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UNDERSTANDING THE DRAGON'S ENTRY TO SOUTH ASIA: REVISITING THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY

ABSTRACT

The regional security complex theory scrutinizes the security complexes including the security complex of South Asia grounded on security interdependency among states situated in a geographically coherent group which could be penetrated by the external powers. The formation of the regional security complex of South Asia was shaped by two major factors: 1. The rivalry between India and Pakistan; 2. The dependency of small nations over the regional hegemony of India. However, the massive plan of economic growth and connectivity – BRI introduced by China have changed these dynamics of the complex. The BRI changed the traditional understanding of the regional security complex of South Asia and forced to contemplate China as an internal member of the complex rather considering China as external power. The purpose of the study is to capture these changes and alter the theory to understand the South Asian security complex sophisticatedly by considering the smaller states of South Asia (Sri Lanka and Nepal). The case study method has been employed to derive influences from the BRI, and it is based on a wide range of sources, both primary and secondary. BRI has changed the traditional patterns of security interdependency of the smaller states of South Asia vis-à-vis big brother India while elevating the Chinese ability to redefine, reorganize, reshape, and reconstruct the security patterns of South Asia and establishing Chinese military supremacy in Indian backyard. The traditional security complex theory did not capture these changes and yet, the paper argues that the regional security complex can be understood comprehensively by transporting external powers into a given complex based on the criteria, to be qualified as an internal actor. To validate this claim, the paper will consider the case study of Chinese led BRI projects and the regional complex of South Asia.

Keywords: Regional Security Complex Theory, Barry Buzan, BRI, Sri Lanka, India, China, South Asia

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Arise, ye who refuse to be slaves, with our very flesh and blood, Let us build our new Great Wall!! The peoples of China are in the most critical time; everybody must roar his defence. Arise. Arise. Arise!! (Peoples Daily Online, 2006).”

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

The idea of Chinese rejuvenation should be understood in the light of historical facts. In 1949, after securing its victory over Chiang Nationalist Party by the communists, the party came with the national slogan of rebuilding the nation after years of carnage and destruction. Since the national rejuvenation, rebuilding the country and claims all the communist leaders in China have invoked the glorious past. Subsequently, in the 1990s, the Chinese foreign policy was shaped by the Deng Xiaoping doctrine based on the principle of “hide your strength and bide your time (Vito, 2007, p.5).” However, President Jinping changed the three-decade-long policy of keeping a low profile by introducing the “Chinese dream of rejuvenation (Miller, 2017, p.8)”. President Jinping’s agenda of rejuvenation: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first introduced in 2013, acknowledges the necessity for a robust economy to play a dynamic military role for self-defence and maintain influential connectivities with its neighbouring states.

Jinping stressed that “we must preserve the bond between rich countries and active military and strive to build a consolidated national defence (Bougon, 2018, p.4).” The BRI conveyed Chinese influence to the South Asian region through its massive port developments and economic corridor projects. The Chinese government proposed several land and maritime routes under the BRI, including China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, China-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, Antwerp port, Piraeus port, the port of Djibouti, Gwadar port, Hambantota port development project, and Colombo Port City in Sri Lanka (Macaes, 2019, p.47). A number of these projects are laid across the Indian Ocean and link countries in South Asia with other regions, and it is “expected to impact more than 60 countries, which is home for about 4.4 billion people, who represents about 63 per cent of the world’s population (Friends of the Earth, 2016, p.3).”

Therefore, the paper attempts to understand the regional security complex of South Asia while bringing China as an internal member of the security complex. The primary research question is: in which ways has a Chinese presence in South Asia reinforced or reiterated the major security concerns: bilateral relations of small states with India, Indian security concerns and supremacy of the region, maritime security, state sovereignty, issues created by debt diplomacy that affects the South Asian regional security complex?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX

The regional security complex theory primarily addresses the security and military engagements of a particular set of countries located in geographically proximate space, and these countries have a high degree of security interdependence with each other because security threats travel a short distance. Barry Buzan and the Copenhagen School set the theoretical foundation for regional security complex: “a group of states must possess a greater degree of security interdependence which is sufficient both to establish them as a linked set and to differentiate them from surrounding security regions” (Buzan & Waever, 2003, pp.47–48). These describes the basic criteria of membership in a regional security complex which are: 1. They were composed of two or more states; 2. These states constituted a geographically coherent group; 3. The relationship among these states was marked by security interdependence which had to be significantly stronger among them than others; 4. The patterns of security interdependence had to be deep and durable although not permanent (Buzan, Waever, & Wilde, 1998, p.15).

The theory has identified the role of external powers, and it stressed out that the amity and enmity relations among the members of the complex could be subjected to the power and influence of external forces, expressly the penetration of external powers of the neighbouring region. However, “the patterns of the conflict stem from factors indigenous to the region and the external powers cannot, even if heavily involved usually define, organise, construct or reshape the region” (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p.47). However, the paper argues that the regional security complex can be understood comprehensively by transporting external powers into a given complex based on the criteria, to be qualified as an internal actor. To validate this claim, the paper will consider the case study of Chinese led BRI projects and the regional complex of South Asia.

2.1.1. THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX OF SOUTH ASIA

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

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

However, the research attempts to identify the dynamic changes of the regional security complex of South Asia, particularly with the announcement of the Chinese led Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI has linked with many countries in South Asia, significantly with

the small states in the region including Sri Lanka and Nepal. The arrival of BRI into South Asia has changed the dynamics of the regional security complex in some ways. Primarily, it diverted the centre of South Asian regional security complex towards smaller nations from Indo-Pakistan tension. The bilateral relations of small countries vis-à-vis India and the impact of security formations of small states gained substantial attention with the BRI. It does not mean that the security-military tension between India-Pakistan ceased to matter in the regional security complex of South Asia.

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

The equation has changed with the BRI projects and particularly with the national interests of small states and their political desires to reduce dependency on India being acknowledged by China while providing massive financial, infrastructural and other political, military, economic assistance. These assistances have facilitated small states to reduce their dependency over India. For instance, BRI has opened alternative ports and transits for Nepal to address its trade and connectivity requirements. The studies have proved that the new port has less travel time from Nepal than reaching Indian ports. It has reduced Nepal’s dependency over India to a considerable degree. This can be understood in the context of regional security complex theory. To qualify as an internal member, the countries requisite to maintain a higher degree of amity/enmity relationship and interdependency. Chinese government looked at South Asia as a geopolitical solution for the maritime issues in Malacca because countries like Sri Lanka could open new maritime trade routes to China to continue its trade while bypassing Malacca. In this context, BRI has altered the security patterns of the regional security complex and most significantly the bilateral relations vis-à-vis India and small states.

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

According to Tom Miller, Chinese BRI is a necessary evil for small states of South Asia to secure their security and economic needs in the 21st century (Miller, 2017). These deviations of security patterns reshaped the bilateral relations of smaller states vis-à-vis India, and BRI

projects linked China with the regional security complex of South Asia while constructing deep interdependencies with the members of the complex.

The existing theoretical understanding considers China as an external member of the regional security complex of South Asia. However, with the BRI, it is impossible to look at South Asian regional security complex while considering China as an external member due to massive Chinese engagement with the small states of South Asia and its impact on the security relations of the complex. China is no longer penetrating the regional security complex based on power rivalry of Indo-Pakistan, but playing a pivotal role in South Asian context by maintaining strong security interdependency with the members of the security complex while defining the complex.

3. METHODOLOGY

The case study method has been employed to derive influences from the BRI, and it is based on a wide range of sources, both primary and secondary. The primary sources include the official documents and so on, particularly related to smaller nations in South Asia. In addition to the primary resources, the study has also used a variety of secondary resources that include (but not confined to) journal articles, books, reports, and other online resources to analyse the creation and precise nature of the discourse on the theme(s) in question.

The case study method gives more flexibility to conduct the research and particularly, it leads to a qualitative analysis of data while counting the position of smaller states. According to Odell, “qualitative studies are equal or superior for generating valid theories [and] case study methods allow stronger empirical grounding for a hypothesis for the cases studied. They allow greater confidence in the validity of the premise, for the cases studied than other statistical methods” (Odell, 2001, pp.169–170).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. STRATEGIC POSITIONING OF SRI LANKA AND BRI

The Indian Ocean region has turned an active zone of the current wave of international politics in many terms. With massive changes in the world economy, global trade, the Indian Ocean is becoming an important energy and trade channel to connect Asian countries with West Asia and Europe. The Asia-Pacific region is upgrading its strategic value in terms of maritime connectivity route while moving towards the core of the world trade system while connecting the Gulf and African regions and other resource centres. Currently, the Indian Ocean region is listed as the most intensive sea trade route in the world (Jaishankar, 2017, pp.3–9). Petroleum and the trade channels in the Indian Ocean can be considered as a strategic lifeline for many countries to secure their national interests, national security, international trade, and connectivity.

China and its BRI project provide a strong threshold to change the importance of the Indian Ocean region while reshaping the role of the old silk route to address Chinese national interests in the 21st century. The BRI brings China into South Asia in terms of political, military, maritime, economic aspects, and it elevates the strategic position of smaller nations

in South Asia. The island nation of Sri Lanka was one of the first countries who welcomed Chinese BRI in the early stage. This section discusses in which ways Sri Lanka is demanding a strategic position through its involvement in BRI.

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

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

4.2. INTERTWINED NATIONAL INTERESTS: SRI LANKA AND BRI

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

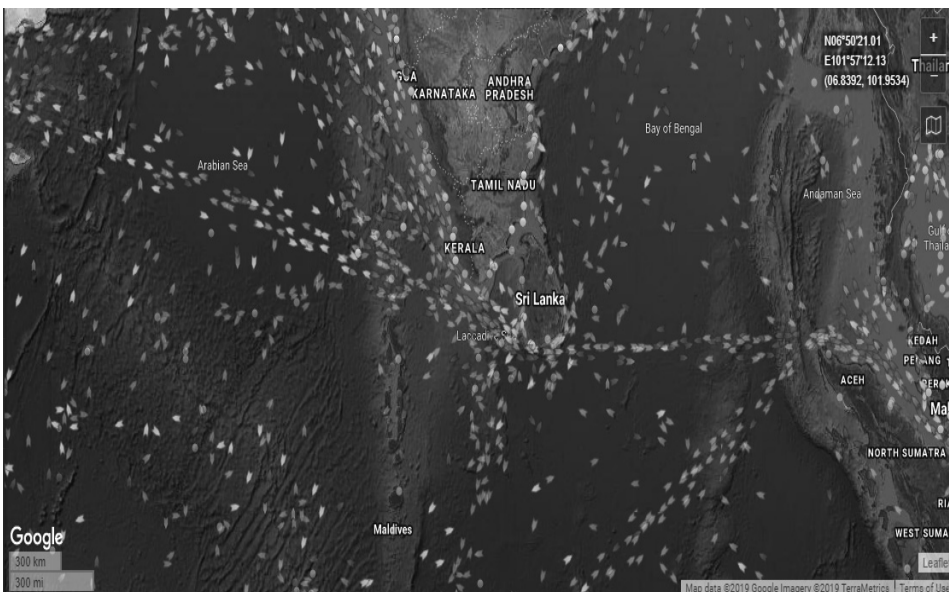
First, dynamic changes in bilateral relations of Sri Lanka vis-à-vis India encouraged the post-civil war government of Sri Lanka to meet alternatives to address and secure the national interests of the country. Particularly, military victory against LTTE increased international pressure over the government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

The foreign policymakers of the Rajapaksa regime stressed that "political, defence, security, economic, trade and the national survival will be the higher priorities of the government and to achieve that, Sri Lanka will preserve pragmatic foreign affairs with Asian nations

comprising China, Japan and Pakistan” (Epa, 2016, p.4). With that, Sri Lanka welcomed China and its BRI projects while creating a great dependency and strong relationship with China.

Similarly, Chinese national interests and the security concerns were intertwined with Sri Lanka particularly in terms of geopolitical advancements. Chinese intention was to cut down their trade-in Malacca Strait due to the high cost, competition and the threats manifested by the western world including the USA, UK and Japan. The political, military, economic and trade competition between USA and China increased the fear within the Chinese political body since 64 percent of their maritime trade was conducted via Malacca Strait which was controlled by the USA. In that case, BRI targeted strategically important Hambantota: it is 4 212 nautical miles from Shenzhen, 3 862 nautical miles from Suez port, and close to Kenyan port and a gateway to the east and central Africa (Tonchev, 2018). The strategic presence of China in the Hambantota harbour cut down the trade cost of China. They could exercise it as a service midpoint of trade while improving supply chains across the region and contributes to considerable growth in trade volumes. “This megaproject would slash approximately 1, 200 miles off the sea route from Suez to China and re-direct business away from the Malacca Strait and Singapore” (Tonchev, 2018, p.67).

Map 1: International Sea Traffic near Hambantota, Sri Lanka



Source: AIS Marine Traffic. (2019, December 24). Marine Traffic Global Ship Tracking Intelligence. Retrieved December 24, 2019, from <https://www.marinetraffic.com/>

Before the construction of Hambantota harbour, the Colombo port served as a midpoint for international ships and cargo vessels and it provided dockyard facilities for ships to refill food, water, fuel and services. However, limited operational power of Colombo port forced international ships to use ports in South India as a midpoint and it had reduced the economic benefits for Sri Lanka. Therefore, the government of Sri Lanka decided to construct a new

port which is located much closer to the international sea routes and can provide a wide range of facilities. The geopolitical location of Hambantota harbour is addressing the political and economic interests of Sri Lanka and international ships can reach Hambantota harbour easily since it is located close to the shipping routes compared to other ports in Sri Lanka.

The criteria to qualify as internal members of the regional security complex theory have pointed out to the necessity of maintaining a high degree of interdependency and amity/enmity relationships. The intertwining national interests of Sri Lanka and China constructed a greater interdependency between the two states. The current theoretical understanding of the regional security complex of South Asia understand China as an external member and according to the theory, external members cannot define, organise, deconstruct, construct or reshape the security patterns. The Chinese presence in Sri Lanka, intertwined national interests, the interdependency of two countries shifted Sri Lanka's dependency away from India while twisting a considerable military threat to India. Similarly, BRI projects in Sri Lanka have reduced the equation of bilateral relations of Sri Lanka vis-à-vis India. For example, during the 2009–2015 period, Sri Lanka did not sign a single MOU or any trade, economic agreement with India. However, the government of Sri Lanka had signed around 27 MOUs in political, economic, military, trade and tourism sector with China including the eight major MOUs signed by two countries during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Sri Lanka in 2014 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014).

The changes in the security posture of South Asian regional security complex deepened the security concerns of India while smaller states adjoined with China and its BRI. This helps China to reshape the security patterns of the region. From a Chinese perspective, building a strong interdependency with Sri Lanka was “a logical step for China as it confers a strategic advantage in protecting its interests in Indian Ocean region while providing strategic pivot in the underbelly of India” (Hariharan, 2013, p.34).

For instance, “Chinese military participation in the Sri Lanka joint services exercise ‘Cormorant III- 2012’ which was conducted in Eastern coast of Sri Lanka aimed at honing joint operational skills with the air force and navy in counterterrorism operations with the presence of military personnel from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Maldives” (Hariharan, 2013, p.38). This was recorded as one of the major military exercises which were held in the Indian Ocean region with the absence of India. The continued military operations conducted by China along with smaller nations of South Asia and Pakistan with the absence of India created a red alert for the security concerns of India. General military exercises undertaken by South Asia including SLINEX has continued annually, yet the new military exercises lead by China in South Asia forced India to rethink about Chinese power presence in the Indian Ocean. Particularly, Chinese military activities in Hambantota harbour and the Indian Ocean region has reshaped the security patterns of the regional security complex of South Asia by changing the security and military alignments of smaller nations of South Asia. Previously, smaller states of South Asia considered India as the main security provider and stability of the region was shaped by India as the regional hegemon. However, China was able to reshape these patterns through BRI.

The Chinese control over the Hambantota port has questioned the sovereign decision making power and the territorial integrity of the country. Particularly, Chinese naval vessels and submarines started appearing in Sri Lankan ports and this created security issues within the Indian Ocean region and mainly it challenged the security concerns of India. The gradual

increase of Chinese military and political appearance in Sri Lanka forced India to change their foreign policy towards Sri Lanka to address the national security priorities of India while maintaining the order of regional security complex. Particularly, rather than promoting the ethnic lines between Sri Lankan Tamils and TamilNadu, the central government of India decided to strengthen state to state relations with the newly elected government of Sri Lanka. The government of India decided to enhance economic and political relations with Sri Lanka while carrying a moderate opinion on the issues of ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka. Particularly, after 2016, the Indian investments in Sri Lanka spread across the entire country rather than focusing on the Northern part of Sri Lanka. For instance, the Indian government-funded emergency ambulance services which operate in major cities in Sri Lanka including Colombo, Galle, Matara and Kandy.

Second, foreign policy shifted in New Delhi, towards Sri Lanka, to avoid miscalculations or indifference because it can lead to China gaining a foothold in Hambantota deeply and many other areas and sectors in Sri Lanka. "New Delhi realised that matching dollar to dollar in terms of investments or trade creation should not be the priority, but being seen as honest and considerate of Sri Lankan peoples interests and rights while changing the negative prospect towards India which constructed throughout the history (Jacob, 2015, pp.1–8)."

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

In this context, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Sri Lanka in 2015, and the government decided to build 27000 new homes in Jaffna (Singh, 2018). To gain geopolitical advantage and to balance the Chinese development projects in Sri Lanka, the Indian government decided to offer massive development projects in Sri Lanka including the development of railway lines from Trincomalee to Medawachchiya, Kankesanthurai Harbour development project and the oil excavation in Trincomalee harbour sea (Aliff, 2017, pp.321–330).

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

With the BRI, countries like Sri Lanka are entangled with China and it can be considered as a change of the security patterns. This has challenged the military supremacy of India while

creating a military competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean region. The regional security complex theory of South Asia understood China as an external member which penetrates South Asian regional security complex. The contemporary security alignments and interdependency of Sri Lanka and China through BRI highlights that China can reorganise, redefine and rearrange the security patterns of the regional complex and especially bilateral relations of Sri Lanka *vis-à-vis* India. In this context, the case study provides validated evidence to detect China as a part of the complex based on the criteria identified by Buzan et al. for having a clear understanding of the regional security complex of South Asia.

4.3. CHINESE BRI AND STRATEGIC POSITION OF NEPAL

The formation of the regional security complex of South Asia was shaped by two major factors: 1. The rivalry between India and Pakistan; 2. The dependency of small nations over the regional hegemony of India. However, the recent developments in the region have changed these dynamics of the complex, significantly the massive economic growth and innovative plan of connectivity, *ie.* BRI. It has challenged the traditional primacy of India in the South Asian region by reorganising and changing the patterns of security alignment of the region. The BRI projects in smaller states in South Asia elevate the political, economic capabilities of respective states while redirecting their dependency over India. For instance, in 2015, Nepali Prime Minister welcomed BRI to elevate the political and economic position of Nepal while reducing its interdependency over India.

Nepal-China relations are marked deep-rooted historical foundation and since China launched its BRI: the Chinese investments, including 2431 km long Lanzhou-Shigatse, Shigatse-Kerung (564 km), and Kerung-Rasawagadhi train services and several hydropower projects: Budhigandaki and West Seti projects, flooded Nepal continuously. However, the strategic position and political opinion of the government of Nepal in front of the giant Chinese BRI projects was not clear upto 2015, and the scholarly world has questioned the political rationale of the government of Nepal to either accept or reject the BRI backed by China. The 2015 regime change of Nepal cleared all these politically intense debates over the triangular power game of Nepal government with two great powers; India and China. The recently elected Prime Minister of Nepal Khadga Prasad Oli's visit to Beijing followed by bilateral agreement of two countries has promoted Nepal as an official member of Chinese BRI projects. With this basic understanding, 14 substantial connectivity, road development, hydropower and tourism development projects have been signed by the two states while several existing hydroelectric developments have been galvanised under the One Belt One Road (Dixit, 2017)(Freitas, 2018).

The gravity of Nepal political behaviour is shifting towards China, and BRI projects are primarily geared towards boosting cross-border connectivity by promoting a more reliable partnership between Nepal and China. This is proved by the joint statement released immediately after the visit of prime minister Oli to China, and both countries agreed "to priorities the implementations of the connectivity-related BRI-MOUs as it relates to ports, roads, rail and air links and overall communications activities within the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network" (Freitas, 2018). The recent political alliance between Nepal and China has questioned how the behavioural changes of Nepal can affect the bilateral relations *vis-à-vis* India. Similarly, the BRI projects in Nepal and the political motivations of the projects influence the comprehensive security patterns of the regional security complex

of South Asia. In this context, the paper addresses the political motivations behind Nepal to welcome BRI and significantly how it could reshape bilateral relations between Nepal and India while testing how Chinese presence in South Asian regional security complex will reinforce or reiterate the major security concerns.

Map 2. Geolocation in Nepal



Source: Groves, S. (2014, September 22). India and Nepal Tackle Border Disputes: Under Narendra Modi's Leadership, India is Addressing Outstanding Border Discrepancies with Nepal. Retrieved March 31, 2019, from <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/india-and-nepal-tackle-border-disputes/>

Nepal is a landlocked country between India and China, and it is the world's 45th biggest country. Even though Britain successfully colonised many countries and landmasses in South Asia, Nepal takes pride in its history of never having been colonised. The landlocked country shares 1,415 km border with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China in the north and 1,758 km border with India. After the Chinese occupation of Tibet, its borders lay next to Nepal, and the border issues between two nations were gradually settled by two governments.

The stable borders and regular transactions over the Nepal-China border are read differently by Nepal and India. According to Nepal, the constant borders with China brings much needed political stability and specially people-people connections and regular movements of frontiers accepted by the society of Nepal as a positive marker of their relations with China. However, from an Indian perspective, Chinese presence in Nepal borders is conceived as a potential threat to the national security of India since Nepal was identified as a critical border of India since British Raj. Shyam Saran stressed that "at least since 1960 when the China-Nepal agreement was concluded, the security provisions in the India-Nepal treaty, which were the result of shared perceptions of threats from China, become outdated from Nepal's point of view (Saran, 2017, p.153)." However, Nepal served as a buffer state between

India and China since the 1960s and the significant concerns of Chinese BRI involvement with Nepal boil down to the primary motivation of Chinese government to bring its power circle next to the India-Nepal borders by controlling Nepal through BRI.

4.4. WHY NEPAL WELCOMED THE BRI: THE INTERTWINING OF NATIONAL INTERESTS

President Xi Jinping launched the BRI in 2013 with five different focal priorities of the government of China including “policy co-ordination, unimpeded trade, facilitating connectivity, financial integration and bonds between people” (Konings, 2018, p.24). The political motivations of the BRI projects touched the national interests of Nepal, particularly in the context of asymmetric power relations between India and Nepal in the postcolonial epoch. These parallel political motivations and shared national interests can be understood as based on the theoretical assumptions of the regional security complex theory.

According to the theory, a security complex can be formed by two or more countries whose security is heavily linked with others and could not address their national security without concerning each other. The geolocation of Nepal forced it to depend on India to fulfil their political, economic interests, and particularly as a landlocked country, Nepal exercise right of safe passage through Indian harbours and most of the Nepali trade, international transactions are conducted via Kolkata harbour. This dependency over India forced Nepal to be attached to the regional security complex of South Asia and similarly, the port clearance tax, transportation expenditures and border tax charged by India over Nepali goods made Nepal more dependent over India. Since the Nepal government was looking for opportunities to elevate their political, financial power by getting close to alternative power, Nepal welcomed BRI based on their national interests.

4.5. NEPAL: CRITICAL BORDER OF INDIAN GEOPOLITICAL AND SECURITY MAP

Post-independent India was born with critical security problems due to the partition. The creation of Pakistan forced India to engage with a series of wars in Indo-Pakistan border areas and Kashmir. This encouraged external powers to penetrate the regional security complex of South Asia. The rivalry between India and Pakistan invited China to stand with Pakistan and similarly after the Chinese annexation of Tibet, the border of China came next to Nepal. Since Nepal was considered as a critical border of India, “the Indian government could not afford to maintain an attitude of tranquil detachment towards Nepal (Wani & Chawre, 2017, p.6).” The internal political and economic conditions of India were vulnerable during the time, and the country was open to external threats, particularly to communist China. The rise of communism in China and the growing military insurgencies in Tibet forced India to control Nepal for the betterment of India’s future. Any threat towards Nepal could be a direct threat to India. To keep Nepal under Indian control, the Indian government influenced the domestic politics of Nepal.

In this situation, India adopted four major principles, First, to keep Nepal away from cold war tensions; second, to promote the process of democratisation in Nepal; third, to assist Nepal in achieving its political stability and economic prosperity as an instrument of effectively guarantee against any foreign encroachment; fourth to ensure Nepal’s security against the communist menace that might ultimately develop from the China side (Wani

& Chawre, 2017, pp.3–6). The adaptation of British principles to control Nepal and its political, economic and military relations grounded in treaty-based rules and regulations including the agreement: Treaty of Peace and Friendship which had signed between to nations in 1950. These provisions of conducting relationships led Nepal's grudging acceptance of India's dominance.

It allowed Nepal to balance between India and China. However, the geopolitical location of Nepal inevitably influenced Nepal to be subjected to the dominance of India, due to its massive dependency over India in many sections including, trade, financial aid, safe passage in international waters, third-party harbour access and for safeguarding the national security of the country. For instance, 90 per cent of global trade of Nepal is conducted through the Kolkata harbour; transactions are subjected to 10–15 per cent of Indian government tax under the port clearance and another five per cent to border regulations fee (Dahal, 2018, pp.41–66). The substantial economic dependency inevitably upgraded India to the upper position and Nepal's ruling elites and civil population of the country viewed that the bilateral relations between two countries are not beneficial for Nepal and its economic development. The public opinion of Nepal stresses that "India does not treat Nepal as per the spirit of a 'special relationship.' Ignoring Nepal's reservations, India managed to keep the Himalayan nation in its fold for several decades. The Indian establishment saw this as a success of its policies that yielded a stable relationship with its little brother (Sherpa, 2018, p.13)."

4.6. NEWFOUND ECONOMIC POWER AND STRATEGIC MOVES OF NEPAL

The BRI offered a wide range of connectivity and development projects, and infrastructure development plans to Nepal through its financial aid and grants. Gaining a politically influential power position within the Nepal political body is mandatory for China to get closer to India as well as encounter Indian hegemony in the South Asian region. Particularly, "China's engagement in Nepal is not new. More importantly and contrary to how it is portrayed in Nepal [...] it is not entirely negative compared to Indian involvement in Nepal" (Bhandari, 2018).

Nevertheless, the government of Nepal was looking for alternatives to reduce its economic dependency over India. The economic dependency over India brings a specific cost to Nepal, notably that Nepal is always subjected to the power dominance and external influences of the government of India. In this situation, Nepal exploited its strategic position and geolocational value to benefit from the competition between two great powers while winning its national interests such as infrastructure development projects and facilitating its economic takeoff.

With the official launch of the BRI in 2013, the Trans-Himalayan railway network extended to Nepal and it will link Pokhara, Kathmandu, and Indo-Nepal border state of Lumbini. From Nepal's perspective, this reduces their dependency on Kolkata harbour and India. In 2015, the Prime Minister of Nepal agreed to sign an official agreement of BRI, declaring Nepal as an official partner of Chinese BRI projects. The BRI contracts agreement worth US\$ 2.4 billion and it was included infrastructure and energy projects to post-disaster reconstruction efforts. Under this agreement, the main connectivity project, the Kerung-Kathmandu railway will be constructed by China, and it is estimated that the 72.25 km line from the Chinese border to Kathmandu would cost US\$ 2.25 billion. The Tibet-Qinghai railway expansion is underway and will reach to Nepal border in Kerung by 2020, and in the second phase of the project, this will link to Lumbini, and few other border states of Nepal which are located close to the India-Nepal border. Apart from these significant connectivity

projects, BRI comes with hydroelectricity and energy projects including US\$ 2.5 billion Budhi Gandaki and US\$ 1.8 billion West Seti projects (Sigdel, 2018).

Even India conducted many development projects in Nepal and provided many grants to the government of Nepal, yet the government and the people of Nepal are reluctant to maintain a close relationship with India due to Indian interference in the domestic politics of Nepal. For instance, the political behaviour and the pressure by India during Nepal's Second Constituent Assembly (2013–2017) has questioned the equal partnership status between India and Nepal. The Constituent Assembly promulgated a constitution on 20th September 2015 amid protests by Madhes-based parties and other groups. In this context, the government of India expressed grave concern regarding the ongoing protests and urged the government of Nepal to make efforts to resolve all issues through a credible political dialogue (Dahal, 2018, p.52). The pressure of the Indian government was shaped by the historical ties and the ethnic ties between Nepal Madhes community with the people of Bihar in India. Based on that, the Indian government interfered in the domestic political issues of Nepal to secure the rights of Madhes community who descended from Biharis. This created a negative public opinion about the Indian role in Nepal and the majority of Nepalese accepted China over India based on these factors.

4.7. RE-CREATING SECURITY PATTERNS OF SOUTH ASIA

As per the regional security complex theory, the amity-enmity relations among the security partners of a regional security complex highlights the strong connections among the members as against the external members of the complex. The security relations between India-Nepal made for strong relations of amity due to their territorial proximity and particularly in the context of mutual needs and assistance to win respective national interests. Nepal depended on India to address their economic needs and India became a security umbrella for safeguarding the territorial space of Nepal. However, Indian dominance over Nepal was shaped by its national interests since the geolocation of Nepal provided a buffer zone or frontline space to India and kept China out from its actual border.

Majority of the civil population of Nepal accepted China as a friendly neighbour compared to India (Bhattarai, 2018), and it encouraged Nepal to welcome BRI to reduce the dependency over India while looking for much comfortable and affordable economic access. For instance, a combined transportation system of rail and road via newly proposed Shigatse-Kerung road reduces the transaction cost and time of inter-state trades substantially. China is already using this route to send cargo and freight trains from Lanzhou to Kathmandu via Shigatse. Currently, Nepal is using Kolkata harbour as the major transit point for their international trade and reaching Kolkata harbour, Nepal cargo containers spend 35 days on a road journey. Due to Indian border regulation fees, transport fees, port, storage, processing charges, the government of Nepal has to pay 20- 25 per cent of income to the government of India based on the net value of the export-import items. This has tangled the security issues of Nepal. However, with the trans-Himalayan connectivity network, Nepal can reach to seaports in China within 12 days and it will reduce the massive transaction costs. In this context, the Chinese railway in Kerung can elevate Sino-Nepal trade and commerce and reduce Nepal dependency over India (Sigdel, 2018). This created security threats to India because advance positioning of China in Nepal will reduce the protection of buffer state. This forced India to rethink about the security relations and bilateral relations of India *vis-à-vis* Nepal.

In this context, the Indian government was forced to change their relations with Nepal, and the Indian government reshaped the bilateral relations with Nepal to reclaim its upper hand in Nepal over China. India decided to fund for connectivity projects in Nepal to compete with China, and under that project, India's Konkan Railway Corporation Ltd will help Nepal to construct a 130km long rail track from the Indian border town of Raxaul in eastern Bihar to Kathmandu for smoother movements of passengers and cargo to the landlocked Himalayan state Nepal. This plan overlay the Chinese trans-Himalayan rail and connectivity project which already started its constructions. Officials signed an agreement to study the feasibility of a rail line linking the two countries during a Regional Summit of Seven South Asian Countries in 2018 (The Indian Times, 2018).

The mutual coordination and the strong relations of the two countries under the BRI projects forced India to actively engage with the internal members of the security complex to safeguard the national interest of the country. Particularly the Indian re-engagement with Nepal highlights that India cannot look at its national security needs without concerning and counting Nepal and China.

Similarly, the current understanding of the regional security complex of South Asia understands China as an external member who penetrates the South Asian regional security complex. According to the theory, external powers cannot redefine, rearrange or reorganise the security patterns of the regional security complex. However, the reality of BRI projects in Nepal stressed that it had forced India to reshape their security concerns and bilateral relations vis-à-vis Nepal and similarly the BRI has created great interdependency with Nepal based on shared national interests and amity relationship. The case study argues that the geopolitical proximity of three countries: India-China-Nepal and inability of these three states to think their security concerns independently has questioned the current understanding of China as an external member of the complex.

For example, the development assistance of Nepali Rs 100 million provided by India for Nepal's remote hilly region of Mustang was followed by financial aid worth Nepali Rs 10 million for the construction of a library, science laboratory and school building with computers in Chhoser village, the same region by China (Chalise, 2017). Finally, Chinese led BRI was welcomed by Nepal to counter the hegemonic power of India and bring China into Nepal. This created triangular security relations between three states while providing space to China to reorganise, redefine, reformulate the patterns of the regional security complex. In this context, the paper argues that China needs to be understood as an internal member of the regional security complex based on the criteria for internal membership rather than keeping it out from the equation.

5. CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of the paper was to derive a composite account of the regional security complex of South Asia and examine as to why China has to be considered as an internal member of the security complex of South Asia. An attempt has been made to outline not only the geopolitical consequences of the BRI in the context of the small states of South Asia yet also to study the continuation and the shifts of the security patterns in South Asia in terms of bilateral relations India vis-à-vis small countries. Also, it examines attempts at making economic inroads by China into South Asia, using massive infrastructure development

projects parallel to core BRI projects as a tool to reconceptualise its relationship with South Asian countries. It is an inquiry into the BRI experiences in Sri Lanka and Nepal, in India's proximity.

The regional security complex theory functions as a useful tool to analyse Chinese involvement and BRI effects on the security dynamics of South Asia. The theory has stressed that the external powers could penetrate a regional security complex and Buzan et al. brought the example of Cold War politics to validate this argument. For instance, the Cold War politics and rivalry of India-Pakistan created a window for external powers to penetrate the regional security complex of South Asia. However, these external powers are not capable of redefining, reorganising or reshaping the patterns of a regional security complex and without an invitation from an internal member which is involved with a regional power race, these external powers could not alter the dynamics in a particular regional security complex.

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

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

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

The small states reoriented their foreign policy towards China while walking away from India. The paper highlighted foreign policy shift in Nepal in late 2015 when the political interference by India in domestic political issues of Nepal forced the administration to get closer to China while reducing its dependence on India. The foreign policy shift is not unique to the context of Nepal, and the paper stressed different reasons for the foreign policy shifts of Sri Lanka and Nepal towards China. The escalation of Chinese presence in Indian backyard forced India to think about its security arrangements and its relationship with small states of the region. Previously, China as an external actor penetrated regional security complex of South Asia based on the rivalry of India-Pakistan. However, with the BRI, China has changed its involvement with South Asia, and particularly, it has linked with many small countries based on mutual and shared national interests.

According to the regional security complex theory, the BRI projects placed China in a strong position which could define, organise, and construct the security patterns of the regional security complex. The role of BRI in the South Asian region stressed that India could not think about its security without considering China and the behaviour of small states of South Asia. In this context, the thesis emphasises that security perceptions and concerns of these countries are linked together sufficiently close and their national security problems cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.

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