

Steadily Advancing the Building of China–South Asia Community with a Shared Future

Lou Chunhao *

From April 8 to 9, 2025, the Central Conference on Work Related to Neighboring Countries was held in Beijing. The conference systematically summarized the achievements and experience of China’s neighborhood work in the new era, scientifically analyzed the situation, clarified the goals, tasks, ideas, and measures for neighborhood work in the coming period, and emphasized the need to focus on building a community with a shared future with neighboring countries, striving to break new ground in neighborhood work. As an important part of China’s neighborhood, South Asia has a close bearing on China’s sovereignty, security, and development interests. It is also a unique geopolitical tectonic plate in China’s neighborhood, having distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from others in terms of the regional balance of power, inter-state relations, regional identity and integration process, and ties with China. South Asia is indispensable for China’s endeavor to build a community with a shared future with neighboring countries.

South Asia is a region where China’s national interests are “densely concentrated,” affecting China’s sovereignty, security, and development interests. From the perspective of national sovereignty and security, among all China’s land neighbors, India and Bhutan are the only two that have not yet formally demarcated boundaries with China. The border dispute between China and India is the biggest obstacle in their bilateral relations. In October 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Kazan, Russia. During their meeting, the two leaders reiterated the need to “view and handle China–India relations from a strategic height and long-term

* Lou Chunhao is a research professor and Vice President of China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations.

perspective” and “prevent specific disagreements from affecting the overall relationship,”¹ setting the direction for improving bilateral ties. Thereafter, the situation along the China–India border entered a stage of regular management and control. However, considering the China–United States–India trilateral interactions, it remains unclear whether India’s shifting China policy is a tactical adjustment or a strategic reorientation. Also closely related to China’s borders and core interests are issues concerning Tibet. Currently, there are still significant portions of overseas Tibetans living in India and Nepal, and the Dalai Group’s self-styled “government-in-exile” is based in India. Some hostile forces from the United States and India are attempting to turn South Asia into a front where they can use Tibet-related issues to contain China. Their interference in the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama is a provocation to China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Besides, a certain number of “East Turkistan” terrorists are hiding in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. These two countries are China’s important partners in the fight against terrorists, including the “East Turkistan” forces.

From the perspective of protecting and expanding China’s overseas interests, South Asia is a critical region for Belt and Road cooperation. China’s overseas interests are continuously growing in South Asia. China has established strategic cooperative partnerships with all South Asian countries except Bhutan. China has become the top trading partner for most countries across the region. Since China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, its trade with South Asia has doubled from less than US\$100 billion to US\$200 billion. South Asia is home to many landmark BRI projects, including the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Port City Colombo in Sri Lanka, the Padma Bridge (known among locals as the “bridge of dreams”) in Bangladesh, and the China–Maldives Friendship Bridge. Some of these projects have been completed, while others are steadily progressing, all contributing to the socio–economic development of the host country. Thus, China has significantly expanded its interests and presence in South Asia, forging closer bonds.

¹ “Xi Urges China, India to Facilitate Each Other’s Pursuit of Development Aspirations,” Xinhua, October 24, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20241024/e5e315072b3a475bbd21320f9dd7df84/c.html>.

From a geostrategic perspective, South Asia constitutes a geographical hub connecting Central Asia, West Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean. Due to its strategic location, South Asia has been intensely contested by the world's major countries. Following a systematic and holistic approach to neighborhood work, China has found a growing role of South Asia in its neighborhood strategy—South Asia is of great significance to China's efforts to consolidate regional connectivity, enhance regional cooperation, and diversify strategic lines of communication options. For example, Bangladesh, as the gateway to South and Southeast Asia, is a fulcrum country strategically located at the apex of the Bay of Bengal, having several natural deep-sea ports there. Sri Lanka sits centrally on the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean, just 10 nautical miles away from the major sea lanes of communication, and is dubbed the “Pearl of the Indian Ocean.” The Maldives is an archipelagic country in the Indian Ocean, often known as the “pearls scattered by God.” These three countries are important partners for China to jointly build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and strengthen a Blue Partnership cooperation network.

South Asia is also a region where China's power projection has remained relatively inadequate. It can be seen as a “low-lying land” in China's vision of a community with a shared future with neighboring countries. Compared with Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and Central Asia, the geopolitical landscape of South Asia is defined by “Indian dominance” and the structural confrontation between India and Pakistan. The lack of geographical connectivity, cultural and people-to-people exchanges, and trade and economic ties between China and South Asian countries has, to some extent, hindered the expansion of Chinese interests and presence in the region. Worse still, the United States, viewing China as its strategic competitor, has stubbornly pursued a policy of “supporting India to contain China.” Taking advantage of India's growing intention of “relying on the United States to counter China” and recently alleviated suspicions about American presence in South Asia, the United States has stepped up expansion in the region, virtually dragging South Asia into the track of major-country rivalries. China's ability to safeguard and expand its national interests in South Asia falls short of what is required by the region's strategic significance. China faces arduous tasks in building a community with a shared future with South Asian countries.

First, the United States is intensifying strategic containment against China in South Asia, raising the risk of camp-based confrontation. During the past few years, the United States has explicitly prioritized “supporting India to counterbalance China” in its “Indo–Pacific Strategy,” substantially boosting cooperation with India in such fields as defense, security, technology, and industrial and supply chains and enhancing strategic collaboration through bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms or initiatives, including the trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and India, the Quad partnership involving the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, the United States–India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology, and the “Indo–Pacific” Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness. India intends to extract benefits from the China–United States strategic competition; in fact, it is leaning more towards the United States in an attempt to counterbalance China. The United States and India have significantly strengthened their collusion on issues such as the China–India border dispute, sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean, trans-border rivers, and decoupling industrial and supply chains from China. For instance, both American and Indian officials have openly acknowledged that the United States provided intelligence support to India during the 2020 China–India border clash in the Galwan Valley. Amidst growing strategic convergence, India has shown an increased acceptance of expanded American presence in South Asia. Consequently, the United States has ramped up its intervention in South Asian nations such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Previously, South Asia was not a main theater of the China–United States strategic rivalry; regional countries, with India being the only exception, were reluctant to “pick sides” between China and the United States. However, due to India’s unique role in the US “Indo–Pacific Strategy” and its growing attempt to “rely on the United States to contain China” and “counterbalance China and Pakistan,” other South Asian countries are facing increased pressure to “pick sides” between China and the United States and between China and India, posing a challenge to China’s interests in the region.

Second, the geopolitical structure of South Asia has constrained China’s strategic cooperation and influence in the region. India’s centrality is a distinctive geopolitical feature of South Asia. India shares land borders with most South Asian countries, except for Sri Lanka and the Maldives (both are

island countries) and Afghanistan. By contrast, no other South Asian nation (except Pakistan and Afghanistan) shares land borders with any other country in the region. Moreover, India is the maritime neighbor of Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Geographically, India is located in the center of South Asia, with all other regional countries surrounding it. In addition, India far outweighs other South Asian countries in terms of composite national strength. India's land size (excluding the Indian-occupied areas along the China–India border and Indian-controlled Kashmir) is about 1.62 times that of the other seven South Asian countries combined and 3.74 times that of Pakistan (excluding Pakistan-controlled Kashmir). India's population is estimated to have touched 1.44 billion, roughly 2.87 times the combined sum of the other seven South Asian countries and 6 times that of Pakistan. According to World Bank statistics, in 2023, India's gross domestic product reached US\$3.57 trillion, foreign direct investment hit US\$28.079 billion, foreign trade totaled US\$1.63 trillion, and military expenditure amounted to US\$83.575 billion, approximately 3.85, 5.60, 49.91, and 9.50 times the combined amount of the other seven South Asian countries, respectively. India is a dominant regional power that China obviously cannot circumvent in its relations with South Asia. Considering India's increasingly competitive mood towards China and its obsession with a “sphere of influence” in South Asia, it is predictable that India will remain highly vigilant over China's relations with other South Asian countries and may even attempt to sabotage such relations when the chance arises. Except for Pakistan, which has a structural feud with India, other South Asian countries are inevitably subject to Indian influences when developing ties with China. For example, India repeatedly expressed concern over China–Bhutan negotiations on boundary demarcation and advancing the process of establishing diplomatic relations. It also strongly opposed the docking of Chinese research vessels in Sri Lanka. In these two cases, India's attitude greatly influenced the policy decisions of the concerned countries.

Another dominant feature of South Asian geopolitics is the deep-rooted antagonism between India and Pakistan. China has always adhered to a fair and impartial policy, urging both sides to handle their differences through dialogue. However, given the objective reality that China's relations with India are not at the same level as its relations with Pakistan, the India–Pakistan conflict

has not only hindered South Asia's integration process, affecting regional peace and stability, but also encumbered China's friendly relations with the two countries. Especially, there has always been a "Pakistan factor" in India's China policy. Following the September 2016 terrorist attack against the Uri military base in Indian-controlled Kashmir, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation summit has lost momentum even to this day. Another terrorist attack on tourists occurred in April 2025, also within Indian-controlled Kashmir. The attack led to a military conflict between India and Pakistan, sharply souring their bilateral relations. The deterioration of the security situation in South Asia is unfavorable for China to cultivate a stable and peaceful neighboring environment.

Third, the widespread governance deficits in South Asia have impeded China's in-depth cooperation with regional countries. India is now the best-performing country in South Asia, but its business environment falls far short of expectations. Affected by fluctuations in bilateral ties in recent years, India has adopted a series of economic and trade policies discriminating against China, seriously hampering the building of a partnership between the two countries. Apart from India, other South Asian countries also face grave challenges to their stability and development. Pakistan, as China's all-weather strategic cooperative partner, has been dedicated to promoting the CPEC. However, the persistently turbulent political situation in Pakistan, the difficulties it faces in economic development, and the long-unresolved problem of terrorism have, to a certain extent, hindered further progress in China-Pakistan cooperation. For example, recent years have witnessed multiple terrorist attacks targeting Chinese interests in Pakistan, dampening Chinese companies' confidence to invest and start businesses in the country. Other South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan, also face daunting tasks relating to stability and development. Some of them have even experienced crises such as national bankruptcy and regime collapse, increasing risks for China safeguarding and expanding overseas interests.

The 2025 Central Conference on Work Related to Neighboring Countries introduced a comprehensive, systematic, and integrated strategic framework, which covers the common vision, policy and principle, fundamental guidance, main platform, and strategic support, for building a community with a shared

future with neighboring countries. China and South Asian countries have a combined population of over 3.2 billion, representing nearly 40% of the world's total. A China–South Asia community with a shared future is conducive to peace and development on both sides and will set an example for the rest of the world. Of course, as mentioned above, conditions are not yet ripe for China to build a community with a shared future with South Asia, compared to other geopolitical plates in its neighborhood. The risks and challenges ahead will be formidable. In the next step, China must thoroughly implement the guiding principles of the Central Conference on Work Related to Neighboring Countries, take into account both domestic and international imperatives, and coordinate development and security, so as to ensure that its work related to South Asia subordinates to and serves the national goal of high-quality development. China should continue to promote dialogue, preventing the India–Pakistan conflict from escalating into war, in joint efforts to preserve peace and strategic stability in South Asia. In addition, China should strengthen exchanges and cooperation on national governance to comprehensively upgrade South Asian countries' national governance systems and capacities, ensuring their alignment with China in the direction of modernization. China should coordinate its “one country, one policy” and “one region, one policy” approaches, formulating regional policies commensurate with its bilateral policies targeting individual countries. Meanwhile, China should deepen cooperation in specific fields. Last but not least, China must always be prepared for worst-case scenarios and be ready to manage and control risks. For example, China must properly respond to the latest developments of the geopolitical competition and camp-based confrontation the United States is peddling in South Asia, staying alert to the ensuing risks and challenges.

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