

China's Information Warfare and Its Impact on South Asian Regional Stability

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes the evolution of China's information warfare strategy within the context of its national security policy, emphasizing its role in shaping perceptions, controlling narratives, and asserting geopolitical influence. The study highlights the strategic significance of South Asia, and its expanding economic and political interests in the region. It examines how China's information operations in South Asia serve its immediate objectives while simultaneously presenting substantial challenges to the security and stability of South Asian states. Through an exploration of these dynamics, the paper underscores the implications of China's information warfare for South Asian geopolitics and security frameworks..

Keywords: China, Information Warfare, South Asia, Propaganda, Narrative, Disinformation

1. INTRODUCTION

China's information warfare strategy has evolved as a central component of its national security policy, aiming to shape perceptions, control narratives, and assert geopolitical influence. These campaigns not only serve China's immediate interests but also pose significant challenges to the security and stability of South Asian states (Ali & Sidhu, 2021). China's approach to information warfare is deeply rooted in its military doctrine, which emphasizes the integration of civilian and military resources in the cyber domain. This strategy is often referred to as the "three warfare" doctrine, which includes psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare (Babar & Mirza, 2021). The implications of this doctrine are profound, as they allow China to exert influence and control over narratives in South Asia, potentially destabilizing the region. The impact of China's information warfare extends beyond mere military considerations; it also affects political, economic, and social dimensions within South Asian countries. The region is characterized by a complex interplay of historical grievances, territorial disputes, and economic competition, which makes it particularly susceptible to the effects of disinformation and psychological operations. For instance, China's use of social media and other digital platforms to disseminate narratives that favor its geopolitical ambitions can exacerbate existing tensions among South Asian nations, leading to a deterioration of regional stability (Alvi et al., 2022).

Moreover, the rise of hybrid warfare tactics, where conventional military strategies are combined with cyber operations and information manipulation, complicates the security landscape in South Asia (Gonçalves, 2020). The region's vulnerability to such tactics is underscored by the ongoing conflicts and rivalries, particularly between India and Pakistan, as well as the influence of external powers like the United States and Russia (Iskandarov et al., 2023). China's ability to exploit these vulnerabilities through targeted information campaigns can shift the balance of power in the region, making it imperative for South Asian nations to develop robust countermeasures. In light of these dynamics, this research paper will explore the various dimensions of China's information warfare strategies and their

implications for South Asian regional stability by examining various case studies (Bachmann & Paphiti, 2017). It will also analyze the mechanisms through which China conducts information warfare, the responses of South Asian nations, and the potential pathways for mitigating the risks associated with these strategies and to offer insights into potential strategies for enhancing regional resilience..

China's Information Warfare Strategy

China's information warfare strategy is a multifaceted approach that integrates various elements of cyber espionage, psychological warfare, narrative control and the manipulation of information to achieve strategic objectives (Wang et al., 2023). The concept of information warfare (IW) in China encompasses not only traditional military operations but also the use of cyber capabilities to influence public opinion, disrupt adversaries, and secure national interests. China's approach to information warfare is characterized by a blend of offensive and defensive strategies. On the offensive side, China has developed sophisticated cyber capabilities that enable it to conduct espionage, sabotage, and influence operations against adversaries (Oberhauser, 2023). These capabilities are often employed to infiltrate critical infrastructure, steal sensitive information, and disrupt the operations of foreign governments and corporations. Defensively, China recognises the need to protect its own information infrastructure from foreign cyber threats. This has led to the establishment of robust cybersecurity measures aimed at safeguarding critical national assets and ensuring the integrity of information systems (Pan & Chen, 2018). The Chinese government has invested heavily in developing a comprehensive cybersecurity framework that includes both technological solutions and legal regulations to combat cyber threats.

Moreover, China's information warfare strategy is closely linked to its broader geopolitical ambitions. As China seeks to expand its influence in Asia and beyond, it employs information warfare tactics to shape regional narratives, undermine adversaries, and promote its own interests. China also leverages non-state actors and private enterprises to enhance its information warfare capabilities. This includes collaboration with technology companies and academic institutions to develop advanced cyber tools and techniques that can be used in information warfare operations (Green, 2016; Hjortdal, 2011). Such partnerships enable China to tap into a broader pool of resources and expertise, further strengthening its position in the information domain (Wells, 2022). The implications of China's information warfare strategy extend beyond its borders, affecting regional stability and international relations. As China continues to assert its influence through information warfare, neighboring countries must navigate the complexities of this evolving landscape.

Building on this comprehensive framework, China's information warfare strategy employs a diverse range of tools and tactics to achieve its objectives. Central to this approach are mechanisms like propaganda and narrative control, which are used to shape public perception and align global discourse with China's strategic goals. These efforts are complemented by cyber espionage activities that target critical infrastructure and gather intelligence to undermine adversaries (He & Ji, 2021). Furthermore, China has harnessed the power of digital diplomacy to project its influence on international platforms and amplify its voice in global governance. Disinformation campaigns also play a critical role, enabling the spread of tailored narratives to sow discord and confusion among adversaries while bolstering China's image. Collectively, these interconnected strategies illustrate the dynamic and expansive nature of China's information warfare operations (Nip & Sun, 2018).

Propaganda and Narrative Control

China's strategy for information warfare heavily relies on propaganda and narrative control as considering these strategy crucial components for achieving its geopolitical objectives. This strategy is intricately woven into the broader framework of hybrid warfare, where the manipulation of information is utilised to influence perceptions, shape public opinion, and undermine adversaries without engaging in direct military confrontation (Reis, 2024). The effectiveness of this approach is evident in various contexts, particularly in regions where China seeks to expand its influence, such as South Asia and the South China Sea (Saalman, 2021). At the core of China's information warfare strategy is the concept of "cognitive warfare," which aims to manipulate the cognitive processes of target audiences. This involves not only the dissemination of information but also the strategic framing of narratives to align with China's interests. The manipulation of narratives serves to bolster China's image domestically and internationally, creating a favorable perception of its governance and capabilities (Yu & Ho, 2022). The use of propaganda in China's information warfare is multifaceted, encompassing state-controlled media, social media campaigns, and the strategic use of influencers. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exerts significant control over media narratives, ensuring that information disseminated within China aligns with the party's objectives. This control extends to foreign media as well, where China employs tactics to influence coverage and shape narratives that favor its political agenda (Wither, 2023). By controlling the narrative, China seeks to create a cohesive story that resonates with its audience, thereby fostering a sense of national pride and unity. Moreover, narrative control is not limited to domestic audiences; it is also a critical tool in China's foreign policy arsenal. In regions like South Asia, China actively engages in information operations that aim to undermine the credibility of rival nations while promoting its own initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Gershaneck, 2020). Disinformation campaigns are another facet of China's information warfare strategy. These campaigns often involve the dissemination of false or misleading information to create confusion and sow discord among adversaries. For example, during territorial disputes in the South China Sea, China has been known to use social media to spread disinformation about the intentions of other claimant states, thereby justifying its own aggressive action (Joshi & Singh, 2021). This tactic not only serves to manipulate public opinion but also aims to weaken the resolve of adversaries by creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and mistrust. The effectiveness of propaganda and narrative control in China's information warfare is further enhanced by the use of advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence and big data analytics (Jacob, 2017). These technologies enable China to tailor its messaging to specific audiences, ensuring that propaganda is not only widespread but also resonates with the target demographic. By leveraging data-driven insights, China can optimize its information campaigns, making them more effective in achieving desired outcomes. In addition to traditional propaganda methods, China has also embraced digital platforms to amplify its narratives. The rise of social media has provided China with new avenues to reach global audiences, allowing for the rapid dissemination of information and the ability to engage directly with users (Joshi & Singh, 2021). The implications of China's information warfare strategy extend beyond mere narrative control; they pose significant challenges to regional stability and international relations.

2.2 Cyber Espionage

Cyber espionage plays a pivotal role in China's strategy for information warfare, serving as a mechanism through which the state seeks to achieve its national interests across military, economic, and political domains (Maness & Valeriano 2015). This multifaceted approach to cyber espionage is not only about gathering intelligence but also about leveraging that intelligence to gain strategic

advantages over adversaries, particularly in the context of the United States and its allies. The implications of China's cyber espionage activities are profound, influencing international relations, economic competition, and national security considerations (Stockmann, 2016). One of the primary objectives of China's cyber espionage is to acquire sensitive military and technological information. This is particularly evident in the context of China's military modernization efforts, where intelligence gathered through cyber means is used to enhance its capabilities and reduce technological gaps with Western powers. The implications of this economic espionage are also significant, as they undermine fair competition and create an uneven playing field in global markets. Reports indicate that the economic costs of such espionage activities are substantial, with estimates suggesting that U.S. businesses alone lose billions annually due to Chinese cyber intrusions (Samad et al., 2024). Furthermore, China's cyber espionage strategy is intricately linked to its geopolitical ambitions. By acquiring intelligence on the political and military strategies of other nations, China can better position itself in international negotiations and conflicts. This strategic intelligence allows China to anticipate and counteract the moves of its adversaries, thereby enhancing its influence on the global stage (Grobler & Swart, 2014). For example, insights gained through cyber espionage can inform China's diplomatic strategies, enabling it to exploit divisions among its rivals and strengthen its alliances. The role of state-sponsored actors in China's cyber espionage cannot be overstated. The Chinese government has established a framework that encourages and supports cyber operations, often utilizing state-affiliated hackers and cyber units to carry out espionage activities. The integration of cyber capabilities into China's national security strategy reflects a broader recognition of the importance of information dominance in contemporary warfare (Green, 2016). In response to the growing threat of cyber espionage, nations targeted by Chinese operations have begun to enhance their cybersecurity measures and develop counterintelligence strategies. This includes investing in advanced technologies to detect and mitigate cyber threats, as well as fostering international cooperation to share intelligence and best practices (Hjortdal, 2011). However, the effectiveness of these measures remains a challenge, as the rapidly evolving nature of cyber threats requires constant adaptation and vigilance. The implications of China's cyber espionage extend beyond immediate national security concerns; they also affect broader geopolitical dynamics. This underscores the need for robust diplomatic channels and confidence-building measures to mitigate the risks associated with cyber espionage (Anderson, 2016).

2.3 Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy has emerged as a crucial tool in China's broader strategy for information warfare, allowing the state to engage with international audiences, shape narratives, and exert influence in the global arena. This approach leverages the power of the internet, social media, and other digital communication technologies to enhance China's diplomatic efforts and promote its national interests (Yang, 2020). The significance of digital diplomacy in China's information warfare strategy can be understood through several key dimensions, including narrative control, public engagement, and the strategic use of technology. One of the primary roles of digital diplomacy in China's information warfare strategy is the control and manipulation of narratives. By utilizing social media platforms and online forums, China seeks to present its perspective on global issues, counter negative portrayals, and promote a positive image of the Chinese government and its policies (Zhang et al., 2023). For instance, during significant events such as the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, China employed digital public diplomacy to showcase its achievements, emphasize its cultural heritage, and project an image of national strength. Moreover, digital diplomacy facilitates public engagement and interaction with

global audiences. China has recognized the importance of engaging with foreign citizens, particularly the youth, to foster goodwill and understanding (Kalachishvili, 2023). Through various digital platforms, including WeChat, Weibo, and even Western social media, China disseminates information that resonates with target audiences, aiming to build favorable public opinion. This engagement is not limited to passive information dissemination; it often involves active participation in discussions, responding to criticisms, and addressing misconceptions about China's policies and actions. By fostering dialogue and interaction, China seeks to create a more favorable environment for its diplomatic initiatives. The strategic use of technology is another critical aspect of China's digital diplomacy. The Chinese government has invested heavily in developing sophisticated digital tools and platforms that enhance its diplomatic capabilities. Furthermore, digital diplomacy serves as a means of countering adversarial narratives and disinformation campaigns. In the context of increasing geopolitical tensions, particularly with the United States and its allies, China has faced significant challenges in managing its image and countering negative portrayals (Barman, 2024). Digital diplomacy provides a platform for China to directly address these challenges, enabling it to refute false claims, clarify its positions, and present counter-narratives that align with its strategic objectives.

2.4. Disinformation Campaigns

Disinformation campaigns play a crucial role in China's strategy for information warfare, serving as a means to manipulate public perception, undermine adversaries, and advance national interests. These campaigns are characterized by the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information, often facilitated through digital platforms and social media (Xu, 2023). The effectiveness of these campaigns lies in their ability to exploit existing societal divides, sow discord, and create confusion among target audiences, thereby achieving strategic objectives without the need for conventional military engagement. One of the primary objectives of China's disinformation campaigns is to control narratives surrounding sensitive issues, particularly those related to its domestic policies and international relations (Luo & Harrison, 2019). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China engaged in extensive disinformation efforts to deflect blame for the virus's origins and to promote its response as superior to that of other nations. By flooding the information space with favorable narratives and countering negative portrayals, China sought to bolster its image and diminish the credibility of its critics. This tactic of "zone-flooding" involves overwhelming the information landscape with so much content that discerning the truth becomes increasingly difficult for the average consumer. Moreover, disinformation campaigns are often tailored to specific audiences, utilizing data analytics and social media algorithms to maximize their impact. For example, China's use of targeted messaging on platforms like Twitter and Facebook allows it to reach diverse demographics, including overseas Chinese communities and foreign populations. This tactic is particularly evident in the context of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, where disinformation has been employed to obscure China's aggressive actions and to delegitimize the claims of other nations (Pan et al., 2022). The legal and ethical implications of disinformation campaigns pose significant challenges for the international community. The lack of effective regulatory frameworks to address state-sponsored disinformation complicates the response from affected nations. Efforts to combat disinformation often face obstacles related to freedom of speech and the difficulty of distinguishing between legitimate dissent and malicious misinformation (Nip & Sun, 2018). This legal gray area allows states like China to operate with relative impunity, further entrenching their disinformation strategies in the digital landscape.

Impact on South Asian Security

reaching implications for South Asian security, undermining sovereignty, exacerbating regional tensions, and political realignments. By influencing political and the sovereignty of South Asian nations, effectively altering governance structures. This manipulation of economic and political divisions, intensifying conflicts both within and across the region. These dynamics are further complicated by China's efforts to strengthen alliances, particularly with Pakistan, while undermining India's balance (Chen, 2018). Collectively, these factors highlight the impact of information warfare and its profound impact on the comprehensive understanding of these challenges to regional stability (Ng et al., 2022). China's information warfare tactics involve influencing nations by influencing political processes, public opinion, and election campaigns and propaganda, China seeks to often portraying itself in a favorable light while undermining its rivals, particularly India (Singh, 2016). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China used information warfare to assert its claims and delegitimize those of other nations, leading to a diminished sense of national identity and trust. Nations in South Asia grapple with external influences that seek to shape their political and economic future, and the pervasive nature of digital communication amplifies this influence. Political elites and the general populace, thereby becoming part of the fabric of South Asian nations (Durrani, 2023). The impact is most pronounced in countries with existing political instability, which are more vulnerable to influence by external information sources. As a result, the region becomes susceptible to foreign influence that threatens its long-term stability.



by MAXQDA Software

China's disinformation campaigns often exploit existing ethnic, religious, or political divisions within South Asian countries, exacerbating tensions and conflicts. By disseminating false information that plays on societal grievances, China can intensify existing rivalries and create new fault lines within and between states. For example, during the India-Pakistan rivalry, Chinese information warfare tactics have been used to stoke nationalist sentiments and anti-Indian rhetoric in Pakistan, thereby deepening the animosity between the two nuclear-armed neighbors (Saalaman, 2021). This strategic manipulation of public sentiment can lead to increased hostilities and a heightened risk of conflict, undermining regional stability (Benvenuti et al., 2022). Furthermore, the use of social media platforms to spread disinformation allows for rapid dissemination of divisive narratives, making it challenging for governments to counteract false claims effectively. The speed and scale at which information spreads in the digital age mean that once a narrative takes hold, it can be difficult to correct, leading to entrenched divisions and a polarized political environment. This dynamic not only threatens the internal cohesion of South Asian states but also complicates diplomatic efforts aimed at conflict resolution and regional cooperation.

Cybersecurity threats originating from China pose a significant risk to the national security and economic stability of South Asian nations. China has been implicated in numerous cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure, government institutions, and private enterprises across the region (Swan & Mutschler, 2024). These attacks not only aim to steal sensitive information but also to disrupt essential services, thereby undermining public trust in governmental institutions. The potential for cyber warfare to escalate into physical confrontations is particularly concerning in a region marked by historical tensions and unresolved conflicts. The implications of these cybersecurity threats are far-reaching, as they can lead to economic disruptions and a loss of investor confidence in South Asian markets (Tursyn & Turuntaeva, 2024). Moreover, the reliance on digital infrastructure for governance and economic activities makes South Asian nations particularly vulnerable to cyberattacks, necessitating urgent investments in cybersecurity measures and international cooperation to mitigate these risks.

China's strategic use of information warfare is closely linked to its efforts by fostering closer ties with Pakistan through economic investments and military cooperation, China seeks to counterbalance India's influence in South Asia (Zhou et al., 2024).. This geopolitical maneuvering is facilitated by information warfare tactics that promote narratives favorable to China and Pakistan while undermining India's position in the region (Cour, 2020). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as a key tool in this strategy, as China invests heavily in infrastructure projects throughout South Asia, thereby increasing its economic leverage over participating countries. By framing these investments as opportunities for development, China can cultivate goodwill among local populations while simultaneously creating dependencies that enhance its geopolitical influence. This shift in alliances has significant implications for regional security dynamics, as it may lead to increased tensions between India and its neighbors, further complicating the already fragile security environment in South Asia (Yu, 2023).

Influence Operations & Techniques of China's in South Asian Region (SAR)

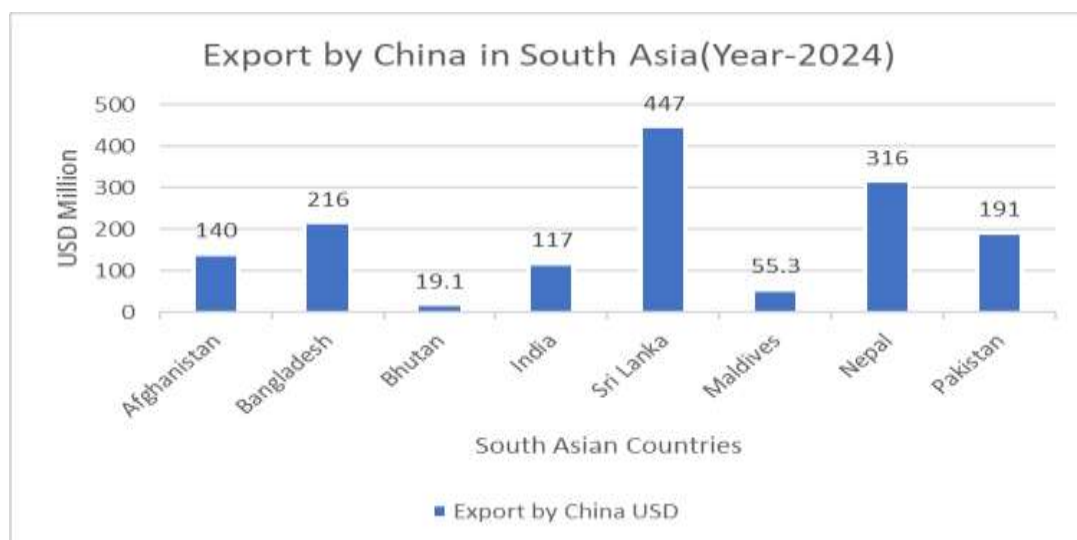
China chooses various means and techniques for their economic dependence and propaganda

campaigns as the means to achieve the goals of its influence operations in South Asia. Propaganda is used as a tool to influence public opinion. The third dimension is the most important, where China uses various strategies, sometimes through the United Front Department, to promote friendly voices, especially in the academic community of the SARs.

4.1 Influence through Political and Economic Tools in SAR

Under President Xi's leadership, China has made the use of economic resources to their foreign policy objectives as part of its influence operations a defining. And the purposeful exploitation of economic ties to accomplish geopolitical goals supported by financial investment and economic pressure to either limit the growth of SAR nations or to ease trade and financial flows in order to affect the policies of the target nation (Wickramasinghe & Ordigoni, 2013).

Figure: 2 Chinese exports in the various South Asian Countries in 2024



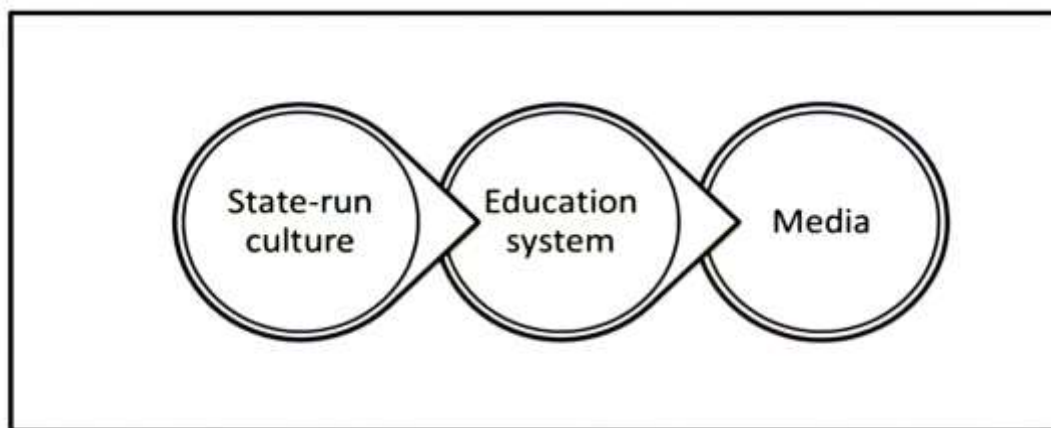
Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)

One way to integrate the economic objectives of the SAR countries with China's strategic interests is through the flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Beijing has heavily invested in. The total amount of Chinese infrastructure investment in Sri Lanka from 2006 to 2019 was \$12.1 billion. It's interesting to note that 15% of Sri Lanka's overall GDP came from the aforementioned Chinese investment, according to the World Bank report (Kumar, 2020). Unexpectedly, though, this is less than that of other SAR nations; in Pakistan, Chinese investment accounts for 25% of GDP, while in the Maldives, it accounts for 20%. The financial and business sectors have been the most potent sources of Chinese influence in recent years (Holroyd, 2020). The disparities in exports between China and the other four SAR countries are depicted in Figure-1. China only has Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Pakistan and the Maldives out of all the nations. China's commerce, however, contributed significantly to the asymmetric pattern of economic partnerships with the other SAR nations. For instance, Bangladesh's main commercial partner is China, with over USD 25 billion in bilateral trade between the two nations in 2021. Chinese exports to Bangladesh have grown by 88% annually over the past five years. Bangladesh exported \$85.7 million to China in 2022, whereas China exported \$15 billion to Bangladesh (Mahbub, 2021). In 2024, China exported \$216 million and imported only \$96.4 million from Bangladesh, which is highly asymmetrical. Apart from economic considerations; China's Free Trade

Agreements (FTAs) in South Asia are influenced by strategic and geopolitical factors. China tends to sign FTAs with countries it depends on for imports or to expand its market access. Despite significant trade with Bangladesh, Beijing avoids an FTA due to its lower dependency. Since joining the WTO in 2001, China's FTAs have been seen as tools for advancing its political influence and geostrategic interests. With South Asian countries heavily reliant on Chinese exports and China's vast market, opposing Beijing's interests is economically disadvantageous for them. China's quick ascent in the world economy has been aided by its efforts to liberalise regional commerce (Silvee, 2022). Through the state-capitalist system and the idea of Guanxiwang, or a network-based connection structure, Chinese firms have strong ties to the Communist Party and influence policy in target nations. Research indicates that Chinese companies are the ones driving investments under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), despite the fact that corporate goals and foreign policy might clash. By using the party-state machinery to influence policies in target countries, Chinese firms are essential to the advancement of the nation's economic engagement. Chinese companies function in a state-capitalist framework, in contrast to Western corporate-government connections, where alignment with national goals is facilitated by the idea of Guanxiwang, a network-based system of commercial and political relationships (Wignaraja, 2014). Businesses may further China's economic and geopolitical objectives thanks to this arrangement, which cultivates enduring trust and strategic reciprocity. Research shows that Chinese businesses continue to play a key role in investment initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), despite conflicts between corporate priorities and foreign policy.

4.2. Influence Operations through Propaganda Agenda

Under the direction of the CCP's United Front Work Department, China's propaganda activities span official organisations, private businesses, and global networks. According to studies, social media mining has emerged as a crucial disinformation tool since 2020, and Chinese government initiatives use data-mining tools to keep tabs on foreign nationals. Buddhism is becoming a diplomatic tactic to fortify relations with South and Southeast Asian countries while opposing India's Buddhist heritage, and Confucius Institutes act as cultural and language propagandists (Chakhunashvili et al., 2024).



The Figure given below demonstrates the three focused pillars of the Chinese propaganda system. Figure:3 Pillars of Chinese propaganda system (Compiled by the author)

The Confucius institutes established abroad are the major drivers of propagating Chinese culture, lifestyle, and language. China's propaganda campaign, according to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Commission, involves developing political personalities, influencing academics, and

using state-controlled media (Cook, 2022). China invests large sums of money at foreign universities in an effort to sway public opinion in favour of its policies; this practice known as “Sharp Power.” China’s strategic influence is strengthened in Nepal through programs like the Nepal-China Friendship Forum and Confucius Institutes, which support China’s development model, include Mandarin into curricula, and cultivate academic collaborations (Minici et al., 2024). China has positioned Nepal’s education sector as a major target for future Chinese investment by institutionalizing higher education internationalization and providing training programs and scholarships as part of its public diplomacy.

4.3 Security Influence in SAR

China’s security engagement in South Asia has grown tremendously through defence cooperation, arms sales, confrontation and strategic alliances, which have also strained regional stability and great power competition, and particularly India’s relations with other great powers, particularly the United States (Silva & Junior, 2016). The region’s security dynamics have changed as a result of China’s solid military alliance with Pakistan, rising marine presence in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and strengthening defence links with Bangladesh, Nepal, and other South Asian nations. This has changed the military balance in the region, heightened the strategic rivalry between China and India, and sparked worries about maritime security and economic interdependence (Matondang et al., 2022). The future course of South Asia’s security environment will be influenced by shifting geopolitical alignments and strategic recalibrations as Beijing’s influence increases.

Balance of power Between India and China in SAR

The figure-2 highlights the strategic competition between India and China in South Asian region. China leads in economic influence, infrastructure projects, trade, and technology, largely due to its Belt and Road Initiative and financial investments.

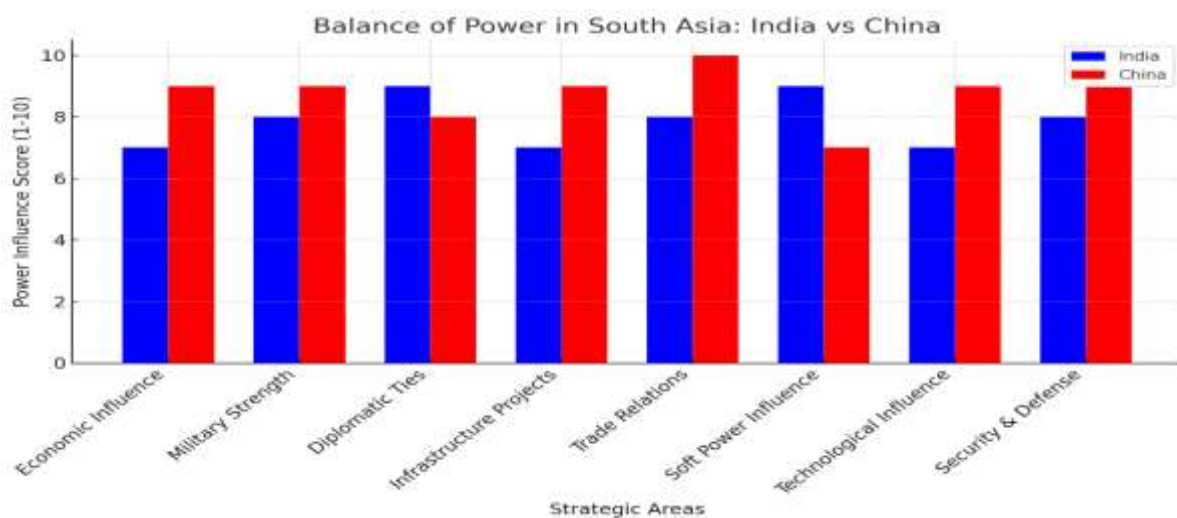


Figure 4: Balance of Power in South Asia: India v/s China

Source: Data compile by Author based on India and China’s strategic influence in South Asian countries

India, however, holds an advantage in diplomatic ties, soft power (cultural and educational influence), and regional security through its defense partnerships. While both nations have significant military strength, China’s economic leverage and trade dominance give it an edge. However, India’s deep-rooted regional ties and democratic influence help maintain a strong counterbalance in the region.

China's Information Warfare and Its Impact on South Asian Regional Stability

The balance of power remains dynamic, shaped by economic shifts and geopolitical strategies.

Category	India	China	Other South Asian Countries
Economic Influence	Major trade partner in South Asia, investments in infrastructure and IT sectors	Dominates global trade, BRI investments in South Asia	Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives receive investments from both
Military Strength	World's 4th largest military, nuclear power, regional bases	World's largest military, nuclear power, strategic bases	Pakistan has a strong military with Chinese support; others rely on India or China
Diplomatic Ties	SAARC leadership, QUAD alliance, growing Indo-Pacific ties	BRI, strong ties with Pakistan and Sri Lanka, increasing influence in Nepal	Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh engage with both India and China
Infrastructure Projects	Leads regional connectivity projects, highways, and railways	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), port developments (Gwadar, Hambantota)	Pakistan benefit from CPEC and others benefited from India-led projects
Trade Relations	Major trading partner in South Asia, increasing exports	Largest exporter to the region, debt diplomacy concerns	Countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan heavily trade with both
Soft Power Influence	Bollywood, cultural ties, democracy, education hub	Economic incentives, Confucius Institutes, media influence	India's strong cultural influence; China's growing economic presence

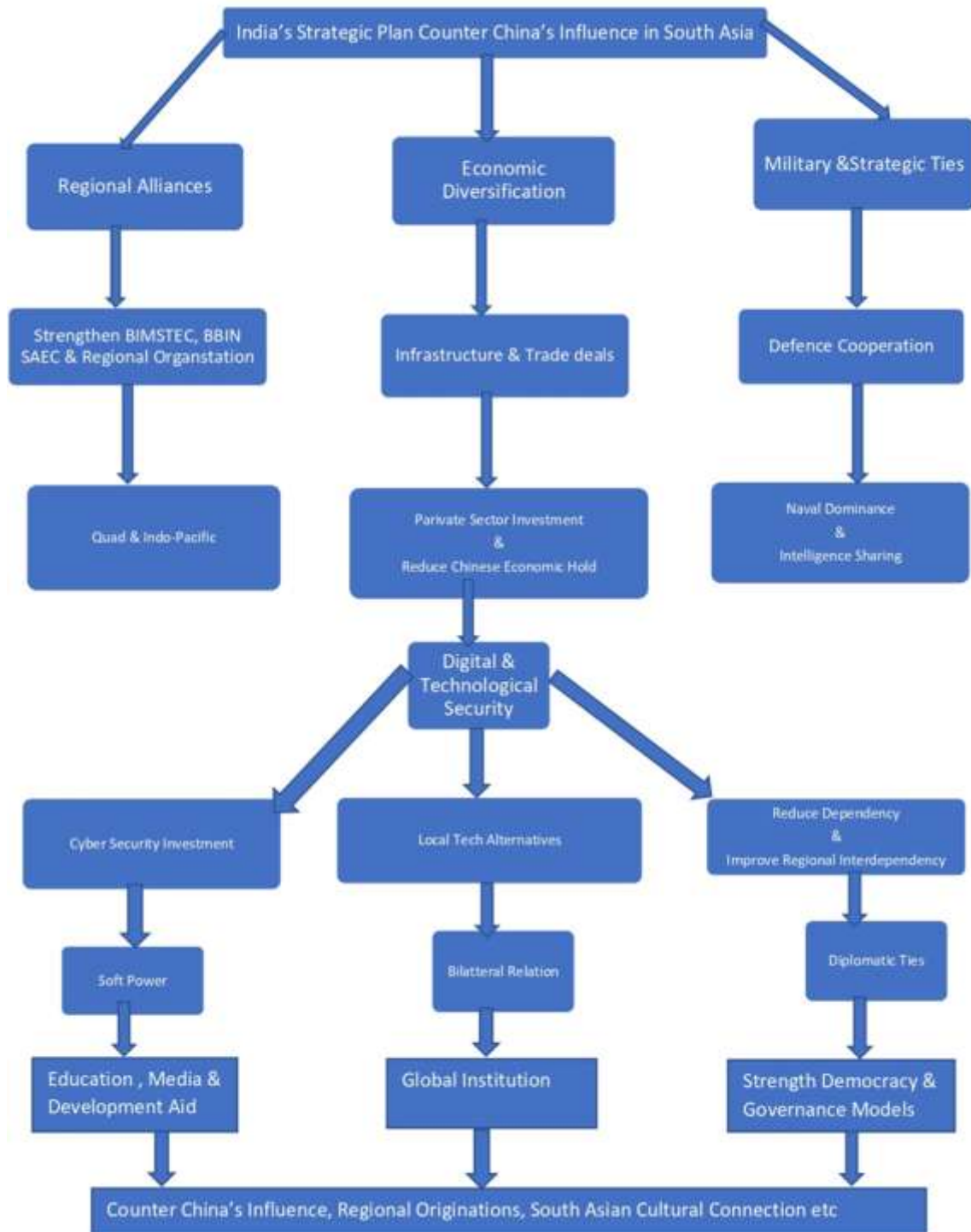
Technological Influence	IT dominance, space program, digital outreach	5G, AI, tech dominance, digital silk road	Some countries adopt Chinese tech, while others rely on Indian IT expertise
Security & Defense Agreements	Defense cooperation with SAARC nations, Indo-Pacific alliances	Military agreements with Pakistan, naval presence in the Indian Ocean	Pakistan-China military ties are strong, while others balance engagements

Source: Data collected from various Reports, Newspapers and Research Articles (Compiled by Author)

China's investments in South Asia have fostered economic dependencies, allowing Beijing to exert influence over national policies. Landlocked nations like Nepal and Bhutan rely heavily on external transit routes, with Nepal historically dependent on India. While Nepal signed a transit treaty with China in 2000, it gained significance only after India's 2015 economic blockade, reducing Nepal's reliance on India. China's strategic influence extends to political maneuvering, as seen in the Maldives, where anti-India narratives facilitated the rise of a pro-China government. Beijing's military presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), under the guise of research, further strengthens its regional leverage (Kurian & Vinodan, 2021). China has also used diplomatic pressure, as demonstrated by its attempt to dissuade Bangladesh from joining the Quad, prompting Dhaka's reaffirmation of its independent foreign policy. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been criticized as a geopolitical tool, with projects like Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port reinforcing its strategic foothold. The recent China-Maldives defense pact, following India's military withdrawal, poses a direct challenge to India's influence in the IOR. Additionally, the presence of the PLA in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) raises significant security concerns for India.

China employs cultural diplomacy to expand its influence in South Asia. Confucius Institutes, scholarships, and the promotion of Mandarin cultivate pro-China sentiments among future leaders. By positioning itself as a Buddhist leader, Beijing seeks to counter India's spiritual legacy. The growing popularity of Chinese cuisine, music, and cinema further strengthens its soft power, embedding Chinese cultural elements into South Asian societies. India remains a key target of China's disinformation campaigns. Beijing has repeatedly circulated misleading narratives to undermine India's global standing. The 2020 ban on Chinese apps, including TikTok, was driven by concerns over data security and propaganda dissemination, reflecting broader efforts to curb China's digital influence in India.

India's Strategy to Counter China's Influence in SAR



This flowchart outlines a comprehensive strategy of India to reduce China's influence in South Asia by addressing multiple interconnected domains. First, Regional Alliances focus on strengthening groups like SAARC and BIMSTEC while expanding partnerships through the Quad and Indo-Pacific

frameworks, thereby creating a united front against economic or political coercion. Simultaneously, Economic Diversification emphasizes infrastructure development, trade agreements, and private sector investments to mitigate reliance on Chinese funding and technology. In the realm of Military & Strategic Ties, enhanced defense cooperation, naval dominance, and intelligence sharing collectively bolster security and deter aggressive maneuvers. Digital & Technological Security highlights the importance of cybersecurity measures, developing local tech alternatives, and reducing dependency on Chinese platforms. Parallel to these efforts, Soft Power initiatives—through education, media, and development aid—are vital for countering China's cultural and ideological influence. Finally, Diplomatic Ties encourage deeper bilateral relations, engagement with global institutions, and support for democratic governance. All these components work in concert to achieve the ultimate goal: a more self-reliant, resilient South Asia with diminished vulnerability to China's strategic leverage.

Recommendations/ Suggestions

Indian Government needs to take a diversified approach to thwart China's growing influence in South Asia. It is imperative to strengthen regional economic connectivity, especially through investment-driven projects in Bangladesh and Nepal. India must implement alternative economic frameworks to bolster its regional footprint, even though its exit from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was a calculated move. China's opaque BRI financing can be effectively countered by promoting joint ventures and providing clear, long-term credit arrangements.

India should assist South Asian independent media in combating China's propaganda, using the region's expanding media landscape to combat false information. A balanced perspective can be shaped by programs like media partnerships and journalist internships. Additionally, a good example of how to effectively promote positive messaging is India's G20 Presidency.

Reducing China's educational impact will also need increasing scholarships for South Asian students and expanding intellectual exchanges. In order to ensure a knowledgeable and calculated counterbalance to China's expanding soft power, it can be beneficial to strengthen local think tanks and research organisations through financial support. This will encourage independent conversation on regional issues.

India is not as economically capable as China. As a result, it ought to collaborate with China to help these nations grow so that the benefits of their combined progress can be seen throughout South Asia. Additionally, it must vehemently oppose the proposals to expand the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. In order to preserve its goodwill in South Asia and keep these countries from eclipsing India's influence, India should also invest in these areas where China falls short.

Conclusion

The region's capacity to oppose Beijing's policies is hampered by China's expanding influence in South Asia, which is fuelled by trade imbalances and economic reliance. These nations are further constrained by their over-reliance on BRI investments and the lack of other financial institutions. India needs to aggressively oppose China's growing influence in South Asia because of its strategic significance. Beijing's intellectual outreach, media sway, and disinformation tactics necessitate a proactive response from New Delhi. India's leadership in the region may be strengthened by bolstering its economic resilience, expanding its academic and cultural connections, and capitalising on its

democratic values and international reputation. Countering China's influence will require a multipronged approach that combines diplomatic, economic, and soft power activities. China's information warfare in South Asia poses a multi-dimensional threat, impacting political stability, cybersecurity, and regional security dynamics. A coordinated effort by South Asian states is essential to mitigate these challenges and safeguard the regional sovereignty and security..

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