

## **China's Geo-economic Hegemony in South Asia: An Analysis of Bangladesh's Rapid Engagement and Consequence**

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### **Abstract**

China, as one of the influential states in South Asia, has recently proposed a new strategy known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This development, along with China's increasing presence in South Asia, requires critical analysis. China's rapid engagement with South Asian states, has a significant impact on the geopolitical landscape of the region. Bangladesh, being an important state in South Asia, attracts the attention of powerful nations seeking to assert their influence. Over the past few years, China has emerged as one of Bangladesh's major economic and development partners. However, it is crucial to recognize that Chinese involvement in Bangladesh goes beyond mere economic cooperation and encompasses broader geopolitical, geostrategic and geoeconomic interests. It seems China's south Asia policy shift from earlier landscape. Consequently, China's engagement with Bangladesh has implications not only for the trade but also for the wider geopolitical dynamics of South Asia. This research seeks to elucidate the economic ties between Bangladesh and China and examine their impact, influence, and relevance. This research aims to explore China's new South Asian policy by using the China-Bangladesh relationship as an illustrative example.

Keywords: China, South Asia, Bangladesh, BRI, Geo-Economics, Chinese Engagement

### **Introduction:**

While China is not officially part of South Asia, it is challenging to deny the influence of this economic giant in the region. Chinese policies have a profound impact on South Asian geopolitics, and the consequences are vividly apparent. China shares its borders with several South Asian states and, as a rising global economic power, has a vested interest in South Asia's trade markets, connectivity, geoeconomics, and geopolitics. In smaller South Asian nations, such as Nepal, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, China has significantly invested in numerous projects. There is an ongoing debate that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transformed the geopolitics of South Asia (Hossain, 2023). This research aims to explore

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China's policy shifts following the announcement of the BRI and how these have been reflected in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh. It seeks to address China's current policy toward South Asia by examining its engagement in Bangladesh.

As an emerging economic power, China exerts growing economic influence over South Asian nations; this research focuses on that engagement. In Bangladesh, China's involvement has significantly increased across various sectors, particularly in the economic domain, over the last decade. Xi Jinping's visit to Dhaka in 2016 and Bangladesh's signing of the BRI are milestones in this development. This article aims to analyze both BRI and non-BRI engagements in Bangladesh to gain a deeper understanding of the China- Bangladesh relationship and China's policy toward Bangladesh. Beyond economic engagement, China's military involvement, soft power diplomacy, cultural and political exchanges, media dialogues, and aid initiatives also significantly influence the current political dynamics of Bangladesh. Therefore, this research encompasses these areas as well.

This article focuses on the current drivers of China's South Asia policy and examines the extent to which they influence China-Bangladesh relations. It investigates the nature of China's involvement in Bangladesh and explores the relevance and consequences of China's recent engagement there.

It is important to note that China's economic agenda is not generalized but driven by specific geoeconomic objectives. Each infrastructure project undertaken by China in Bangladesh holds geopolitical significance and serves a geostrategic purpose. This article explores how Chinese engagement in Bangladesh aligns with China's geoeconomic and geopolitical objectives and explains how this engagement has contributed to the establishment of Chinese hegemony in Bangladesh, shaping both its domestic and foreign policies.

China and Bangladesh have had bilateral relations for over 40 years, but this research emphasizes the rapid engagement observed in the last decade, particularly after the signing of the BRI. The study broadly analyzes Chinese engagement in Bangladesh from 2013 to 2023, covering a period of ten years, while also considering China's past involvement in the region to understand the current scenario fully.

## **Theoretical Analysis**

Globalization represents a form of connectivity, facilitating accessible trade routes and interconnection between nations. Connectivity has become one of the major tools in geopolitics, ensuring supply chains and trade relations. Those with smooth connectivity dominate the supply market. China has introduced a global connectivity strategy known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to connect Asia, Africa, and Europe. BRI strategy extends beyond mere connectivity and economic progress, encompassing security and strategic achievements (Jie & Wallace 2021). Therefore, it is essential to comprehensively explain China's BRI strategy in South Asia, a region which has significant geostrategic importance for trade, connectivity, and maritime borders.

As an economic power, China has a major engagement with South Asia as well as Bangladesh in the economic sector. Mattlin and Wigel (2016) suggested that geoeconomics strategies are typical for non-western powers like China, India, and Brazil because they rely on economic power rather than military power, unlike the USA (Scholvin & Wigell 2018, p. 06).'

According to Hsiung (2009), 'geoeconomics is a shift from military to an economic security concern, especially concerning China's new role in global politics (Ibid). Sanjoy Baru (2012) considers that 'geoeconomics has a double analytical sense; on the one hand, it assesses the geopolitical implication of the economic phenomenon; on the other hand, it analyses the economic effects of geopolitical trends (Jaeger & Brites, 2020, pp 24).'

The author argues that geoeconomics is a soft power in influencing other states and practicing hegemony. So, this article explores China's economic engagement primarily to explain China's geostrategy and geopolitical interest in Bangladesh.

## **Methodology, Data Collection and Analysis**

This paper emphasizes qualitative analysis and relies on the secondary data analysis process. The research aims to utilize secondary sources, such as books, research articles, documents, newspaper sources, data provided by national and international institutions, etc. However, selection bias can sometimes mislead the research. Therefore, the research emphasizes cross-

checking the data from different sources. Sharan B. Merriam discussed the limitations of data analysis, pointing out that many documents are not readily suitable for research purposes, and their authenticity and accuracy are questionable (Merriam, 2015). Consequently, this research emphasizes on cross-check and authenticity of data source. This research also emphasizes observation. According to Merriam, qualitative research encompasses three primary methods: important interviews, observation, and examination. This research embraces at least two of these techniques (observation and examination). The research analyzes data gathered from secondary sources and draws conclusions. The analysis includes observations from the article's author.

### **China's Strategic Ascendance: Shaping Global Power Dynamics**

The Chinese Revolution of 1949 marked a significant turning point in China's history. Following the revolution, Mao Zedong and later Deng Xiaoping emerged as influential leaders in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Currently, Xi Jinping serves as the Chinese President, and his new policy, known as 'striving for achievement,' represents a departure from Deng Xiaoping's approach of 'keeping a low profile and biding the time' (Kumar, 2019, p. 137).

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, and through his unique policies, China is positioning itself as an alternative development partner for smaller nations. Through its ambitious projects and substantial investments in infrastructure in these countries, China is expanding its influence, causing concern in the United States about its declining status as the world's leading superpower (Hossain, 2024). In response to China's rise, the U.S. has announced its Indo-Pacific Strategy, promoting a "free and open Indo-Pacific." The Indo-Pacific concept extends beyond geographic boundaries, representing a shared identity among nations that are increasingly uneasy about China's growing power (Ibid).

China's strategic presence in smaller nations, coupled with its military presence in critical locations like the South China Sea, poses a significant challenge to U.S. trade interests. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, more than "21% of global trade, totaling \$3.37 trillion, transited through the South China Sea in 2016 (Regilme, 2018)." China's expansive claims and military presence in this vital artery have raised concerns for international trade and for the United States, the world's largest economic power.

China's rise has also heightened tensions with India. The Galwan Valley clash in 2020 significantly strained bilateral relations between the two countries and sparked widespread international concern over escalating border disputes and military tensions in the region. As China continues to assert its influence in South Asia, it increasingly challenges India's position in the region.

China's authoritarian political system and its efforts to export this model to other nations through geo-economic engagements is another point of concern for democratic nations like the U.S. and India. In 2017, President Xi Jinping articulated China's own perspective on democracy and governance, suggesting that China was forging a new path for other developing countries to achieve modernization, this stance implies that economic growth and modernization are achievable under an authoritarian regime (Weiss, 2019).

Christopher Wray, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), has expressed that China poses a threat not only to specific U.S. interests but also to the broader survival of democracy and the U.S.-led international order (Ibid). In the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China appears to be leading a coalition of nations that lack strong democratic institutions, such as Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Myanmar. These nations, each with unique political contexts, have found common ground with China on various international issues (Hossain, 2024).

In 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden emphasized this rivalry during his first presidential meeting, stating that the U.S.-China competition is part of a broader struggle between democracy and autocracy (Cheng, 2021). China's footprint in third-world nations, smaller states, the Global South, and even South Asia demonstrates its ambition to counter the U.S. influence in these regions. This is particularly relevant in the context of Bangladesh, where China has effectively countered the U.S. criticism of Bangladesh's less democratic moves.

### **China's Policy Shift and Implementation in South Asia**

Under Xi Jinping, China has shifted to a new policy approach characterized by ambitious projects BRI that have significantly established its strategic importance in South Asia. China's international relations framework employs a three-ring categorization: the inside ring consists of China's neighboring states, the middle ring comprises the neighboring states of the inside ring, and the outer ring extends to Europe, America, and Africa (Kumar, 2019, p. 137). Within this framework, South Asian states fall into the inside and middle rings. India, Pakistan,

Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar are considered inside ring states, while Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives are classified as middle ring states in Chinese foreign policy. Consequently, the South Asian region is viewed as part of China's neighborhood in its foreign policy.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's major grand strategy. Scholars, such as Chen (2014), have characterized the BRI as a "New Marshall Plan" with Chinese characteristics, highlighting its economic nature (Beeson, 2018, p. 02). South Asia is a crucial region for the implementation of this Chinese grand strategy.

China aims to connect its western regions, including Tibet, Xinjiang, and the southwestern province of Yunnan, to the Indian Ocean and the global economy for trade and connectivity. To achieve this objective, China has strengthened its strategic relationships with Pakistan, Myanmar, and other South Asian nations.

One of the key corridors under the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), aims to link China's western provinces to the Indian Ocean via the Pakistani port of Gwadar. Additionally, China has proposed the Bangladesh-India-China-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, which would connect Kunming in China to the Indian Ocean through India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

As part of China's BRI grand strategy, its economic influence has already grown significantly in South Asian states. Trade between China and South Asian countries has witnessed substantial growth, increasing from 5.7 billion USD in 2000 to 93 billion USD in 2012, with an average annual growth rate of 26 percent (Economic Times, 2013). This evidence suggests that China's foreign policy now emphasizes geoeconomics to influence global politics in South Asia.

### **China's Interest in Bangladesh**

China is increasingly fostering a close relationship with Bangladesh, emerging as a potential hegemonic power in the region. China's South Asia policy has always guided Sino-Bangladeshi relations, which are also a part of its broader neighborhood policy.

Bangladesh now has one of the fastest-growing GDPs in South Asia. In 2021, its GDP growth was recorded at 6.9% (Business Standard, 2022). Additionally, Bangladesh possesses proven

reserves of 5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (Singh, 2010, p. 273). With a GDP exceeding 400 billion USD and a market of 170 million people, Bangladesh represents a promising trade partner for China.

Bangladesh's geostrategic position is unique, sharing borders with both India and Myanmar, and possessing vast sovereignty over approximately 112,000 square kilometers of the Bay of Bengal. In the maritime geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific, Bangladesh holds significant importance. China has proposed the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor as one of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) corridors, further enhancing Bangladesh's strategic relevance to China.

Given Bangladesh's geopolitical and geoeconomic significance over the past decade, China has significantly increased its engagement with the country in economic, military, and soft power diplomacy. After 41 years of bilateral relations, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Bangladesh in October 2016, announcing substantial investments under the BRI (Karim & Liton, 2016). During this visit, Bangladesh formally signed the BRI agreement, and China announced investments in 27 projects totaling approximately 24.5 billion USD (Ibid).

Moreover, several Chinese firms signed 13 joint ventures with Bangladeshi companies, bringing the total investment value to 13.06 billion USD. Thus, the combined sum of investments amounts to around 38.05 billion USD (Ibid). The proposed projects primarily focus on the power, port, expressway, railway, tunnel, and IT sectors. Although some projects have been revised or replaced over the past seven years, most of them are already in progress. These projects hold immense geostrategic importance for Bangladesh. Consequently, China's economic engagement and other affiliations in Bangladesh serve both its geoeconomic and geopolitical interests.

### **China-Bangladesh Relations Overview:**

This chapter focuses on the engagement between Bangladesh and China across various sectors. The first section examines the patterns of China-Bangladesh engagement under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreement. The second section explores non-BRI development projects in Bangladesh, specifically Chinese-assisted construction projects, public-private partnerships (PPP), and foreign direct investment (FDI). The third section reflects on China-Bangladesh

trade relations. The fourth section analyses Chinese military engagement in Bangladesh, and the fifth examines the pattern of Chinese aid and soft power in Bangladesh.

### **1. China-Bangladesh Engagement within the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

Most South Asian states, except for India and Bhutan, have joined China's grand initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including Bangladesh. According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), China invested USD 9.75 billion between 2009 and 2019 in various infrastructure projects in Bangladesh (Khatun & Saadat, 2020). However, China's current BRI investment in Bangladesh exceeds that figure, spanning multiple sectors including power, roads, railways, tunnels, expressways, ports, pipelines, export processing zones (EPZs), and IT sectors.

#### **Power Sector:**

China's investment in Bangladesh's power sector under the BRI is noteworthy. Bangladesh has developed a comprehensive Power Master Plan (2010-2030), aiming to increase its power production capacity to 40,000 MW by 2030 and 60,000 MW by 2041 (Finance Division, Ministry of Finance, n.d.). To achieve this goal, the Bangladeshi government has initiated the construction of new power stations, transmission lines, and distribution lines, with China playing an active role in this expanding market.

In 2016, the North-West Power Generation Company Ltd (NWPGL), a state-owned power-generating institution in Bangladesh, signed an agreement with a Chinese government company to establish a 1320 MW coal-fired thermal power plant in Payara, Patuakhali. The Chinese Exim Bank funded this project at a cost of USD 2 billion (BSS, 2022).

Another significant power project is the S Alam Power Plant, a 1320 MW coal-fired thermal power plant situated offshore in the Bay of Bengal near Chittagong. The project is estimated to cost around USD 2.04 billion, with the China Development Bank, the Bank of China, and the China Construction Bank covering 85% of the total project cost (NS Energy, 2019).

The Bangladesh government also facilitated the establishment of another 320 MW coal-fired power plant in Barguna, located in the northwestern part of the state (Rahman, 2018). Power China Resource Limited is developing this project with funding from the Export-Import Bank of China and the Bank of China.



Despite facing environmental criticisms regarding coal-based power plants, the Bangladesh government initiated these projects under the BRI framework. Additionally, Bangladesh accepted a loan of USD 970 million from the China Exim Bank for the Power Grid Network Strengthening Project (Rahman, 2020). This initiative involves constructing new substations and installing over 1,000 km of new transmission lines in various parts of the country. The People's Republic of China, along with the Chinese Exim Bank, signed an agreement with the Power Grid Company of Bangladesh to provide funds of USD 966 million for the "Expansion and Strengthening of the Power System Network" project in Dhaka (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

The state minister for the Power sector of Bangladesh, proposed the establishment of 23 solar power plants with a total capacity of 1,220.77 MW (UNB, 2020). The North-West Power Generation Company Ltd (NWPGL), a joint venture between Bangladesh and China, is actively involved in plans to set up several solar plants in the country (ibid).

#### **China's BRI Investments in Roads, Railways, and Expressways:**

One of the major projects under the BRI in Bangladesh is the Padma Bridge Rail Link, which aims to connect Dhaka with the western region of the country through a 168 km rail line. The China Exim Bank has provided funding of USD 3 billion for this project, which is currently under construction by China Railway Group Limited (Indo-Asian News Service, 2018).

Bangladesh's first under-river tunnel, located in the port city of Chittagong, is also a BRI project. The Chinese Exim Bank provided funding of USD 705 million for this project, which was constructed by China Communication Construction Company Limited (Kamal, 2022).

The Bank of China has agreed to provide funding of USD 2.08 billion for constructing the largest marine drive expressway in the country, connecting Sitakundu and Cox's Bazar over a distance of 230 km (Rahman, 2021).

Additionally, the Bangladesh government is currently planning the construction of the Dhaka East-West Elevated Expressway, which will connect Dhaka to the Padma Bridge. The project's estimated cost is USD 2 billion (Chakma, 2020). The Embassy of China has expressed interest in funding this project, and the Bangladeshi government authorities are encouraged by their interest.

**Ports, Pipelines, EPZ, IT, and Other Proposed Projects:**

Two Chinese companies, China Harbour Engineering Company and China State Construction Engineering Company, are constructing the Payara Port in the southern coastal area of the country. This is a USD 600 million project under the BRI agreement (Rahman, 2021).

Bangladesh has planned to install a 135 km offshore and 58 km onshore Single Point Mooring (SPM) with a double pipeline from the Moheshkhali deep seaport to Chittagong. The Bangladesh government has provided USD 220 million in funding out of the project's total cost of USD 760 million, with the remaining USD 540 million funded by the Chinese Exim Bank (Rahaman. M. A., 2021).

The Bangladesh government has granted a Chinese company 774 acres of land to develop the Chinese Economic and Industrial Zone in Chittagong. This economic zone marks Bangladesh's first government-to-government (G2G) special economic zone (Chakma, 2020).

China has also established the largest data center in Bangladesh, located at Bangabandhu Hi-Tech City in Kaliakoir, Joydebpur. This Tier IV National Data Center, costing USD 154 million, began in 2016 on a two-lakh square foot space, with financial and technical assistance from China, and was completed in June 2019 (UNB, 2021).

The Bangladesh government has decided to set up six branches of its state-owned television division, BTV. China agreed to contribute USD 115 million out of the USD 160 million budget for this project (The Daily Sun, 2017).

The Bangladesh government has also proposed that China may fund a USD 350 million digitization project to expand Teletalk, the state-owned mobile operator, to provide 5G mobile broadband and digital connectivity from urban to rural areas (Rahaman. M. M., 2021).

In 2020, Bangladesh sought an additional USD 6.4 billion loan from China for nine projects within the country (Rahman, 2020). These projects include the restoration and management of the Teesta River, estimated to cost USD 853 million; the Barishal-Bola Bridge, valued at USD 1.2 billion; the expansion and strengthening of the power system network under the DPDC area; the first phase of the Payara Seaport; the Sheikh Hasina Institute of Information Technology and Hi-Tech Park; the procurement of oil tankers; the four-lane development of the Barisal-Kuakata highway; and the construction of high-tech rural bridges across the country (ibid).

## **2. Chinese Non-BRI Engagement in Bangladesh**

Apart from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has engaged with Bangladesh across numerous sectors. Chinese companies have been notably successful in bidding for most of the construction projects in Bangladesh. Moreover, China has significantly invested in Bangladesh's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) initiatives.

Chinese companies are bidding for most development projects in Bangladesh, regardless of whether they are financed by China, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), or the Bangladesh government. A notable example is the Padma Bridge project, which came into focus in 2012 after the World Bank withdrew its funding plan due to corruption allegations. As a result, the Bangladesh government decided to fund the bridge with its own resources, making it one of the country's most expensive projects, at around 3.5 billion USD (Byron & Adhikary, 2021). Two Chinese companies, China Major Bridge Engineering Co. Ltd and Sino Hydro Corporation Limited, were involved in its construction (Ibid).

Another crucial infrastructure project is the Payara Bridge, which aims to improve connectivity through the Padma Bridge by linking the Kuakata tourist spot and the Payara seaport to Dhaka. The Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) and the OPEC Fund for International Development funded the project with 160 million USD. The Chinese firm Longjian Road and Bridge Company won the construction assistance tender (The Financial Express, 2021).

Similar to the Padma Bridge, the Chittagong-Cox-Bazar Railway is another mega-project costing approximately 2 billion USD. The Bangladesh government secured funding for this project from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Chinese companies China Railway Group Ltd (CREC) and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) are leading the construction (The Financial Express, 2017).

Bangladesh has proposed upgrading Sylhet's domestic airport to international status, which is located near the Indian border. Beijing Urban Construction Group Limited, a Chinese firm, was selected for the development (Javed, 2020). Similarly, Bangladesh has decided to upgrade Cox's Bazar Airport near the Myanmar border to international status, involving two Chinese state-owned companies, China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation and Changjag Yichang Waterway Engineering Bureau (Chowdary & Barua, 2021).

China also plays a significant role in Bangladesh's PPP and FDI projects. Although Bangladesh has the lowest FDI in the region, China holds a substantial portion of it. According to

UNCTAD, in 2018, Bangladesh received 3.6 billion USD in FDI, with China holding a share of 1 billion USD (DW, 2019). In 2017, a Chinese consortium named Himalaya Energy acquired three gas fields in Bangladesh from Chevron, valued at around 2 billion USD. These fields contribute to over half of Bangladesh's total gas reserves (Das & Qadir, 2017).

Chinese companies are also involved in various projects through PPP arrangements. One example is the Kalapara coal power plant in Patuakhali district, which aims to generate 1320 MW of electricity at an estimated cost of 2.3 billion USD. The project is a joint venture between Bangladesh's Rural Power Company and China's Norinco International Cooperation (Hossain, 2021).

China has expressed interest in developing Purbachal, the first and largest planned township near Dhaka. Delcot Water Limited, a Chinese company, signed an agreement to manage the smart city water distribution project valued at approximately 0.72 billion USD, which operates under PPP and is not part of the BRI (Chowdary K. R., 2021).

Additionally, Alipay, part of China's Alibaba Group, purchased a 20% stake in Bkash, Bangladesh's largest mobile banking company (The Daily Star, 2018). Two Chinese stock exchanges, the Shenzhen and Shanghai stock exchanges, signed an agreement to acquire a 25% stake in the Dhaka Stock Exchange, along with a commitment to provide technical support worth 37 million USD (Reuters, 2018).

### **3. China and Bangladesh Trade Relations**

According to the Bangladesh Bank Annual Report (July 2019-June 2020), during FY 2019-2020, Bangladesh imported goods worth 11.33 billion USD from China, representing 23% of its total imports of 48 billion USD for that fiscal year. During the same period, Bangladesh exported goods worth 490 million USD to China (Bangladesh Bank Annual Report, n.d.).

In FY 2020-2021, Bangladesh's imports from China increased to 12.74 billion USD out of a total import value of 53 billion USD, accounting for 24% of Bangladesh's total import market. During this fiscal year, Bangladesh's exports to China amounted to 550 million USD (Bangladesh Bank Annual Report, n.d.).

Overall, the trade relationship between Bangladesh and China is heavily dominated by Chinese exports, making Bangladesh a significant and growing market for China.

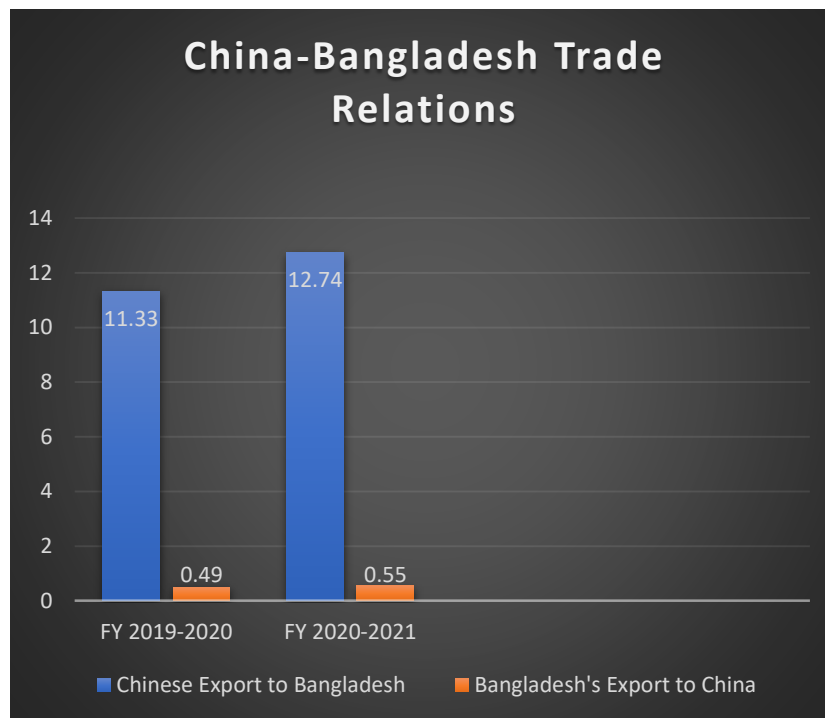


Figure 1: China Bangladesh Trade Relations in USD/Billion

Another aspect is to analysis that Bangladesh's major export item is ready-made garments, and its largest export markets are the USA and the EU. In 2013, the US suspended the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) for Bangladesh. Bangladesh is expected to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026. However, there is no guarantee that Bangladesh will receive the GSP+ facility from the USA and EU after the LDC graduation. In effort to this trade tension in Bangladesh and explore alternative potential exporting markets, China granted 97% of Bangladeshi products (8256 in total) duty-free access to the Chinese market from July 2020 (Bhuiyan, 2021).

#### 4. Bangladesh-China Military Engagement

Military relations between Bangladesh and China began with a bilateral agreement signed in 2002, which included provisions for training, maintenance, and other military-related fields (Singh, 2010, p. 272). Since then, China has emerged as Bangladesh's primary military ally. According to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from 2015 to 2019, China exported 20% of its total arms to Bangladesh, making it the second-largest arms supplier to Bangladesh in South Asia, after Pakistan (ANI News Agency, 2021).

In 2014, the Bangladesh military and the Bangladesh University of Professionals—a university operated by the Bangladesh Army—signed four agreements with China, under which the Chinese military would train Bangladeshi military personnel (Hasib, 2014). Since 2010, China has also supplied Bangladesh with five maritime patrol vessels, two corvettes, 44 tanks, and 16 fighter jets (Tiezzi, 2015). Additionally, China provided Bangladesh with its first pair of submarines, the Chinese Ming-class Type 035B diesel-electric submarines (Press Trust of India, 2016). Currently, the Sheikh Hasina Submarine Base is under construction in Cox's Bazar, a project with an estimated cost of 1.2 billion USD, funded by China and constructed by Chinese firms (Chowdary, 2019). Based on the above information, China is a dominant player in Bangladesh's defense market.

### **5. China's Aid and Soft Power Diplomacy in Bangladesh**

In 2021, Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, inaugurated the Bangladesh-China Friendship Exhibition Centre in Purbachal New Town. The project, costing 95 million USD, received a substantial donation of nearly 61.5 million USD from China (Chowdhury, 2021). The Friendship Exhibition Centre is now the largest exhibition facility in the country.

Since 1986, China has provided aid for the construction of seven bridges in Bangladesh. The eighth China-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge, nearing completion, will connect the important divisions of Khulna and Barisal. China has provided 50 million USD in aid for the construction of this bridge, which was built by China Railway 17 Bureau Grand Co Ltd (The Daily Star, 2017). Additionally, China has expressed its intention to support the construction of two more friendship bridges in Barguna and Patuakhali, located in the northern region of Bangladesh.

Beyond financial aid, China has focused on student scholarships and academic cooperation in Bangladesh. Each year, China sponsors scholarships for Bangladeshi students to pursue undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD degrees. The Chinese Embassy in Dhaka facilitates these Chinese Government Scholarships (CGS).

China is also engaged in media cooperation, cultural exchange, youth delegation initiatives, and joint festivals in Bangladesh. The Dhaka Bureau of China Media Group, a state-owned conglomerate of media outlets, plays a significant role in fostering cultural and media relations between China and Bangladesh.

China's engagement in Bangladesh through media and cultural initiatives has been notably extensive. For example, the program 'China Festival on the TV Screen' aims to produce Chinese TV dramas co-translated by both Chinese and Bangladeshi TV stations (Xinhua, 2023). Another collaborative effort is the TV show 'China Hour,' co-hosted by China Media Group in Bangladesh, which promotes Chinese culture and the Mandarin language (China Culture, 2020). The Confucius Institute at the University of Dhaka also plays a pivotal role in cultural promotion; in collaboration with Yunnan University, it organized the 'Lantern Festival' in Dhaka, celebrating cultural exchange between Bangladeshi and Chinese traditions (Yunnan University, 2023).

China's long-term vision for establishing its presence in the Bangladeshi media landscape is evident through its consistent efforts. China has prioritized building strong relations with Bangladeshi journalists, as demonstrated by the Chinese Embassy in Dhaka's recent 'Spring Dialogue,' which involved Bangladeshi journalists and aimed to foster closer relations and address their queries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 2023).

Since 2018, over 100 influential Bangladeshi youths have been invited annually to visit China as part of a cultural exchange, strengthening youth-to-youth relations (Jagonews24.com, 2018). This invitation extends to Bangladeshi youths from various sectors, including media, social activism, politics, business, and academia. This exchange program aims to bolster China's soft power presence and improve its image within Bangladeshi civil society over the long term.

### **China's Economic and Strategic Engagement in Bangladesh: A Comprehensive Overview**

China's economic and strategic engagement in Bangladesh is multifaceted, encompassing investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), non-BRI projects, trade relations, and soft power diplomacy. This extensive involvement has significant implications for both countries.

According to data from the Bangladesh-China Relations chapter, Section 1, Chinese investment in Bangladesh under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) includes approximately 6.5 billion USD in the power sector, 9.8 billion USD in the railway, road, and connectivity sectors, and 2.3 billion USD in the port, IT, and other sectors. This brings the total BRI investment in Bangladesh to around 18.6 billion USD. Additionally, Bangladesh is seeking 6.4 billion USD

for nine new projects under the BRI. With this anticipated additional investment, the total BRI investment in Bangladesh is expected to reach approximately 25 billion USD.

Section 2 of the same chapter reveals that Chinese companies are construction partners for projects worth 7 billion USD in Bangladesh. Furthermore, Chinese companies are involved in projects valued at approximately 5 billion USD under public-private partnership agreements. In 2017, Chinese companies acquired Bangladesh's three gas fields for 2 billion USD. In 2018, Bangladesh received 1 billion USD in foreign direct investment (FDI) from Chinese companies, and this trend of increasing investment continues. Therefore, China's non-BRI engagement in Bangladesh is estimated to exceed 15 billion USD.

Consequently, the total Chinese economic engagement in Bangladesh amounts to approximately 40 billion USD (25 billion USD in BRI projects + 15 billion USD in non-BRI projects), while Bangladesh's total GDP stands at over 400 billion USD. In addition to these economic ties, Bangladesh relies on China for approximately 25% of its imports, making China one of its most significant trade partners.

China also exercises its soft power in Bangladesh through foreign aid, scholarships, media and cultural relations, and support for various infrastructure projects, including bridges. In return, China has become Bangladesh's major import source, and Bangladesh is the second-largest importer of Chinese arms in the South Asian region. Leveraging the funds and training received from China, Bangladesh is actively modernizing its naval and military capabilities, including the construction of submarine bases.

Given the scope and scale of China's engagement in Bangladesh, it is essential to examine the potential consequences and impacts of this extensive involvement.

### **Chinese Involvement in Bangladesh: Dynamics and Implications**

Chinese involvement in Bangladesh is pivotal for understanding the evolving dynamics of China-Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh, a dynamic and growing economy, is projected to graduate from its Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026. However, to accelerate its development, the country requires substantial investments in infrastructure, including roads, highways, bridges, and airports.



To support its developmental aspirations, Bangladesh has increasingly relied on external debt, which now accounts for 14.3 percent of its GDP (Datta, 2021, p. 262). China has emerged as a prominent partner in debt and development, offering loans more readily than other countries. Consequently, China has invested significantly in various projects across Bangladesh. While these investments contribute to Bangladesh's developmental goals, they also align with China's broader geopolitical and geostrategic objectives in the region.

China's interest in various infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, such as highways, expressways, and flyovers, is driven by the many Chinese firms in these sectors. Additionally, China wields influence over institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB), which play leading roles in financing infrastructure projects globally also in Bangladesh.

Following Sri Lanka's debt crisis with China, the debt policy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has faced significant criticism. In response, China has strategically diversified its engagement in Bangladesh, utilizing Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and non-BRI projects to mitigate controversies and expand its economic footprint.

When China funds a project, Chinese companies are often granted exclusive rights to bid for construction, effectively sidelining other competitors and allowing Chinese firms to design projects in their favor. However, these projects frequently suffer from delays and cost overruns, increasing the financial burden on Bangladesh.

For instance, a highway from Dhaka to Chittagong, initially scheduled for completion in 2010 at a cost of 3,600 crore BDT, was completed only after double the time and cost by the Chinese company responsible (Azad, 2017). Similarly, the Padma Bridge project, originally budgeted at 20,507 crore BDT in 2011, saw its cost rise to 28,793 crore BDT in 2016 and further to 30,193 crore BDT in 2018 (Byron & Adhikary, 2018).

Concerns about corruption have also emerged. In 2018, the Bangladesh government canceled projects worth 3.2 billion USD, including the Dhaka-Sylhet four-lane project, due to bribery involving a Chinese company (Northeast Now, 2018). Despite these issues, criticism of China's engagement in Bangladesh remains relatively subdued due to its substantial use of soft power within the country.

China maintains strong relations with all major political parties in Bangladesh, particularly with left-leaning parties, ensuring that these parties view Chinese involvement more favorably than that of other states. Many former pro-China student leaders from the 1970s and 1980s have become prominent figures in Bangladesh's major political parties. The Workers Party of Bangladesh and the Communist Party (Sammobadi Dal) have maintained a "special ally" relationship with the Chinese Communist Party, effectively serving as brand ambassadors for China in Bangladesh.

Sheikh Hasina, President of the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), and Begum Khaleda Zia, Chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have been influential figures in Bangladeshi politics since 1990, when the country transitioned to a democratic format. China has maintained warm relations with both leaders during their respective periods in power and opposition. Khaleda Zia made several visits to China, and during her second term in power in 2005, the year was declared the "Bangladesh-China Friendship Year" (Chowdary, 2012, p. 60).

Since 2009, Sheikh Hasina has dominated the political landscape of Bangladesh as Prime Minister. Under her leadership, China- Bangladesh relations have remained a focal point. Notably, during her first term in office in 1996, she chose China as the destination for her first official foreign visit.

By examining the facts, impacts, costs, and political influences of Chinese engagement in Bangladesh, this analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of how China's involvement is shaping the future of Bangladesh's development and its strategic landscape in South Asia.

### **Strategic Analysis of Chinese Infrastructural Engagement**

China's engagement in Bangladesh presents several concerns with significant geostrategic implications, particularly regarding the nature of this involvement. Initially, China expressed interest in constructing a deep seaport in Sonadia, Cox's Bazar, which would strategically connect Kunming to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. The Sonadia port had the potential to become a critical chokepoint for China in the Indian Ocean. However, the Bangladesh government reportedly canceled this proposal. Instead, China has shifted its focus to investing in another port in Bangladesh, the Payara port, which holds similar geostrategic significance. Despite its potential, concerns have been raised about the profitability of the Payara port for Bangladesh. Currently, China is investing 600 million USD in this port, with

total investment expected to increase to 11-15 billion USD over three phases (Business Standard, 2019).

It is noteworthy that Chinese banks secure their investments in Bangladesh's projects, while Chinese construction companies benefit from lucrative opportunities for profit. These projects also serve to enhance connectivity between various Chinese investments in Bangladesh. Many of these connectivity projects are strategically located to link directly with Chinese projects and economic zones within the country. Some projects have the potential to connect with China's proposed Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor and China-Myanmar connectivity routes.

A significant project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the Karnaphuli River Tunnel. China has established a special economic zone in Anwara, Chittagong, focusing on export-oriented activities. Given Bangladesh's abundant supply of affordable labor, Chinese companies aim to capitalize on this advantage. The Karnaphuli Tunnel connects the Chinese Economic Zone in Anwara to the Chittagong seaport. Notably, this tunnel is constructed in a less urbanized area where it serves the Chinese Economic Zone more than the local population.

Additionally, a Chinese company is constructing the Chittagong-Cox's Bazar railway, which will connect the Chinese Economic Zone to the Matarbari deep seaport. China's proposed Sitakundu-Cox's Bazar marine drive expressway could potentially link Myanmar to Chittagong and, in the future, establish a connection between the Chinese Economic Zones of Chittagong and Rakhine.

China is also involved in constructing a coal power plant in Payara and has invested in building the nearby Payara port. Another Chinese company has constructed the Payara Bridge. Furthermore, the Bangladesh government has decided to build the Payara rail link with Chinese funding, similar to the Padma rail link. China has also planned to finance the Dhaka expressway to enhance connectivity between the Padma Bridge and Dhaka city. Consequently, there is a network of connectivity projects from Payara to the Padma Bridge and further to Dhaka, forming a chain of Chinese-constructed and proposed projects in Bangladesh, akin to the "Pearl of Necklace" strategy.

An examination of the pattern of Chinese projects in Bangladesh reveals that each project holds significant geostrategic importance. China does not invest in projects without considering its

geopolitical and geostrategic interests. Notably, there are no projects focused on human development, women's empowerment, or education. China is willing to propose investments if a project aligns with its interests, particularly in advancing its global connectivity objectives under the BRI and infrastructure development agenda.

Beyond BRI projects, Chinese companies are involved in constructing two airports, two major bridges, and a central railway in Bangladesh, all of which hold substantial geostrategic importance. One airport is located near the Indian border in Sylhet, while the other is in Cox's Bazar, close to the Chinese Rakhine economic zone. The internationalization of Cox's Bazar airport will help China establish connections to its economic zone in Rakhine, Myanmar.

While the BRI is primarily a government project in China, it has enabled Chinese investors and companies to become more familiar with Bangladesh. Consequently, Chinese companies now frequently collaborate with the Bangladesh government under public-private partnerships (PPP).

The connectivity projects under PPP, along with BRI and non-BRI projects, are interconnected. These Chinese connectivity projects in Bangladesh have been designed to facilitate connections with other Chinese investments. Thus, while these initiatives may serve some of Bangladesh's interests, they more closely align with China's broader connectivity strategies in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

### **China's Strategic Investments in South Asia: Implications for Bangladesh and Regional Dynamic**

China's investments in South Asia do not always yield positive outcomes for the recipient states. Chinese investment in one state can raise security concerns for neighboring states. For example, China's investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) includes the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which India claims as its own. Despite its relatively small nominal GDP, the Maldives is experiencing rapid Chinese investment, potentially leading to an economic imbalance crisis. Sri Lanka, unable to repay its debt, ceded the strategic Hambantota port to China, further fueling geopolitical discussions regarding China's expanding presence in South Asia. Critics argue that Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022 was partly due to excessive Chinese debt, while China continues to gain geopolitical advantages. This situation raises

concerns about the preparedness of smaller South Asian states for China's extensive investments.

Bangladesh is one of the states actively participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It attended both the inaugural and second BRI forums held in Beijing in 2017 and 2019, respectively (Datta, 2021, p. 257). China has undertaken several politically significant projects in Bangladesh, underscoring the strategic and geopolitical importance of its BRI engagements in the country. When the World Bank withdrew funding for the Padma Bridge, the project became a matter of prestige for the ruling party in Bangladesh. China intervened to support the project. Similarly, the Teesta water-sharing treaty with India has stalled since 2011. In 2022, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina returned from New Delhi without assurances regarding the Teesta River's water sharing. The Teesta River project has acquired political and geopolitical significance comparable to the Padma Bridge project. China has shown interest in undertaking the Teesta River management project, highlighting its strategic importance.

China is also the largest arms supplier to Bangladesh and provides military training. This involvement has significant geopolitical and strategic implications. The Chinese-funded submarine base in Bangladesh is anticipated to be a game-changer in Bay of Bengal maritime geopolitics and security strategy. This project is expected to offer China a military presence in the Bay of Bengal for training and maintenance purposes, as Bangladesh is relatively new to submarine technology. China's military presence in Bangladesh would enhance its influence in the region and enable close monitoring of South Asia, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian Ocean.

Bangladesh occupies a strategic position in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal, with deep cultural and social ties to India and major import destinations in the US and the EU. The country must navigate its foreign policy in alignment with its strategic preferences.

The USA has formed a new defense alliance in the Asia-Pacific region, known as QUAD, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the USA. In May 2021, Chinese Ambassador to Dhaka, Li Jiming, publicly warned Bangladesh against joining QUAD (UNB, 2021). This warning represents an interference in Bangladesh's independent foreign policy.

China's significant presence in Bangladesh's infrastructure development, economic engagement, trade, military, and soft power sectors creates challenges for Bangladesh's independent foreign policy. When China publicly alerts a host country about its foreign policy

preferences, it can generate fear and anxiety regarding the practice of an independent foreign policy.

China's involvement in the digital infrastructure of African nations has faced criticism for alleged spying and human rights abuses. Notably, Uganda and Zambia have come under scrutiny (Parkinson, Bariyo, 2019). Chinese firms were responsible for constructing the new African Union headquarters, which faced accusations of surveillance on the data within the headquarters (Cave, 2018).

Additionally, Bangladesh's robust digital engagement with China, including the construction of the largest data center and upgrades to 5G infrastructure, has raised concerns about increased Chinese digital surveillance. This could potentially lead to greater Chinese influence and dominance in Bangladesh.

According to the UK-based Intelligence Economist Group, Bangladesh was classified as a 'hybrid regime' in its 2021 index (New Age, 2022). Moreover, Bangladesh was not invited to the 'democracy summit' hosted by the US in December 2021. During this period, Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming wrote a column titled "Enough of the Fundamentalism of Democracy" in the Daily Sun, a Bangladeshi English newspaper, asserting that the US does not have exclusive authority to define democracy (CGTN, 2021). This column appeared to support the ruling government of Bangladesh, reflecting China's strategic engagement with the country's political landscape. Given its geographical significance in South Asia, China's engagement in Bangladesh plays a critical geopolitical role. Chinese investments, trade, and debt are integral components of geoeconomics, influencing the geopolitics of Bangladesh.

## **Conclusion**

China has increased its hegemony in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), infrastructure diplomacy, economic engagement, and the use of soft power tools. These efforts ultimately lead to military alliances, a military presence, and the ability to influence Bangladesh's foreign policy. This is part of China's grand strategy to replace the United States globally, including in South Asia and Bangladesh.

South Asia is a crucial region for China due to its trade potential and the easy access it provides to the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. An examination of China's diverse forms of engagement in Bangladesh shows a rapid increase over the last decade. This engagement,

which tends to follow an imbalanced approach, ultimately serves Chinese interests and allows China to exercise soft power for its geopolitical aims. Furthermore, China's construction of a submarine base in the Bay of Bengal, funded and technologically supported by China, positions it as a major security ally of Bangladesh, giving China the capability to influence the security dynamics of the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

As China's engagement in Bangladesh, primarily viewed through an economic lens, but this is not merely about business deals; it also serves China's grand strategic objectives. This engagement enables China to achieve military, geostrategic, and geo-economic interests, thereby establishing Chinese hegemony in Bangladesh, a country strategically located as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Thus, through its geo-economic, military, and other sectoral engagements, China has become a significant strategic influential actor in Bangladesh and in the broader geopolitics of South Asia. Ultimately China's economic involvement, aimed at advancing long-term geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic objectives. In light of this agenda, China's engagement in Bangladesh can be seen primarily as a political venture, reflecting the essence of China's new South Asia policy.

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