

## Growing Chinese Engagement in Bangladesh: Implications for India

**Sayantana Haldar**

Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

[h.sayantan97@gmail.com](mailto:h.sayantan97@gmail.com)

### Abstract

China's growing engagement with Bangladesh has necessitated a reflection on how India views Beijing's growing influence in a region India considers within its sphere of influence. With the advent of the Belt and Road initiative, China has steadily emerged as an important player in South Asia and Beijing's significant improvement of ties with Bangladesh must be viewed in this context. President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have both reiterated the significance of Sino-Bangladesh strategic partnership. While, Beijing looks at this as an opportunity to expand its strategic influence beyond its traditional ambit, to the Indian Ocean Region, Bangladesh has increasingly warmed up to China as a means to address Bangladesh's infrastructure and connectivity deficit. Where does that leave India? A bolstering China-Bangladesh relationship has important implications for New Delhi, which considers Bangladesh a close partner in its neighborhood. This paper explores India's views on growing Chinese engagement in Bangladesh and argues that even though security implications have been central to India's view of Sino-Bangladesh engagement, the health sector has emerged as a critical area that needs greater attention.

### Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, China, Bangladesh, India, SAARC

**B**angladesh today has emerged as an important country which has made significant contribution in shaping the geopolitical discourse of the region. With a rapidly growing vibrant economy, Bangladesh sits at the heart of South Asia which makes it an indispensable part of any strategic calculus of the region. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Beijing has repeatedly exhibited great interest in forging strategic ties with Dhaka (Titumir and Rahman, 2019).

China, under President Xi Jinping has designed its ambitious globalization project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that has been widely hailed as an instrument to facilitate economic, connectivity and infrastructural development across the world. In the changing landscape of Asian geopolitics, China has emerged as an important player through its Belt and Road framework, which can be mapped in terms of economic might. China is now the second largest economy in the world with ambitions of a global footprint, accounting for 16.38 percent of global economy (Bajpai, 2020). The embedded idea of the BRI framework is to be the driver of globalization in the twenty-first century and, from its very inception, President Xi has steadily calibrated and guided the Initiative towards that lofty goal. This article attempts to take stock of the growing Sino-Bangladesh engagements and its implications for India. This article argues that the health sector has emerged as a crucial area of Sino-Indo competition in Bangladesh.

Out of all the countries in the region, Beijing shares the closest relationship with Pakistan.

### **Belt and Road and Bangladesh**

The BRI comprises various initiatives involving China and other participating countries. However, its overall framework has been designed along two pathways, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Route. South Asia as a region has increasingly gained prominence in this strategic architecture (Markey, 2020). The region has been important to China not only because it is a neighbouring region, but also because it is pivotal for the success of China's BRI. In order to ensure that the initiatives and projects built under the aegis of BRI reach Europe and parts of Africa, it is important that China consolidates a strong strategic partnership with South Asian countries. Of the countries in the region, Beijing shares the closest relationship with Pakistan. China-Pakistan ties are regarded as an 'all-weather friendship' and have matured considerably over the years (Markey, 2020: 47-49).

With the advent of BRI, China has gained new leverage to expand its ambit of influence in South Asia beyond its traditional partner, Pakistan, to other countries. Beijing's outreach to Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh have

received a lot of attention from the international community. Bangladesh in particular has seen some interesting development in its bilateral relations with China. Infrastructure development projects and connectivity have been the bedrock of China's outreach to Bangladesh under the BRI framework. Of the recent projects that have taken shape between China and Bangladesh, the Payra Port project and the Padma Rail Link have seen significant development over the years (Saimum, 2020: p. 9-11). Apart from these and other individual projects, a notable factor that has influenced the growing proximity between the two countries has been what appears to be a 'political appointment' of the current Chinese Ambassador made by China.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Ambassador Li Jiming, who is currently deputed in Dhaka, has not been a professional diplomat. He has mostly served at the trade and industry sections of local offices in Yunnan and other provinces. It can be argued that his appointment has brought a new 'industrious' and 'enterprising' effect to China's outreach to Bangladesh, which is in tandem with Beijing's engagement with Bangladesh, at large. Ambassador Li Jiming's (2020) rhetoric of 'writing a new chapter in China-Bangladesh relationship' is reflective of the spirit of innovation which might have led to his appointment in Dhaka. In 2016, President Xi Jinping became the first Chinese leader to visit Bangladesh in thirty years (Haque and Hasib, 2016). President Xi has extensively travelled across other South Asian states which have been instrumental in establishing his

interest in the region. In the case of most of the countries, these visits have been perceived as a spectacle event in their states.

Bangladesh has seen dramatic increase in its economic indicators and has become one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

Interestingly, China's engagement with Bangladesh is important for China for quite a few reasons. The general agreement about BRI focuses on China's intention to use its excess manufacturing and production capabilities outside their market which is increasingly becoming saturated. This holds true for Bangladesh as well. Apart from this what makes Bangladesh stand out in China's strategic architecture, is its unique geo-strategic locations. Bangladesh sits at the heart of the Bay of Bengal which is central to China's Maritime Silk Route. Also, Bangladesh has increasingly gained prominence because of its economic performance. Bangladesh has seen dramatic increase in its economic indicators and has become one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Therefore, it has been in the best interest for China to have strong economic ties with a burgeoning economy like Bangladesh secure strategic entry point into India. According to Professor Lailufar Yasmin (2019: p. 331), 'Bangladesh's geopolitical significance has been well noticed by China, where Bangladesh stands as a key state in China's BRI.'

But why does BRI bring to the table for Bangladesh? Bangladesh is a booming economy with demand for infrastructure development to meet its potential. Poor infrastructure conditions pose to be a ‘key impediment’ to Bangladesh’s future growth (Afraz and Khawar, 2019).

China’s willingness to cooperate with Bangladesh in dealing with the pandemic further prompted it to propose ‘sister city’ assistance.

Additionally, China’s economic advances in the region further give Bangladesh an opportunity to bandwagon with the globalization project of BRI. Anwara Begum (2015) draws a positive picture of China’s economic engagement with Bangladesh which has increasingly sought to provide an alternative to Western institutions. This appreciation is concurred by other Bangladeshi scholars who have pointed out that liberalization based globalisation has delivered ‘restricted benefits’ to developing nations like Bangladesh (Titumir and Rahman, 2019: p. 2). Therefore, the economic project of BRI has presented itself as a platform for Bangladesh to escalate its economic prospects.

Interestingly, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladesh and China have sought to cooperate in dealing with the health crisis.

This has manifested through Dhaka getting a ‘priority status’, in terms of cooperation and support when China develops a vaccine successfully (The Daily Star, 2020). China’s willingness to cooperate with Bangladesh in dealing with the pandemic further prompted it to propose ‘sister city’ assistance. Within this framework, scientists and medical experts from China will share their experiences and expertise with Bangladesh as well as provide technical and financial assistance to Bangladesh. In similar vein, Deep Pal and Rahul Bhatia (2020) write that increasingly health infrastructure will find more space in the BRI rubric, especially in South Asia. According to them, as the world deals with the emergent economic perils, public health infrastructure will be a crucial area of cooperation which will require China to redistribute its capital to accommodate health projects. China has exhibited its interest in building a ‘Health Silk Road’ in order to facilitate international cooperation to deal with the pandemic and other public health issues in the future (MOFA, 2020). Therefore, Bangladesh’s interests in BRI are grounded on its own infrastructure demands as well as economic and strategic imperatives.

However, it is important to note that the growing proximity between Dhaka and Beijing has critical implications for New Delhi. As it is, China’s growing presence in South Asia has long been a looming concern for India. Therefore, it is important to take stock of the

implications for New Delhi in light of growing Sino-Bangladesh relations. Admittedly, India's interest in Bangladesh is not guided solely by the 'China factor'. There is a much larger civilizational link binding the two countries together that can scarcely be gainsaid.

### **India's Implications for China-Bangladesh Bonhomie**

How does India perceive China's growing engagement with Bangladesh? India's ambition to emerge as a regional leader is grounded on a secure and stable neighborhood. Strategic analysts have pointed to India's fears of an 'encirclement' which might be an outcome of China-Bangladesh relations. China's inroad into India's 'sphere of influence' has been a major source of discomfort for India. To tackle this, it is imperative for India to strengthen its ties with Bangladesh.

Any discussion on India, China and Bangladesh cannot afford to ignore the Bangladesh China India Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). The BCIM-EC was a part of the BRI framework, although India had denied participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, citing lack of transparency and breach of sovereignty (Uberoi, 2016). However, at the Second BRI Forum in Beijing in April 2019, the BCIM-EC was formally dropped from the BRI (Business Standard, 2019). India's interest in Bangladesh is prompted by Bangladesh's strategic location. Connectivity between India's North-East regions with other

parts of the country will be better facilitated by using Bangladesh's territory. Therefore, it is important for India to engage with Bangladesh in order to ensure better connectivity. More so, Chinese engagement with Bangladesh would imply that Bangladesh is not solely dependent on India to address its infrastructure deficit. China has already begun building several key infrastructure projects in Bangladesh which are expected to address the infrastructure deficit in the country. This line of engagement is in tandem with China's 'win-win' doctrine of peaceful and mutually cooperative development. Therefore, New Delhi's policy towards Bangladesh should also be guided by the eagerness to cooperate in order to address issues which concern both the countries.

There is little evidence to point out that the 'China factor' is directly influencing the behavior of the small states - Bangladesh in this case.

Recent reports suggest a prevailing tension between India and Bangladesh. Aside from some insensitive comments made by senior Indian political leaders that aroused strong reactions in Dhaka, there was some speculation when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina 'refused' to meet the outgoing Indian envoy, recently. New Delhi followed it up with Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla's visit to Dhaka (Islam, 2020). However, this visit was not met with the sense of diligence as is

normally the case. This prompted speculation in both the Bangladeshi and Indian media on whether the leadership in Dhaka was miffed with New Delhi. However, on the contrary, according to Dr. Harsh V Pant (2020), this visit should be viewed as a ‘successful’ one, as it managed to reaffirm Bangladesh’s ‘privileged position’ in the Indian foreign policy matrix. India and Bangladesh have sustained engagements at larger social and a cultural level, which has manifested this year as the two countries jointly celebrate ‘*Mujib Borsho*’ marking the centennial birth anniversary of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman (MEA, 2020). There has been a growing speculation that the growing distance between India and its neighbors should be seen in light of China’s extensive engagement in the region. Similar trends of speculation have followed in recent occurrences in Nepal. However, there is little evidence to point out that the ‘China factor’ is directly influencing the behavior of the small states, and Bangladesh in this case. Dhaka has maintained through actions that it doesn’t see balancing India and China as a zero-sum game.

Although BIMSTEC has been around since 1997, it is the Modi government in New Delhi which has made significant efforts in reviving the technical institute.

Even at the peak of robust Chinese engagements in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has referred to India as ‘a partner worth more than a few billions of dollars of trade’ (NDTV, 2019).

How can India cope with China’s growing presence in Bangladesh? It is important for India to reinvigorate its ties with Bangladesh in light of growing Chinese engagement. Both Dhaka and New Delhi have emphasized the need to have a robust regional framework. Towards this end, the South Asian countries had operationalized the mechanism of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985.

Although, there is common agreement that SAARC has not performed up to its intended scope, Bangladesh holds SAARC very dear to them. In light of SAARC’s poor performance, the Bay of Bengal Institute of Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has received a lot of attention from India. Although BIMSTEC has been around since 1997, it is the Modi government in New Delhi which has made significant efforts in reviving the technical institute. Prime Minister Modi’s shift of focus from SAARC to BIMSTEC was visible in 2019 as all the BIMSTEC leaders were invited to his swearing in ceremony, reflecting his willingness to strengthen the BIMSTEC arrangement (Desai, 2019). It is important for India to engage with its neighbors, and more importantly Bangladesh in well-articulated regional and

sub-regional organizations in order to check Chinese influence in the region.

China's maritime network of naval bases had alarmed India soon after China began building its 'string of pearls' (Raja Mohan, 2013: 124-132). Beijing's outreach towards Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, etc. is guided by its attempt to mark its presence in the Indian Ocean Region. The Twenty first century Maritime Silk Route has been designed in a way that ensures connectivity between China and Africa and parts of Europe. This has naturally aroused suspicion in the strategic circles of India. It is no secret now that gradually, many countries are taking note of China's 'expansionist' tendencies (Basu, 2020). India, being a 'resident power' of the Indian Ocean Region, has a great deal of concern over China's increasing presence in the region. India's primary contention with China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean Region as well as Bangladesh stems from a threat perception of 'encirclement'. However, Bangladesh has remained firm that the port projects jointly built by China do not follow a 'field of dreams'<sup>2</sup> approach (Brewester, 2019). Therefore, Bangladesh has vouchsafed against any significant negative security implication for India in its engagement with China.

However, apart from the security implications, the health sector is likely to emerge as an area of contestation between India and China in Bangladesh. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, India has displayed its willingness to initiate

regional solidarity to deal with the ongoing crisis. In this context, the health sector will emerge as a crucial area of Sino-Indo competition. Traditionally, people from Bangladesh rely on India for their medical needs. Kolkata and other Indian cities are popular destinations to people from Bangladesh who travel on account of medical emergencies. China's robust engagement with Bangladesh to assist them in developing their health sector is likely to have critical implications for India's medical sector. The health sector remains as a crucial area of cooperation between India and Bangladesh. As India aspires to be a leading medical and pharmaceutical hub, it must ensure to do more in that area, especially in light of Chinese cooperation with other countries in the health sector. In this context, it must be mentioned that Prime Minister Modi had initiated a regional solidarity framework among the SAARC nations and India has been the highest contributor to the SAARC fund for Covid, yet it must do more in terms of providing assistance and expertise to its neighboring countries.

## **Conclusion**

The rise of China in India's neighborhood has made significant impact in the region. China's outreach has also presented countries like Bangladesh with the option of maneuverability over India. Growing Chinese engagement has therefore made it imperative for India to re-examine its regional foreign policy. China's



outreach to Bangladesh has traditionally been viewed by India as a part of its larger ‘encirclement policy’. However, Dhaka has maintained that it doesn’t see China as an ‘alternative’ to India. China’s BRI advances have presented itself as an opportunity to remedy Bangladesh’s key impediments to future growth. Dhaka’s engagement with both New Delhi and Beijing is premised on its strategic objectives.

However, the looming presence of China has prompted India to considerably reinvigorate its outreach towards its neighborhood. India’s regional ambitions have manifested in foreign policy initiatives such as the ‘Neighborhood-First Policy’, emphasizing on BIMSTEC and a host of other regional initiatives aimed at the neighborhood. China has done well in addressing Bangladesh’s infrastructure deficit. Beijing’s political appointment’ to engage diplomatically with Dhaka perhaps hints at a possible desire of the Chinese to replicate the Pakistan model in Bangladesh as well. New Delhi must ensure to establish itself as a more viable alternative to Dhaka. Cooperation over infrastructure development between the two nations has further manifested in terms of cooperation in the health sector. This will have critical implications for India, which aspires to establish itself as a key public health and medical infrastructure hub. Even though India’s economic capability may not match that of China, it has enough room to leverage its ties with Bangladesh. Therefore, while security implications dominate most of India’s

perspective on growing Sino-Bangladesh ties, the health sector is likely to emerge as a critical area which needs attention and requires robust engagement from New Delhi.

## Notes

1. This point was raised by Dr. Jabin T. Jacob. I thank him for directing me towards exploring Ambassador Li Jiming’s profile.
2. Raffiq Dossani and Niels Erich writes about the ‘field of dreams’ approach as a ‘build and they will come’ model for delivering economic development and foreign aid. Although they also mention that security guarantees for China’s military are often found in the small print. See: Dossani, R and Erich, N. 2017. China's Field of Dreams in Pakistan. *The Rand Blog*. 16 October. See: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/10/chinas-field-of-dreams-in-pakistan.html>

## References

Bajpai, Prableen. 2020. The 5 Largest Economies in the World and Their Growth In 2020. *NASDAQ*. 22 January. See: <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/the-5-largest-economies-in-the-world-and-their-growth-in-2020-2020-01-22>.

China drops BCIM from BRI projects' list. *Business Standard*. 28 April, 2019. See: <https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/china-drops->



[bcim-from-bri-projects-list-119042800540\\_1.html](https://www.brimstec.org/bcim-from-bri-projects-list-119042800540_1.html).

Desai, Suyash. 2019. India's Focus Shift From SAARC to BIMSTEC Is Strategic, but Underused. *The Wire*. 4 June. See: <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-saarc-bimstec-trade-south-asia>.

Haque, Sajibul and Hasib, Nurul Islam. 2016. Chinese President Xi Jinping in Bangladesh on 'historic' state visit. *Bdnews24*. 14 October. See: <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/10/14/chinese-president-xi-jinping-in-bangladesh-on-historic-state-visit>.

Islam, M Serajul. 2020. Indian foreign secretary's hasty visit misfires. *NewAge*. 23 August. <https://www.newagebd.net/article/114231/indian-foreign-secretarys-hasty-visit-misfires>.

Kashem, Md. Abdul and Islam, Md. Shariful. Narendra Modi's Bangladesh Policy and India–Bangladesh Relations: Challenges and Possible Policy Responses. *India Quarterly*, 72(3). DOI: [10.1177/0974928416655409](https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928416655409).

Manral, Karan. 2020. Amid Tensions with China, PM Speaks to Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina and UAE's Bin Zayed. *India.com*. 25 May. <https://www.india.com/news/india/amid-tensions-with-china-pm-speaks-to-bangladeshs-sheikh-hasina-and-uaes-bin-zayed-4039418/>.

Markey, Daniel Seth. 2020. *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Pant, Harsh V. 2020. Delhi-Dhaka ties: India is doing well in the region. *ORF Commentaries*. 28 August.

<https://www.orfonline.org/research/delhi-dhaka-ties-india-is-doing-well-in-the-region/>.

Raja Mohan, C. 2013. *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indo Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Basu, Titli. 2020. Calling out “expansionism”: The Modi way. *Lowy Institute: The Interpreter*. 8 July. See: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/calling-out-expansionism-modi-way>.

Saimum, Rubiat. 2020. The Prospect of Belt and Road Initiative in the Context of Bangladesh. *China Report*, 56(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445520930396>.

Shringhla, Harsh V. 2018. India–Bangladesh Relations: An Indian Perspective. *Strategic Analysis*, 42(5). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1523080>.

Titumir, Rashed Al Mahmud and Rahman, Md. Zahidur. 2019. China's Belt and Road Initiative and Economic Implications for Bangladesh. *BISS Journal*, 40(1). <https://www.biiss.org/public/files/publication/5e770bc2a68c8Jaunary%20Issue%202019.pdf>

Uberoi, Patricia. 2016. Problems and Prospects of the BCIM Economic Corridor. *China Report*, 52(1).<https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445515613868>.

Yasmin, Lailufar. 2019. India and China in South Asia: Bangladesh's Opportunities and Challenges. *Millennial Asia*, 10(3). [DOI: 10.1177/0976399619879864](https://doi.org/10.1177/0976399619879864).

Will write new chapter of Dhaka-Beijing bilateral cooperation: Ambassador Li Jiming. *The Business Standard*. 7 June, 2020. See: <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/will-write-new-chapter-dhaka-beijing-bilateral-cooperation-ambassador-li-jiming-89980>

Sayantana Haldar is Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi. He is currently finishing his Masters in Political Science from Presidency University, Kolkata. He is interested in China's Belt and Road Initiative, South Asian geopolitics, China - South Asia relations and Indian foreign policy.

---

*The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.*

<b>Issue No/ Month</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>
No. 117  August2020	Sino-Japanese Relations: Forced Engagement or Healthy Rivalry?	Mohd Adnan
No. 116 August 2020	Clashes in Trade and Causes of Migration: The Case of India and China as the Dynamic to the World	Sangit Sarita Dwivedi
No. 115  August 2020	Covid-19 and the Communist Party of China's Governance Crisis	Bhim B. Subba
No. 114  July2020	The Emergence of a New Kingpin in the Pacific: China's Initiatives	Tanishka
No. 113 July 2020	Clash of Narratives: The US-China Propaganda War Amid the Global Pandemic	Preksha Shree Chhetri
No.112  July 2020	Sino-Indian Border Dispute: Explained in Constructivist Paradigm	Reena Bhatia
No. 111 July 2020	Hazarding Hazards: An Assessment of China's Workplace Safety Since Year 2000	P K Anand
No. 110 July 2020	Are US and China on the Verge of a Cold War 2.0?	Zorawar Daulet Singh
No. 109  July 2020	To Craft a Covid-19 Narrative, China needs Africa	Veda Vaidyanathan
No. 108  July 2020	Domestic Imperatives Behind Chinese Aggression at the India-China Border in 2020	Dr. Sriparna Pathak

## PRINCIPAL SUPPORTERS TO ICS RESEARCH FUND

### TATA TRUSTS



MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS  
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



INDIAN COUNCIL OF  
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

GARGI AND VIDYA  
PRAKASH DUTT FOUNDATION



JAMNALAL BAJAJ  
FOUNDATION

PIROJSHA GODREJ FOUNDATION

## ICS PUBLICATIONS



A short brief on a topic of contemporary interest with policy-related inputs



Platform for ongoing research of the ICS faculty and associates



Authored by the faculty, also emerging from research projects and international conferences



Draft paper of ongoing research

## ICS JOURNAL



In its 56th year, *China Report* is a refereed journal in the field of social sciences and international relations. It welcomes and offers a platform for original research from a multi-disciplinary perspective, in new and emerging areas, by scholars and research students. It seeks to promote analysis and vigorous debate on all aspects of Sino-Indian relations, India-China comparative studies and multilateral and bilateral initiatives and collaborations across Asia.

*China Report* is brought out by Sage Publications Ltd, New Delhi.

Editor  
Associate Editor  
Assistant Editor  
Book Review Editor

Sreemati Chakrabarti  
G. Balatchandirane  
Rityusha Mani Tiwari  
Vijay K Nambiar



### INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

8/17, Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines,  
Delhi 110054, INDIA  
T: +91 (0) 11 2393 8202  
F: +91 (0) 11 2383 0728

<http://www.icsin.org/>

[info@icsin.org](mailto:info@icsin.org)



[twitter.com/ics\\_delhi](https://twitter.com/ics_delhi)



[facebook.com/icsin.delhi](https://facebook.com/icsin.delhi)



[in.linkedin.com/icsdelhi](https://in.linkedin.com/icsdelhi)



[soundcloud.com/ICSIN](https://soundcloud.com/ICSIN)



[youtube.com/ICSWEB](https://youtube.com/ICSWEB)



[instagram.com/icsdelhi](https://instagram.com/icsdelhi)

