economic interdependence that now envelops the Indo-Pacific underscores the grave threat of complete and total economic collapse in the region. While it is important not to be an alarmist, China's strong reluctance for loan forgiveness speaks to the CCP's tunnel vision for expansionist power. Some countries engaged with China are devoting more than a third of government revenue to paying off foreign debt (AP News, 2024a). The cases of Zambia and Sri Lanka are indicative of the debt trap enabled by the CCP. If history tells us anything, it's that China is unprepared to remedy the wake of destruction left behind by its debt diplomacy.

China's Southern Conquest and the United States' Counter-Strategy

China's jingoist foreign policy stretches far past the boundaries of South Asia, and extends well into the Indo-Pacific, a vital passage of trade and commerce. In the contentious South China Sea (SCS), as well as the hotly contested Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the Chinese military has waged a campaign of sheer pugnacity against those perceived to have violated Beijing's territorial claims. In the SCS, China has aggressively confronted Philippine naval forces over the disputed Second Thomas Shoal, a partially submerged littoral belonging to the internationally disputed Spratly Islands. In June 2024, Chinese naval officers confronted a Philippine military vessel near the Shoal, slashing at Philippine military personnel with axes and knives, injuring one officer and damaging vital communication and navigation equipment (CNN, 2024). Manila condemned the

incident and deplored China for its reckless and unwarranted violence. While confrontations such as these continue to grow in frequency and severity, there is little to be done. For those involved in China's investment brokering, it is difficult to do more than quietly censure Beijing's recalcitrant behaviour behind closed doors. Publicly reprimanding China would threaten the colossal investment packages that the Indo-Pacific states have come to rely on. Aside from Manila, who can lean on Washington for support under the 1951 mutual defence pact, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan and many other nations miniscule in size and power to China are subjugated to mere pawns on the gameboard (The New York Times, 2024). On 3 August 2024, in response to escalating tensions, Manila agreed to a new defence agreement with Germany by the end of the year (Semafor, 2024), likely to affirm key operational support to the island nation (AP News, 2024b). China views the involvement of the West as a breach of diplomatic boundaries, but this hasn't stopped Washington from multilaterally strategizing to counter the CCP's breadth of influence. The line of islands that encloses East Asia, colloquially referred to as the 'First Island Chain,' consists of the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan, and is crucial to the United States' counter-strategy. The 'Second Island Chain' stretches from Japan to Papua New Guinea by way of the Federated States of Micronesia and offers the United States and its partners a tactical advantage in operational strategy and intelligence support. While the first island chain presents opportunities to directly counter China's activity in the immediate SCS, the second island chain offers the chance to limit China's broad southerly reach, connecting American military personnel in Hawaii to comrades in Guam.

The AUKUS security initiative has greatly expanded defence spending to meet the regional strategic demand. In 2023, Australia committed over $4 billion to revamp its military bases on its northern coastline (Geopolitical Futures, 2024). Canberra's 2024 Integrated Investment Program will channel a further $9 billion - $12 billion in funds to revitalise Australia's aerial capabilities, including upgrades to P-8A Poseidon aircraft (Australian Government Department of Defence, 2024). Similarly, the United States has allocated nearly $300 million to vital infrastructure projects aimed at reinforcing military facilities in Australia's northern regions, the Cocos Islands, Papua New Guinea, and East Timor. From as early as 2027, AUKUS partners will operate a rotational submarine force in Australia, utilising four nuclear-powered vessels to deter the CCP's refractory campaign in the region (ASA).

Conclusion

China's burgeoning influence in the Asia-Pacific should be of great worry to the international community. The CCP's techno-nationalist foreign policy is enmeshed within its desire for national and economic prowess, licensing China the opportunity to carve out its global influence. While Washington and its allies have drawn up a strategy to meet the operational demand, it is clear that the great power competition will only grow in intensity. For democracy to prevail, it is imperative that the CCP is not allowed to roam free in its nefarious pursuit for total control. The use of technology for iniquitous purposes must not exceed the capacity that technology has for good.

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6

The Polycrisis Nexus: South Asia's Challenges and the Role of Peripheral States

Mira Rai

Abstract

South Asia faces interconnected crises intensified by globalisation, including climate change, pandemics, inflation, and systemic pressures. Despite some resilience, the region grapples with economic strain, poverty, environmental degradation, and political instability. The most vulnerable, peripheral nations struggle under major powers' influence, confronting geopolitical, economic, and environmental challenges. This essay examines South Asia's polycrisis, its implications, and the critical yet precarious role of peripheral nations in fostering regional resilience and responses.

Introduction

Adam Tooze, building on a concept first introduced by French theorist Edgar Morin, describes the escalating global challenges as a "polycrisis," highlighting the interconnected crises across economics, politics, geopolitics, and the environment that intensify and compound each other. This framework illustrates how issues like economic instability, climate change, geopolitical tensions, and public health emergencies amplify vulnerabilities in governance, economies, and societies, calling for comprehensive strategies that address these complex interdependencies. Accelerated globalisation has further amplified these interconnected risks, with challenges such as climate change, pandemics, economic crises, and wars creating unprecedented pressures.

Polycrisis in South Asia

South Asia is grappling with a polycrisis characterised by interconnected and simultaneous challenges that exacerbate regional issues. After the global COVID-19 pandemic, economic and social crises emerged, compounded by inflationary pressures, debt distress, and geopolitical shocks such as the Russia-Ukraine war, which have severely disrupted South Asia's progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the year 2030 (SAWTEE). Despite some resilience in poverty and health indicators, key goals like zero hunger, decent work, reduced inequalities, and economic growth have regressed or stagnated. Countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan face acute economic crises, including foreign exchange shortages and political instability. Large external debts are a major vulnerability for emerging markets and low-income countries, and South Asia's heavy reliance on energy imports worsened the situation in the year 2022. The impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Western sanctions, and rising interest rates led to surging energy prices and currency devaluations, creating a vicious cycle.

In terms of Sri Lanka's and Pakistan's heavy debt, China, a key creditor to Sri Lanka and Pakistan, has shifted from development lending to providing US$24 billion in emergency loans over the past four years, mostly to Pakistan, in response to global economic shocks. While Sri Lanka was trying

to survive and desperate for support, India became a key player to bail it out, and this has helped to make India into a key player in the Sri Lankan bailout. Colombo came to terms with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in early September and promptly opened talks with the Chinese (Adam Tooze, 2022). At the same time, Nepal and Bangladesh confront rising vulnerabilities in their financial systems and cost-of-living pressures. The interconnected nature of these challenges undermines broader goals like education, gender equality, and climate action.

Besides, political instability in South Asia is marked by violent Islamist-backed protests in Bangladesh, which ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and led to mob attacks on her Awami League supporters, particularly targeting the Hindu minority. This unrest adds to regional challenges, with Myanmar embroiled in conflict and the Pakistan-Afghanistan region serving as a hotbed for terrorism, posing significant difficulties for India. Despite over 15 years of leadership, Hasina's autocratic rule contributed to her downfall, mirroring Sri Lanka's 2022 crisis under Gotabaya Rajapaksa. In Bangladesh, as in much of the region, the fall of autocrats often leads to military rule rather than democratic reform. After Hasina's escape to India, facilitated by the military, a civilian interim government with little experience is left to handle the crisis.

In Pakistan, elections alone do not guarantee democracy, as military influence remains paramount; Shehbaz Sharif's government relies on the army chief's approval, highlighting the need for the rule of law and the curbing of extra-constitutional powers to achieve lasting democratic progress. In the Maldives, the political instability triggered by the year 2012 resignation of the democratically elected president under Islamist radical pressure has allowed China to increase its influence in India's maritime region, with the recent signing of a military pact and docking of a large research vessel with the Maldives (Chellaney, 2024). Meanwhile, Islamist radicals are expanding their base by establishing ISIS and al-Qaeda cells on the archipelago. In Nepal, the frequent leadership changes, including the appointment of K.P. Sharma Oli as the 14th prime minister in 16 years, underscore the difficulty in achieving political stability and democratisation.

With all this, crucial issues like climate change are disregarded, as South Asia is regarded as the third pole because its ice fields contain the largest reserve of fresh water outside the polar regions hence this region is vulnerable to climate change impacts, including extreme weather events that threaten agricultural productivity and exacerbate existing socio-economic vulnerabilities (ReliefWeb, 2023). This region is also facing severe economic, social, and environmental impacts from climate change, with rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and the loss of livelihoods for millions, particularly due to diminishing snow cover in the Himalayas and rising sea levels. The region's economy could shrink significantly by the year 2050 and 2100 unless global action is taken to limit temperature could rise above three degrees Celsius (NOAA, 2024), which would still require substantial adaptation costs. Rapid urbanisation and energy consumption are driving a rise in greenhouse gas emissions, particularly in cities dealing with solid waste disposal issues. This last decade has seen the warmest years on record since the year 1850. At the same time, more and worse extreme weather events in the form of storms, floods, droughts, and heatwaves are occurring due to climate change (NOAA, 2024). These events are significantly hindering poverty reduction efforts in the poorest regions. Nepal faces an existential crisis due to climate change, disproportionately affecting lower-income countries like itself, facing the worst effects of climate change such as depleting snow caps and permafrost in the Himalayas, melting glaciers, extreme weather patterns, recurring natural disasters, depleting food production, and harsh living conditions that people find difficult to adapt to (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal, 2023).

Additionally, South Asia remains a hotspot for regional conflicts and global geopolitical struggles. The geopolitical significance of Afghanistan and Pakistan, straddling both South Asia and West Asia, underscores their strategic importance. The region has long been a theatre of rivalry, with the United States and Russia competing for influence since the Cold War, while China's presence looms to the northeast. China's presence in South Asia is evident through its control of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, escalating tensions with India in the Himalayas, and major Belt and Road Initiative projects, which smaller nations in the region evaluate for immediate development benefits despite long-term risks. Meanwhile, India's central role in the region continues to strain its relations with China, as South Asian governments prioritise political survival over strategic foresight. Also, Nepal's geopolitical vulnerabilities stem from its strategic location between China and India, attracting competition from major powers. These challenges have intensified with China's rise and the onset of a "new cold war," compounded by domestic political actors' weak sense of national interest. Regionalism in South Asia has been undermined by power rivalries, including tensions between China and India, China and Pakistan, and the United States, which impede economic development and regional integration, as evidenced by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)'s limited progress.

Role and Importance of Periphery

Because they frequently depend on the main countries for trade and economic support, peripheral nations like Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan are essential to South Asia's polycrisis. Their significance and value in the polycrisis in this area have been diminished by the near-complete disregard and study of this periphery. For instance, India has a major role in the major crises, and its regional supremacy in South Asia is intricately linked. China's expanding might is undermining India's hegemony in the region by taking advantage of smaller nations' long-standing animosity towards India for disregarding their requests. India has responded by reorienting its foreign policy through programmes like the Neighborhood Priority Programme, the Look East Policy, and multilateral alliances with the United States and Japan (Mohan, 2023). These efforts aim to strengthen India's presence in South and Southeast Asia, counter Chinese influence, and maintain regional stability amid shifting diplomatic and economic relations.

Conclusion

The polycrisis in South Asia has not only put pressure on the countries but also revealed the weaknesses in regional governance and cooperation. Nations like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh are struggling with economic issues, climate vulnerabilities, and political unrest, all worsened by global disturbances like the Russia-Ukraine war and the COVID-19 pandemic. Incorporating peripheral nations into wider strategies is essential, as their issues frequently mirror the weaknesses of the entire region. Although economic and geopolitical rivalries among major powers add complexity to the situation, promoting inclusive regional frameworks such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and utilizing multilateral partnerships could offer solutions to alleviate the effects of the polycrisis. Ultimately, South Asia's capacity to manage its polycrisis will rely on the readiness of countries to rise above political conflicts and focus on enduring resilience. International collaboration, climate initiatives, and economic reforms should accompany strengthen democratic institutions and reduce disparities, making certain that no country is overlooked in this complex regional context.

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7

Bridging Borders: Multilateral Labor Mobility and Migration Governance in South Asia

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Abstract

Despite the migration of labor being a vital part of South Asia's economies, there's yet to be a multilateral agreement that covers labor mobility and migration governance with the millions of workers that remit the majority of their salaries back home having to be governed by bilateral agreements instead. This often leaves workers at risk of being exploited due to inconsistent labor protections across the region and economic shocks being worse as workers cannot easily migrate to find better work abroad. This essay examines the need for a multilateral framework to regulate labor mobility in South Asia, exploring any existing precursor mechanisms and examining the potential for a unified governance model through regional frameworks in order to protect its migrant workforce while also maximizing the developmental impact of remittances.

Introduction

The concept of migration is older than human civilization, starting during the time of hunter-gathers and to this day, migration is still a core part of human life. This is especially true in South Asia, a region known for its high population density and uneven economic development. Today, labor migration plays a significant role in driving economic growth in the smaller South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan, while India remains as both a large sender and receiver of migrant labor. According to the World Bank (2023), South Asia exceeded expectations in 2022 and received over $176 billion, with India accounting for $111 billion alone, the largest global recipient of remittances in 2022. However, this was only responsible for 3.5% of India's GDP while in Nepal, the remittances accounted for 33.1% of the entire GDP, proving the importance of remittances in the GDPs of smaller South Asian countries.

Despite this, South Asia is still heavily dependent on external labor markets such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Libya, Malaysia, Singapore, and to a lesser extent countries in Europe and North America (Asian Development Bank, 2012), . This is often governed predominantly by bilateral agreements that often favor the receiving countries' interests and leaves migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation due to a lack of labor safety standards, wage theft due to a lack of power held by the migrant workers in the face of their employers, passport confiscation by exploitative employers who want to limit migrant workers' options, and sudden policy changes by host countries that worsen their lives without any say by the migrant workers themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these weaknesses as millions of workers were forcefully repatriated home without pay, straining the economies that relied so heavily on the remittances provided by these migrant workers and highlighting the need for a multilateral framework that could handle crises such as this one.

While migration is often portrayed as either a domestic or bilateral issue, the scale of migration from South Asia and its socio-economic consequences proves the need for better regional cooperation regarding migration and labor mobility governance. This essay will examine how South Asia can move beyond inconsistent and fragmented governance structures to establishing a multilateral approach that would safeguard its migrant workforce while maximizing sustainable development from remittances for the region.

The State of Labor Mobility in South Asia

As a subcontinent, South Asia is one of the world's largest labor exporting regions due to heavy migration being driven by a combination of lacking domestic employment opportunities, income inequality and low domestic wages, and worse social mobility due to the existence of castes and religious differences. The largest labor exporting countries in South Asia together account for over 24 million migrant workers abroad, 15% of the global migrant worker population (World Bank, 2020). The largest global recipient of remittances, India, receives 120 billion USD in remittances, more than Mexico and China combined, the second and third largest recipients, with workers concentrated in Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Southeast Asia, and increasingly in skilled sectors across OECD countries (Migration Data Portal). While India remains the largest recipient of remittances, Nepal remains the largest recipient in terms of remittances to GDP ratio in South Asia, being ranked the 4th highest in the world at 33.1% compared to India's 3.5% at 77th, being 47 times the world's average of 0.7% (World Bank). The rest of South Asia, with the exception of Maldives with a remittance to GDP ratio of 0.1%, rely on the remittances of their migrant workers to balance foreign exchange rates and maintain sustainable economic growth.

This labor migration is not limited to unskilled workers either with a growing increase in migrant workers being from skilled or semi-skilled backgrounds for careers such as nurses, engineers, IT professionals, and construction supervisors (World Bank, 2025). In recent times, women have started to increasingly participate as migrant workers in the roles of domestic workers and caregivers, especially from Sri Lanka and Nepal, but with the existence of restrictive sponsorship systems in the Middle East, women migrant workers are increasingly at risk of gender-based violence and exploitation, an ongoing concern for the labor exporting countries of South Asia (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022).

The scale of South Asia's reliance on remittances and increasing migrant worker population have both their advantages and disadvantages, offering a lifeline to fragile economies struggling in economic crises with a lack of foreign exchange (The Borgen Project, 2023), but the export of human capital also results in brain drain (Christopher, 2022), overdependence on the economic state of host countries, and potential domestic labor shortages.

Existing Frameworks and Shortcomings

Despite the role remittances and migrant workers play in South Asia's economies, the existing migration governance and labor mobility agreements remain largely fragmented and almost entirely bilateral. Most South Asian economies negotiate independently with host countries and establish bilateral agreements with varying standards, enforcement, and scope, with the host country holding most of the power in these negotiations (Agreement between His Majesty's Government of Nepal & the Government of the State of Qatar, 2005). However, during the Eighteenth SAARC Summit, held in Kathmandu in November 2014, the leaders of the SAARC

Summit did express their determination to deepen regional integration and planned to set up a Technical Committee on Labor Migration. As of 2025, there has been no major update on any form of labor and migration governance with the technical committee having yet to be established as well. Due to BIMSTEC being more focused on regional trade, the framework does not host any form of migration governance either. This lack of any substantial cohesive migration governance results in a system that leaves deciding on the migrant worker rights entirely to the host country, with no formal protections in place, with the exceptions of the limited bilateral agreements.

Why a Multilateral Approach is Needed?

Considering the scale of labor mobility (International Labour Organization, 2018) and the fragmentation of frameworks in South Asia, a multilateral framework for managing labor mobility (International Labour Organization, 2018) and migration governance is essential to be able to protect the rights of migrant workers and the interests of countries sending out migrant workers by creating a united front when negotiating with host countries. Shifting to a multilateral approach would optimize the use of migrant workers with the opportunity to create joint databases tracking migrant workers abroad in host countries, prevent human trafficking, and facilitate the reintegration of returning migrant workers in the case of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of a multilateral framework would also enhance the earning potential of all migrant workers from South Asia with countries exporting labor being able to use the power of a multilateral approach to ensure their workers are well paid, contributing to remittances increasing and therefore sustainable economic growth for all of South Asia (OECD). None of this would be possible without the creation of a multilateral framework and South Asian migrant workers will remain at risk of exploitation, especially in times of crises.

Proposed Multilateral Mechanisms

To be able to bring this vision to reality, this paper proposes the creation of a South Asian Labor Mobility Accord (SALMA), potentially under either SAARC or BIMSTEC. This new Labor Mobility Accord (ICMPD) should aim to standardize labor contract standards by establishing contract requirements in terms of minimum pay and maximum hours, insurance coverage for migrant workers, and mechanisms for dispute resolution. Additionally, the SALMA could potentially create an Overseas Workers Welfare Fund (ILO, 2015b) financed by both sending countries and host countries, with the aim of ensuring emergency support will always be available for migrant workers and their families. Furthermore, to ensure that migrant workers' qualifications are recognized across the world, the SALMA could create a digital platform that recognizes all the different vocational and professional certificates across South Asia, establishing the creation of a Skills Passport (NSP) for migrant workers to easily convey their qualifications in every region of the world. To ensure that these mechanisms are consistently updated for the current economic state of the world, the SALMA could establish an annual negotiation forum aiming to stabilize recruitment costs, update minimum wages with regional inflation, and ensure safe work conditions are constantly upheld. This annual negotiation forum would include each country from South Asia along with all major host countries for migrant workers, enable an annual multilateral dialogue to ensure that migrant workers' rights are protected, remittances are maximized, and host countries' concerns are addressed with minimal delays.

Conclusion

The current state of labor migration in South Asia is currently supporting the region's economies while simultaneously holding the region back. While the increasing remittances are a lifeline for South Asia's more fragile economies and for the millions of families back home, the lack of consistent migration governance has created a source of systemic vulnerability for all migrant workers from the region. The implementation of bilateral agreements have merely provided temporary fixes to a permanent problem, failing to deliver any sustainable and equitable solution for all the parties involved. Establishing a multilateral migration governance framework would transform migration from a reactive survival strategy relied on by South Asia's governments in times of crises, into a strategic tool that improves regional integration and increases both economic development and resilience.

By adopting a unified approach to migration governance, with an emphasis on establishing consistent labor standards, transparent systems, and coordinated bargaining, South Asia has the capability to amplify the region's geopolitical and economic leverage in an increasingly competitive labor market, while being able to better protect the rights of their migrant workforce. With demographic transitions slow but underway and the pressures of climate change mounting in the region, shifting from viewing migration governance as a bilateral issue rather than a multilateral issue is not an option, but a necessity for South Asia to reach its true potential.

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8

Navigating Complexity: The Balochistan Insurgency and the Future of Regional Security in South Asia

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Abstract

The issue brief discusses the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has emerged as a formidable non-state actor challenging Pakistan's sovereignty and regional stability. With China's expanding presence in Pakistan, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the BLA poses an increasing threat to critical infrastructure projects and foreign investments. Applying Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) helps contextualize the insurgency within the South Asian security environment, where regional rivalries—especially between India and Pakistan—shape the conflict dynamics. This paper examines the origins, organizational structure, leadership, activities, and funding sources of the BLA. It further explores the group's terrorist operations, external state support—especially Indian intelligence involvement—and their implications for regional security and Chinese interests. The study concludes with strategic recommendations to mitigate the BLA threat over the next decade. The study employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing interviews for primary data collection. Secondary data were drawn from existing resources available during the research period.

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure and investment strategy, has redefined the geopolitical and economic contours of Asia, Africa, and beyond. At the heart of this expansive vision lies the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship BRI component that underscores Pakistan's strategic importance to China's regional ambitions. With multibillion-dollar investments in infrastructure, energy, and transportation, CPEC has positioned Pakistan as a pivotal partner in Beijing's pursuit of enhanced connectivity and regional influence. However, this deepening infrastructural and economic interdependence is increasingly threatened by persistent security challenges, most notably from insurgent groups operating within Pakistan's restive Balochistan province. Among these groups, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has emerged as a formidable actor, actively opposing what it perceives as the exploitation of Baloch resources by both the Pakistani state and foreign entities—particularly Chinese corporations. Founded on a separatist ideology, the BLA views Chinese involvement in Balochistan as a form of neocolonial intrusion, exacerbating long-standing grievances related to marginalization, underdevelopment, and state repression (Small Arms Survey, 2015; Yousaf, 2019). The group's growing hostility has manifested in high-profile attacks targeting Chinese nationals, projects, and interests, creating a volatile environment that threatens the long-term viability of CPEC and undermines broader regional stability.

The recent Iran–Israel war has further intensified the regional security dilemma, introducing a new layer of volatility that indirectly impacts the Balochistan conflict. With Tehran's growing alignment with anti-Western and anti-Israeli resistance groups, and Israel's regional strikes

widening the theatre of confrontation, the conflict risks spilling into neighboring zones through proxy warfare. Pakistan, sharing a sensitive border with Iran and facing domestic sectarian and insurgent tensions, is particularly vulnerable to destabilizing spillover effects. Iran's Baloch-dominated Sistan-Baluchestan region—already a sanctuary for cross-border Baloch insurgents—could become a more contested or radicalized space in the wake of escalating regional hostilities. Moreover, the Iran-Israel conflict diverts international attention and resources, reducing the diplomatic bandwidth available to de-escalate simmering insurgencies such as that of the BLA. This shifting landscape increases the risk that BLA and similar non-state actors could exploit the geopolitical distraction to intensify attacks, leveraging the fractured regional order to push their separatist agenda more aggressively.

This paper offers a comprehensive examination of the BLA as a sustained security challenge to Chinese strategic investments in Pakistan over the next decade. It explores the group's historical evolution, ideological foundations, organizational structure, and operational tactics. Furthermore, the study assesses the implications of BLA militancy for China's geopolitical strategy, Pakistan's internal security calculus, and the broader regional order in South and Central Asia.

Origins and Evolution of the BLA

The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is a product of deeply entrenched Baloch nationalist sentiment, which has historically challenged the centralized authority of the Pakistani state. This sentiment is rooted in the broader political context of Pakistani federalism, ethnic identity, and longstanding grievances over autonomy and resource control (International Crisis Group, 2006). The Baloch people, who inhabit the geopolitically significant and resource-rich province of Balochistan, have historically perceived themselves as politically and economically marginalized within the federal structure of Pakistan. Balochistan province is the largest supplier of natural gas that receives only one-fifth in royalty payments as compared to the Punjab and Sindh provinces and thus Balochistan – the poorest province – in effect becomes a subsidizer to the richer provinces. Meezan et al. (2009) argue that the situation is further exacerbated by the central government's failure to allocate any portion of its substantial revenues back to the province in the form of development expenditures.

Armed resistance by Baloch tribes predates the creation of Pakistan in 1947, with recurring uprisings against both colonial and post-colonial central authorities. These movements, while varied in scale and organization, have consistently demanded greater regional autonomy, equitable resource distribution, and recognition of Baloch identity and rights. The formal emergence of the BLA in the early 2000s marked a significant evolution in Baloch insurgency, shifting from sporadic tribal rebellions to a more cohesive and ideologically motivated militant organization. The BLA's formation was catalyzed by growing discontent with the state's aggressive resource extraction practices in Balochistan—particularly in the mining and energy sectors—coupled with chronic underdevelopment, militarization of the province, and the systematic exclusion of Baloch voices from national political processes. A critical inflection point came in 2006 with the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti, a prominent Baloch nationalist leader and former chief minister and governor of the province, during a Pakistani military operation. Bugti's death not only intensified anti-state sentiment across Balochistan but also served as a powerful rallying symbol for militant resistance, significantly boosting the BLA's recruitment and legitimacy (Khan, 2014). While the BLA has its roots in earlier tribal militias and nationalist movements, it has since evolved into a more structured and militarized insurgent group. Unlike its predecessors, the BLA combines

traditional guerrilla warfare tactics with modern ideological frameworks, often framing its struggle as an anti-colonial resistance against both the Pakistani state and foreign powers—most notably China. The group's transformation reflects a broader trend within insurgent movements in South Asia, where local grievances are increasingly tied to regional and international geopolitical dynamics. As such, the BLA represents not only a continuity of Baloch nationalist resistance but also its adaptation to a changing strategic landscape.

Geography and the Self-Perpetuating Cycle of Violence

The geographical characteristics of Balochistan present unique operational advantages for insurgent movements. Characterized by vast, sparsely populated territories and challenging topographical features, the region offers natural sanctuaries that enable strategic mobility and resistance against conventional military interventions. The BLA leverages these geographical advantages, creating a decentralized operational model that frustrates traditional counterinsurgency strategies. Pakistan's institutional response to the BLA insurgency has been predominantly characterized by kinetic military approaches, a strategy that inadvertently reinforces the separatist narrative. By prioritizing military solutions over comprehensive developmental interventions, the Pakistani establishment effectively validates the BLA's fundamental critique of systemic marginalization. This approach creates a self-perpetuating cycle of violence and alienation, generating continuous recruitment opportunities for insurgent organizations.

Leadership and Organizational Structure

The BLA's leadership remains elusive and strategically dispersed, often operating from overseas locations to evade capture (Abbas, 2020). Figures like Bashir Zaib, often cited as a senior commander, reportedly operate from exile and use encrypted communication and proxy networks to issue directives. The BLA operates under a decentralized, cell-based structure, which provides operational resilience against counterterrorism operations (SATP, 2021). Each cell—composed of a few operatives—handles its own logistics, planning, and execution. These cells report loosely to the top leadership but operate autonomously to reduce the risk of penetration or total collapse. The group also has specialized propaganda and media wings that focus on disseminating anti-state narratives and seeking international legitimacy for their cause. These units use social media, websites, and encrypted communication to amplify their message and recruit globally, particularly among the Baloch diaspora in the Middle East and Europe (PIPS, 2022).

Resource Politics, Ethnic Identity, and National Integration

Pakistan's largest province represents a complex geopolitical landscape characterized by vast territorial expanse, sparse population, and immense natural resource wealth. Historically, the region has been dominated by a tribal political system where powerful Sardars (tribal leaders) negotiated with the federal government through intricate patronage networks. These arrangements typically involved loyalty payments directly to tribal elites, who were expected to distribute resources among their communities, though in practice, these leaders often accumulated wealth while leaving their populations marginalized. During the 1970s, the Pakistani government implemented strategies to integrate Baloch elites into national institutions, including job quotas and educational opportunities. However, these efforts predominantly benefited the upper echelons of Baloch society, with local populations primarily relegated to manual labor roles. Nearly 70

percent of the population in Balochistan is identified as multidimensionally poor, followed by 48 percent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 45 percent in Sindh (Niaz, 2024). The selective development approach created deep-seated grievances, particularly among younger, educated Baloch who felt systematically excluded from meaningful economic and political participation. The political tensions escalated dramatically during Musharraf's military regime, marked by a significant incident involving the alleged rape of a local doctor by military personnel. This event catalyzed growing resentment against the central government, particularly when Nawab Akbar Bugti, was killed. His death triggered the fifth major insurgency in Balochistan, fundamentally altering the region's political dynamics. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) emerged as a primary resistance movement, strategically targeting military installations and opposing Chinese development projects. Their insurgency represents a complex blend of ethnic nationalism, resource conflict, and opposition to perceived external economic exploitation. The BLA views these infrastructure projects as symbolic of continued marginalization, with military protection of Chinese investments seen as a direct threat to Baloch autonomy. Contemporary Balochistan remains a powder keg of unresolved tensions. The province's development has been consistently uneven, with resource extraction benefiting external stakeholders while local populations experience minimal economic improvement. The tribal leadership's complicity in this system has further complicated potential resolution, creating a multi-layered conflict involving federal authorities, military institutions, tribal elites, and grassroots nationalist movements. The ongoing conflict reflects broader challenges of post-colonial state-building in Pakistan. It demonstrates how unaddressed ethnic grievances, combined with economic marginalization and political exclusion, can transform into sustained insurgent movements. The modern trend of BLA support comes from women, educated middle class is a notable factor of social acceptance gaining traction in the society (Shaikh, 2024). The Balochistan case study offers critical insights into the complex interactions between resource politics, ethnic identity, and national integration. Resolving the Balochistan conflict requires a multifaceted approach emphasizing genuine political representation, transparent resource distribution, and meaningful economic inclusion. Any sustainable solution must address the deep-rooted historical grievances while creating mechanisms for equitable development and political participation.

Diagram A: BLA insurgency root causes, stakeholders and consequences

Activities and Funding Sources

According to Dr. Salma Malik, Geopolitically, the BLA's operational landscape is defined by complex transnational support mechanisms, with India emerging as a primary external patron. Empirical evidence suggests a deliberate, strategic approach wherein India provides comprehensive support encompassing financial resources, advanced training programs, and sophisticated intelligence networks. Afghanistan and Iran serve as critical conduits, facilitating the movement of insurgent leadership and providing operational flexibility within the region's fragmented territorial boundaries (Malik, 2025).

The BLA's activities have become increasingly sophisticated, targeting both symbolic and strategic assets. Its operations span sabotage, bombings, targeted assassinations, and suicide missions (Rana, 2020). Recent years have witnessed a disturbing increase in the use of female suicide bombers, indicating both a tactical evolution and deepening radicalization. One of the main targets of these operations is Chinese personnel and infrastructure associated with CPEC. For example, the group has attacked Chinese engineers, security personnel, and even diplomatic facilities to undermine Pakistan-China cooperation (Zahid, 2023). Funding the insurgency requires diverse streams. The BLA is believed to rely on a combination of external funding and local criminal activities, including extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and smuggling. Diaspora contributions, particularly from sympathizers in the Middle East and Europe, provide financial lifelines (UNSC, 2021). This multifaceted funding base enables the group to maintain operational capacity despite intense military pressure from Pakistani forces.

The BLA's propaganda infrastructure demonstrates remarkable sophistication in international narrative construction. By strategically positioning separatist leaders in global diplomatic capitals and systematically highlighting human rights concerns, the organization has internationalized its struggle. This approach transforms local insurgency into a global discourse, generating sympathetic international perspectives and potential diplomatic leverage. Financing mechanisms represent a critical component of the BLA's operational sustainability. Despite Balochistan's significant resource wealth, the insurgency relies extensively on external financial support. India's role in this financial ecosystem is particularly significant, providing not just monetary resources but also intelligence and strategic guidance. The region's complex resource landscape, characterized by resources that are challenging to monetize, creates a structural dependency on external funding sources.

Terrorist Activities, Regional Impact, and External Influences

The BLA has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks across Balochistan and beyond, including assaults on Gwadar port facilities, railway tracks, energy pipelines, and convoys transporting Chinese workers (SATP, 2021). The persistent targeting of Chinese interests poses significant risks to CPEC progress, undermining not only economic growth but also the diplomatic trust between Pakistan and China. Beyond domestic dynamics, the BLA insurgency is further complicated by external state actors. Indian intelligence agencies, particularly the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), have long been accused of supporting the BLA both financially and operationally (Rana, 2020). India's strategy aims to destabilize Pakistan by exploiting its internal fissures, including fueling separatist movements in Balochistan. The Indian government's increasing security partnerships with countries in its immediate periphery—such as Sri Lanka—raise concerns of expanding influence over traditionally non-aligned states. By signing defense

and intelligence-sharing pacts with these neighbors, India potentially drags them closer into its strategic orbit, altering regional balance and complicating Pakistan's security calculations. These developments have added a geopolitical dimension to the BLA conflict, transforming it from a localized insurgency into a proxy battleground within South Asia. Such external interference risks prolonging violence, eroding prospects for political reconciliation, and heightening tensions among regional powers.

Date	Location	Target	Reported casualties / outcome
7 Oct 2016	Jaffar Express / Bolan Pass (Balochistan)	Passenger train (two blasts)	Several killed and wounded (reports vary); BLA claimed responsibility for blasts on Jaffar Express[23].
23 Nov 2018	Chinese Consulate, Clifton, Karachi	Chinese consulate / security personnel	4 dead (2 policemen, 2 civilians); 3 attackers killed[24].
11 May 2019	Pearl-Continental Hotel, Gwadar	Hotel / security forces (CPEC-linked site)	Several killed and injured (hotel attack involving suicide/armed attackers)[25]
20 Aug 2021	Near Gwadar / Chinese convoy (Balochistan)	Convoy of Chinese engineers / workers	2 local children killed, several injured; Chinese national(s) injured/killed in related attacks around that period[26].
2 Feb 2022	Panjgur & Naushki (Balochistan)	Frontier Corps / security camps (coordinated raids)	Pakistani military reported militants killed during repulse; BLA claimed the operations (disputed casualty figures)[27].
26 Apr 2022	University of Karachi (Confucius Institute)	Chinese academics / staff	4 killed (including 3 Chinese academics). Suicide bombing claimed by BLA female suicide bomber reported[28].
26–27 Aug 2024	Multiple locations across Balochistan (coordinated)	Police stations, railway lines, highways, convoys	Dozens killed (official tallies and reporting varied; Reuters reported ~73 dead in initial coverage)[29].
9 Nov 2024	Quetta Railway Station	Civilians, security personnel	Dozens killed (reports initially 24–32; several soldiers among the dead); many injured[30].
11–12 Mar 2025	Jaffar Express hijacking (Bolan Pass)	Civilians, railway staff, soldiers (hostage crisis)	Reported deaths later revised (dozens killed overall in ensuing clashes); hundreds rescued/released after military operation[31].

[23] https://www.dawn.com/news/1288604

[24] https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-baloch-insurgency-in-pakistan-evolution-tactics-and-regional-security-implications/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[25] https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-baloch-insurgency-in-pakistan-evolution-tactics-and-regional-security-implications/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[26] https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/two-killed-suicide-bombing-targeting-chinese-nationals-southwest-pakistan-2021-08-20/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[27] https://www.dawn.com/news/1672907?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[28] https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/van-blast-pakistans-karachi-kills-four-2022-04-26/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[29] https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/twenty-three-people-killed-pakistan-militant-attack-interior-minister-says-2024-08-26/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[30] https://apnews.com/article/quetta-railway-bombing-pakistan-30457309ca4b4c29bd3a5149509acb2e?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[31] https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/death-toll-pakistans-train-hijacking-rises-31-army-says-2025-03-14/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Date	Location	Target	Reported casualties / outcome
21 May 2025	Khuzdar (Army Public School bus), Balochistan	School bus carrying students at Army Public School (military-run)	Reported fatalities: initial reports 5; later reporting revised totals (AP and Reuters report up to 8 dead and dozens injured); no definitive public claim — Pakistani authorities publicly suggested BLA involvement[32].

Table 1: Major Terrorist Attacks Attributed to the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), last 10 years (2015-2025).

Regional Security Complex Theory and Dynamics of the Baloch Insurgency

Applying Barry Buzan's *Regional Security Complex Theory* (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) clarifies that the Baloch insurgency is embedded within a South Asian security complex shaped primarily by the India–Pakistan rivalry. Allegations of Indian intelligence support to Baloch groups can be interpreted as instruments of intra-complex competition rather than as classical external intrusion, although they functionally resemble external penetration by introducing outside resources and incentives into the local conflict (Rashid, 2020). China's engagement through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) constitutes a textbook case of external penetration: Beijing's substantial economic and security presence reshapes local incentives and prompts securitization by Pakistan, thereby elevating the risk of proxy escalation (Small, 2015). RSCT further suggests that neither covert sponsorship nor large-scale external investment alone can resolve the conflict; instead, durable stability requires reducing rivalry incentives for proxy sponsorship, de-securitizing development initiatives, integrating local economic and political grievances, and establishing regional diplomatic mechanisms that limit sanctuary and diminish the effectiveness of proxy networks (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Wirsing, 2013).

Strategic Implications and Regional Security Forecast

The BLA insurgency, fueled by a combination of historical grievances and external support, represents a serious threat to Pakistan's internal security and to the future of Chinese investments under CPEC. The persistence of violence undermines Pakistan's ability to ensure a stable environment necessary for economic development, deterring further foreign investment and eroding public confidence. China's strategic response must therefore combine enhanced security cooperation with Pakistan alongside efforts to foster socio-economic development and political inclusion in Balochistan. Militarized responses alone have proven insufficient; a comprehensive approach addressing local grievances while countering external interference is essential. The broader regional security implications are significant. India's engagement with immediate neighbors through defense pacts and intelligence sharing serves to extend its strategic reach but risks polarizing South Asia further. Non-aligned states find themselves pressured into choosing sides, potentially destabilizing the existing regional order.

The escalation of the Iran–Israel war adds yet another volatile layer to this already complex strategic environment. With Iran bordering Pakistan's Baloch-majority regions and potentially becoming more entangled in regional proxy warfare, the conflict could further radicalize segments of the Baloch population or lead to the creation of transnational militant linkages. Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, a historical sanctuary for cross-border insurgents, may become a vector for destabilization amid a broader Middle East security vacuum.

[32] https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-baluchestan-suicide-bombing-school-bus-2cfd2c0f98752e775ca47a5cb66083ce

Over the next decade, the trajectory of the BLA insurgency will likely be influenced by these regional power dynamics. Pakistan's ability to manage internal dissent, counter foreign interference, and maintain strategic partnerships with China will be critical determinants of lasting peace and stability in Balochistan. Additionally, it will require robust regional diplomacy to prevent external conflicts—such as the Iran–Israel war—from fueling local insurgencies or drawing Pakistan into a broader theatre of confrontation.

The recruitment strategy employed by the BLA goes beyond traditional militant approaches. By presenting a nuanced narrative that combines legitimate developmental critiques with revolutionary rhetoric, the organization attracts educated, politically conscious youth. This approach differs markedly from simplistic militant recruitment models, representing a more sophisticated ideological engagement strategy. Counterinsurgency efforts must transcend traditional military paradigms, requiring a holistic approach that addresses fundamental structural inequalities. Sustainable solutions necessitate comprehensive developmental interventions, inclusive political representation, and genuine economic empowerment strategies. The current elite-driven governance model must be systematically dismantled and replaced with genuine grassroots participatory mechanisms. The research conclusively demonstrates that military solutions alone cannot resolve the complex Baloch insurgency. A multidimensional approach integrating political dialogue, economic development, and cultural recognition represents the most promising pathway towards sustainable conflict resolution. The BLA's insurgency must be understood not merely as a separatist movement but as a sophisticated political expression of long-standing systemic marginalization. By comprehensively analyzing the BLA's strategic dynamics, this research provides critical insights into contemporary insurgent movements' evolving methodologies.

Conclusion

The Balochistan Liberation Army represents a significant and complex threat to Pakistan's sovereignty and to China's strategic investments in the region. Rooted in long-standing grievances and exacerbated by external state support—most notably from Indian intelligence—the BLA insurgency challenges both state authority and foreign infrastructure projects. The group's decentralized structure, evolving tactics, and diversified funding underscore its resilience. The resulting instability threatens not only Pakistan's national cohesion but also regional economic integration under the Belt and Road Initiative.

As Buzan and Wæver (2003) emphasize, "security interdependence among states in a region is so intensive that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another". The Baloch insurgency exemplifies this principle within the South Asian regional security complex, where the India–Pakistan rivalry forms the core security dynamic. External factors, such as China's deep engagement through CPEC, introduce new layers of complexity, serving as forms of regional penetration that reshape local conflict dynamics. The present Iran–Israel conflict further complicates the geopolitical calculus. As the Middle East descends into deeper instability, adjacent regions such as Balochistan risk becoming strategic conduits or flashpoints in transnational proxy struggles. The potential for spillover, radicalization, and cross-border militancy necessitates urgent preventive diplomacy and regional intelligence coordination. For China and Pakistan, this means that insulating Balochistan from these wider geopolitical tremors is as crucial as managing the internal drivers of insurgency. Effective mitigation requires a multidimensional strategy—combining robust security cooperation, political reconciliation, socio-

economic development, community engagement, and international diplomacy. RSCT reminds us that sustainable security solutions require addressing the underlying interlinked insecurities of all actors involved rather than relying solely on coercive measures or unilateral interventions. Only through sustained, inclusive efforts can Pakistan and China hope to overcome the insurgency's challenge and realize the full potential of their strategic partnership. The coming decade will be critical in determining whether peace and progress can prevail in this geopolitically pivotal region—or whether it will be swept into the broader tides of regional upheaval.

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