

NAVIGATING BRI AND INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY: CHALLENGE FOR SOUTH ASIAN SMALL STATES

Saroj Kumar Aryal and Manish Jung Pulami



This issue brief explores the intersection of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) among South Asian Small States, analyzing the interplay between the two initiatives and their implications for regional geopolitics. Specifically, it aims to elucidate the synergies and conflicts between the two initiatives, assess the strategic significance of South Asian Small States, including Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka, within this framework and examine the implications for regional stability and national sovereignty. It highlights the complex interplay between BRI and IPS in South Asian Small States, characterized by economic opportunities, geopolitical tensions, and strategic maneuvering. While BRI offers infrastructure development and connectivity enhancement, IPS seeks to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific region, leading to competition and cooperation among major powers. South Asian Small States face challenges in balancing their relationships with China and the United States, navigating great power rivalry, and promoting their own national interests amidst evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Photo credit: Aleksandar Milosevic / Shutterstock

Introduction

In the intricate web of international relations, small states often find themselves at the mercy of larger, more powerful actors, navigating a geopolitical conundrum shaped by the competing interests of great powers. These small states, while possessing limited resources and influence on the global stage, often serve as crucial battlegrounds where the ambitions and strategies of major players intersect. Nowhere is this dynamic more

pronounced than in South Asia, a region teeming with geopolitical significance and characterized by the relentless jockeying for influence among global powers.

At the heart of this geopolitical theater lies the South Asian Small States, a diverse array of nations encompassing countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka, among others. These nations, while individually modest in size and population, collectively wield significant geopolitical importance due to their

strategic locations, access to vital trade routes, and natural resources. Their unique position makes them both vulnerable to external pressures and pivotal players in the broader geopolitical landscape of the region.

The rise of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) has further amplified the complexities faced by South Asian Small States, presenting them with a multitude of challenges and opportunities. The BRI, launched in 2013 by China, aims to enhance connectivity and promote economic development across Asia and beyond through massive infrastructure projects and investment initiatives. Meanwhile, the IPS, introduced in 2018 by the United States, seeks to safeguard a free and open Indo-Pacific region, countering China's growing influence and asserting American leadership in the area. This has led to increased military and security engagements with South Asian Small States, aimed at strengthening partnerships and countering Chinese assertiveness.¹

For the South Asian Small States, the influence of BRI and IPS looms large, shaping their geopolitical calculations and strategies in profound ways. On one hand, the allure of Chinese investment and

The allure of Chinese investment and infrastructure development under the BRI offers tantalizing prospects for economic growth and development. Yet, it also brings with it a host of geopolitical challenges, including concerns over debt dependency, strategic encroachment, and the erosion of sovereignty.

infrastructure development under the BRI offers tantalizing prospects for economic growth and development.² Yet, it also brings with it a host of geopolitical challenges, including concerns over debt dependency, strategic encroachment, and the erosion of sovereignty.³ Simultaneously, the IPS articulated by the United States offers the promise of security assurances and defense cooperation with a powerful ally but also risks entangling these nations in the broader geopolitical rivalry between Washington and Beijing, potentially undermining their autonomy.⁴

The significance of South Asian Small States in the context of great power rivalry cannot be overstated. Their geographical location at the crossroads of major sea lanes and their proximity to key global powers make them crucial players in the geopolitical chessboard of South Asia.⁵ As such, their strategic decisions and alignments have far-reaching implications not only for their own national interests but also for the broader balance of power in the region. Moreover, the experiences of South Asian Small States serve as valuable case studies for understanding the dynamics of power politics in a multipolar world. Their ability to navigate the complex interplay of competing interests, while safeguarding their sovereignty and national interests, offers important insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by small states in an increasingly interconnected and contested international system.⁶

This issue brief aims to delve deeper into the geopolitical conundrum confronting South Asian Small States in the context of China's BRI and the United States' IPS. Through a comprehensive analysis of the challenges, repercussions, and responses of these nations, it seeks to unravel the complexities of great power rivalry in South Asia and illuminate the confluence of BRI and IPS among small states in the region in an era of geopolitical uncertainty.

Understanding Smallness in South Asia

In the realm of international relations, the concept of small states has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, characterized by the paradoxes of power and vulnerability that define their geopolitical existence.

Scholars such as Peter Katzenstein, Robert Keohane, and David Vital have extensively studied these paradoxes, shedding light on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by small states in navigating the complexities of the international system.

At the heart of these paradoxes lies the dual nature of small state power, which is characterized by both limitations and advantages. On one hand, small states possess limited resources, influence, and incapacity to shape global events, making them inherently vulnerable to external pressures and manipulation by larger powers.⁷ Yet, on the other hand, their small size and flexibility afford them certain advantages, such as agility in decision-making, the ability to exploit niche diplomatic opportunities, and the potential to punch above their weight on specific issues.⁸

In South Asia, this paradox of small state power is exemplified by nations such as Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. These countries, despite their modest size and population, occupy strategically significant positions in the region, situated at key geopolitical crossroads and possessing unique cultural, economic, and geographical attributes. Nepal, for instance, is sandwiched between two regional giants, India and China, making it inherently susceptible to the influence and interventions of its larger neighbors. Despite its landlocked status and limited economic resources, Nepal has sought to leverage its geostrategic location to balance between competing powers and pursue a policy of non-alignment.⁹ However, its vulnerability to external pressures and internal instability has often undermined its efforts to assert its sovereignty and pursue an independent foreign policy.¹⁰

Similarly, Bhutan, with its policy of strict neutrality and emphasis on Gross National Happiness (GNH), exemplifies the paradox of small state power in its own unique way.¹¹ Despite its limited economic and military capabilities, Bhutan has managed to maintain its sovereignty and cultural identity through a combination of strategic alliances, diplomatic finesse, and shrewd negotiation tactics.¹² However, its dependence on India for crucial economic and security

“The IPS articulated by the United States offers the promise of security assurances and defense cooperation with a powerful ally but also risks entangling the small nations in the broader geopolitical rivalry between Washington and Beijing, potentially undermining their autonomy.”

assistance underscores the inherent vulnerabilities that small states face in the pursuit of national autonomy.

In contrast, Sri Lanka and the Maldives offer a different perspective on the paradoxes of small state power, characterized by a delicate balancing act between regional powers and internal challenges. Sri Lanka, with its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, has often found itself caught in the crossfire of great power rivalry, particularly between India and China. Despite its attempts to diversify its foreign relations and attract investment under the BRI, Sri Lanka's experience with debt diplomacy and geopolitical tensions highlights the precarious position of small states in the face of competing interests.¹³ Similarly, the Maldives, with its reliance on tourism and vulnerability to climate change, embodies the vulnerabilities of small states in a rapidly changing global environment. Despite its efforts to assert its sovereignty and pursue a policy of non-alignment, the Maldives has often been subject to external pressures and interventions, particularly from regional powers seeking to secure their strategic interests in the Indian Ocean which can be seen in the recent elections and its consequences in the country.¹⁴

In contrast to these small states, Bangladesh stands out as a notable exception, having successfully escaped the constraints of smallness through a combination

of strategic pragmatism, economic growth, and diplomatic assertiveness. Despite its large population and economic challenges, Bangladesh has emerged as a regional powerhouse, leveraging its strategic location, demographic dividend, and growing economic clout to assert its influence on the global stage.¹⁵ Through initiatives such as the Look East Policy and participation in regional forums like BIMSTEC, Bangladesh has managed to transcend the limitations of small statehood and position itself as a key player in South Asia and beyond.¹⁶

Therefore, the paradoxes of small state power as identified by scholars such as Katzenstein, Keohane, and Vital are evident in the behavior and experiences of South Asian small states such as Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Yet, Bangladesh's remarkable trajectory offers a glimmer of hope, demonstrating that with strategic vision, economic development, and diplomatic acumen, small states can transcend the constraints of size and emerge as significant players in the international arena.

BRI: Navigating a Geopolitical Conundrum

China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a significant driver of geopolitical dynamics, particularly in the South Asian region. Envisioned as a vast network of infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing connectivity and promoting economic development, the BRI has garnered both praise and criticism from the international community. For South Asian Small States, the implications of BRI are profound, presenting a complex geopolitical conundrum fraught with opportunities and challenges.¹⁷

In recent years, China has actively engaged with South Asian Small States through the BRI, leveraging its economic prowess to forge closer ties and advance its strategic interests in the region. Key components of China's BRI engagement in South Asia include investments in infrastructure projects such as ports, roads, railways, and energy facilities, as well as initiatives to enhance trade and connectivity.

For example, in Nepal, China has invested in the construction of the Pokhara International Airport and the Rasuwagadhi-Kerung border checkpoint, aimed at improving connectivity between the two countries and facilitating trade and tourism.¹⁸ Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Chinese investments have focused on major infrastructure projects such as the Hambantota Port and the Colombo Port City, which have been touted as flagship BRI initiatives in the region.¹⁹

Despite the potential benefits of Chinese investment and infrastructure development, the BRI also poses significant geopolitical challenges for South Asian Small States. One of the primary concerns revolves around the issue of debt sustainability, with many countries in the region becoming increasingly indebted to China as a result of BRI projects. This debt trap diplomacy has raised fears of strategic encroachment and loss of sovereignty, as Chinese investments often come with strings attached, including concessions on territorial rights and strategic assets. Sri Lanka's fate of Hambantota port and confusion on Nepal's Pokhara International Airport whether it is a BRI project or not elucidates the challenges.

Moreover, the opaque nature of BRI agreements and lack of transparency in project financing have fuelled suspicions about China's strategic intentions, leading to concerns over the militarization of port facilities and the potential for dual-use infrastructure to be used for military purposes.²⁰ This has prompted neighboring countries, such as India, to view China's growing presence in the region with skepticism and apprehension, exacerbating existing geopolitical tensions.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the influx of Chinese investment and influence has heightened competition between regional powers, leading to a scramble for strategic dominance and influence in the Indian Ocean region.²¹ This has the potential to disrupt existing security arrangements and alliances, exacerbating regional instability and insecurity. Furthermore, the asymmetrical nature of China's economic leverage and bargaining power has tilted the balance of power in favor

of Beijing, undermining the autonomy and sovereignty of South Asian Small States. This has led to growing concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and governance standards, as well as the potential for social and environmental degradation associated with large-scale infrastructure projects.

In Nepal, the yet to be constructed Kathmandu-Kerung Railway, a key BRI project aimed at enhancing connectivity between Nepal and China, has sparked controversy due to concerns over financing modalities, environmental impact, and displacement of local communities.²² Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the Hambantota Port project has faced criticism for its opaque financing arrangements and potential security implications, leading to calls for greater transparency and accountability. In Bhutan, concerns have been raised about the potential implications of Chinese infrastructure projects, such as the proposed Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, which is located in a disputed border area between Bhutan and China.²³ This has raised questions about the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bhutan, as well as the environmental and cultural impact of Chinese investments in the region. Further, in the Maldives, Chinese investments in major infrastructure projects, including the expansion of the Male International Airport and the construction of the

China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, have raised concerns about debt sustainability and strategic encroachment.²⁴ This has led to growing scrutiny of the Maldives' ties with China and calls for greater transparency and accountability in bilateral agreements.

As the South Asian Small States navigate the complexities of BRI engagement, they must carefully weigh the risks and benefits of Chinese investment, while also seeking to diversify their economic and strategic partnerships to safeguard their long-term interests and autonomy in an increasingly contested region.

IPS: Walking a Geopolitical Tightrope

The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) has emerged as a critical framework shaping geopolitical dynamics in the South Asian region, presenting both opportunities and challenges for small states such as Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. Introduced by the United States, the IPS aims to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region, emphasizing principles such as respect for international law, freedom of navigation, and economic prosperity. South Asia occupies a central focus within the IPS due to its strategic location, economic importance, and the rise of China as a dominant regional power.

Despite their limited size and resources, small states hold strategic geographic locations and maritime boundaries that are vital to maintaining regional stability and security.²⁵ Additionally, their participation in multilateral forums and security arrangements strengthens the legitimacy and effectiveness of the IPS, fostering collective action to address shared challenges like piracy, terrorism, and maritime disputes.

However, South Asian Small States face numerous geopolitical challenges as a result of the IPS. One significant challenge is the increasing pressure to align with either the United States or China, as the rivalry between these two superpowers intensifies in the Indo-Pacific region. Small states must carefully navigate this geopolitical tightrope, balancing their relationships with both powers to safeguard their sovereignty and national interests. Failure to do so risks entanglement

While the Quad presents opportunities for enhanced security cooperation and economic integration, it also raises concerns about the potential for exclusionary practices and power asymmetries that could marginalize smaller states in the region.

in great power competition, which could lead to economic coercion, political instability, or even military confrontation.

Nepal's strategic location between India and China positions it at the center of U.S.-China competition, offering opportunities to bolster domestic governance by capitalizing on the interests of both superpowers. Despite Nepal's limited global influence, it ratified the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact, seen as a means to counter China's ascendancy, showcasing a willingness to engage with the United States.²⁶ Increased U.S. investment, expanding defense cooperation, and growing people-to-people ties highlight Nepal's efforts to navigate this competition with reference to IPS.²⁷ With its geographical significance as the entry point through the Himalayan barrier, Nepal's value lies in its proximity to Tibet, making it crucial in regional dynamics amidst China's influence and IPS framework.²⁸

Similarly, Sri Lanka stands at a critical crossroads due to its strategic importance and economic vulnerabilities. The United States, previously an ally of Sri Lanka's Wickremesinghe administrations, played a subtle yet pivotal role in facilitating a smooth transition of power during periods of public unrest.²⁹ While emphasizing the importance of human rights and democracy, the U.S. focused on aiding Sri Lanka's economic recovery by providing significant economic and humanitarian assistance totaling nearly USD 240 million in a short timeframe.³⁰ Moreover, the U.S. supported Sri Lanka's efforts to secure an IMF bailout package, showcasing its willingness to assist countries like Sri Lanka and counterbalance China's influence.³¹ Some argue that in exchange for this financial support, the Wickremesinghe regime may have agreed to foster a favorable strategic environment for the U.S. in the future.³²

Furthermore, the relationship between the Maldives and the United States has experienced fluctuations over time, largely influenced by the policies and behavior of the Maldivian government. In 2018, the United States threatened sanctions against the Maldives due to its foreign policy alienating international bodies

“For the South Asian Small States, navigating the intersection of BRI and IPS requires careful diplomacy, strategic foresight, and a nuanced understanding of their own national interests. Tensions between the United States and China have led to geopolitical maneuvering and power projection in the region, complicating the strategic calculus.”

such as the Commonwealth, the European Union, and key allies like Qatar and India.³³ However, there has been a significant improvement in the Maldives-U.S. relationship since then. The Maldives has embraced the increased resources brought by Washington's Indo-Pacific vision, including assistance from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which has focused on supporting self-reliance, stability, and economic growth in the Maldives for the past two decades.³⁴ The United States and the Maldives collaborate closely in areas of security, particularly counterterrorism and maritime security.³⁵ Nevertheless, with the change in administration following the Progressive People's Party (PPM) winning the presidential election in September 2023, the Maldives appears to be leaning towards China once again.

While Bhutan and India are expected to further strengthen their bilateral engagements, the U.S. Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) for Bhutan, endorsed on February 8, 2023, introduces potential avenues for enhanced U.S.-Bhutan relations.³⁶ However, the ICS does not outline specific bilateral engagements but rather identifies areas for potential cooperation.

Strengthening ties between the U.S. and India could significantly contribute to bolstering U.S.-Bhutan relations as well.³⁷ At present, the ICS for Bhutan may serve to pinpoint areas of political alignment. Looking ahead, the IPS could offer a security alternative for Bhutan. Consequently, unless Bhutan opts to establish formal diplomatic relations with the U.S., American influence in Bhutan is likely to remain limited. This scenario provides India with the opportunity to act as a diplomatic intermediary through its own policies towards the U.S.

In addition to bilateral tensions, South Asian Small States must navigate the dynamics of multilateral initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which brings together the United States, Japan, Australia, and India to coordinate efforts to uphold a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.³⁸ While the Quad presents opportunities for enhanced security cooperation and economic integration, it also raises concerns about the potential for exclusionary practices and power asymmetries that could marginalize smaller states in the region.³⁹ Hence, the Indo-Pacific Strategy presents both opportunities and challenges for South Asian Small States, as they navigate the complexities of great power competition, regional security dynamics, and multilateral initiatives. While small states play a significant role in shaping the IPS and upholding regional stability, they also face pressures to align with competing interests and navigate geopolitical rivalries.

The Confluence of BRI and IPS

The intersection of China's BRI and the United States' IPS in South Asian Small States marks a critical juncture in regional geopolitics, characterized by a complex interplay of cooperation, competition, and strategic maneuvering. The convergence of these two initiatives presents both opportunities and challenges, shaping the geopolitical landscape and influencing the strategic calculations of regional actors. The interplay between BRI and IPS in South Asian Small States is multifaceted, reflecting a dynamic mix of economic, political, and strategic considerations.

On one hand, the BRI offers the promise of much-needed infrastructure investment and connectivity enhancement for small states in South Asia, addressing critical development gaps and fostering economic growth. For example, Sri Lanka's dream of becoming a major maritime hub in the Indian Ocean finds a perfect partner in the BRI. By building new ports and other vital infrastructure, Sri Lanka hoped to capitalize on its location and history as a trading post, transforming itself into a bustling center for international commerce and logistics.⁴⁰ Similarly under the BRI, China has carried out a number of projects in the Maldives pertaining to energy, infrastructure, economic growth, and socio-economic development. In an unprecedented action, the Maldivian government even amended the land law, permitting the leasing of islands for 99 years.⁴¹ Also, Nepal, a capital-deficit nation, requires large-scale infrastructural investment, and BRI posed as an advantage to ensure the funding for development.⁴² Although, Bhutan does not have anything to deal regarding BRI, it faces the ripple of geopolitical rivalry between India and China posing a direct threat to the country.

However, the convergence of BRI and IPS also gives rise to tensions and conflicts, particularly in areas where the strategic interests of China and the United States intersect. In Sri Lanka, the presence of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, such as the Hambantota Port which is managed by China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited (CM Port), has raised concerns among U.S. policymakers about China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean region.⁴³ Likewise, the intensification of the strategic rivalry between the United States and China has become significantly perceptible for Nepal. Notwithstanding the geopolitical competition, Nepal ratified the MCC; it is also a signatory to BRI. China's increasing influence has also worried United States because of Tibet's close geographical proximity with Nepal.

Furthermore, the Maldives has become a focal point for strategic competition among China, India, and the United States due to increased attention from China. This is reflected in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's

announcement of opening a U.S. embassy in the island nation to monitor security in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁴ Additionally, Bhutan's foreign policy prioritizes sovereignty and security, with a focus on human and environmental security. The primary security concern remains the fear of Chinese encroachment into Bhutanese territory, while climate change and environmental degradation also pose significant threats. The United States has elevated Thimphu's importance in its Indo-Pacific strategy, aiming to counter China's influence in the region by bolstering the Quad and enhancing bilateral engagements.⁴⁵ Consequently, this dynamic interplay exposes Bhutan to heightened geopolitical risks.

For the South Asian Small States, navigating the intersection of BRI and IPS requires careful diplomacy, strategic foresight, and a nuanced understanding of their own national interests. By balancing their relationships with China and the United States, leveraging economic opportunities, and promoting regional cooperation, small states can mitigate risks and maximize benefits in an increasingly complex and contested geopolitical environment.

Conclusion

South Asian Small States such as Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka find themselves at the center of great power rivalry, with China, India, and the United States vying for influence and strategic advantage. While the BRI offers opportunities for infrastructure development and connectivity enhancement, it also raises concerns about debt sustainability, sovereignty, and strategic encroachment. On the other hand, the IPS seeks to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific region, promoting security cooperation and economic integration. However, tensions between the United States and China have led to geopolitical maneuvering and power projection in the region, complicating the strategic calculus for South Asian Small States. The Quad alliance, comprising the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, has also intensified its engagement in the region, further adding to the complexity of regional dynamics. Despite these challenges, South

Asian Small States have opportunities to leverage their strategic significance, engage in diplomatic initiatives, and promote regional cooperation to navigate the intersection of BRI and IPS and advance their own national interests in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

Authors –

Saroj Kumar Aryal is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw.

Manish Jung Pulami is a research scholar at the Department of International Relations, South Asian University, New Delhi.

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2024.
This Issue Brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

www.isdp.eu

Endnotes

- 1 Zaheena Rasheed, "In bid to counter China, US ramps up effort to boost military ties in Asia," *Al Jazeera*, December 28, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/28/in-bid-to-counter-china-us-ramps-up-effort-to-boost-military-ties-in-asia>.
- 2 Mukesh Shanker Bharti, "China's Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) in South Asia and Its Policy Challenges to India in the Region," *South Asian Survey* (2024): 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09715231231218827>.
- 3 Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/report/china-and-belt-and-road-initiative-south-asia>.
- 4 Joanne Wallis, Sujan R. Chinoy, Natalie Sambhi, and Jeffrey Reeves, "A free and Open Indo-Pacific: Strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for engagement," *Asia Policy* 27, no. 4 (2020): 1-6.
- 5 Constantino Xavier, "How South Asia Plays the BRI Balancing Game," *South Asian Voices*, May 23, 2019, <https://southasianvoices.org/how-south-asia-plays-bri-balancing-game/>.
- 6 Manish Jung Pulami, "China-India contemporary relations: Geopolitical challenges to the small states in South Asia [version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]," *Stosunki Międzynarodowe - International Relations* 1, no. 1 (2022): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17419.2>.
- 7 Robert O. Keohane, "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics," *International Organisation* 23, no. 2 (1969): 291-310, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081830003160X>.
- 8 David Vital, *The inequality of States. A study of the Small Power in International Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1967).
- 9 Sujeev Shakya, "Nepal in the First Half of 2022: Balancing Act in Geopolitics," Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, May 27, 2022, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/nepal-in-the-first-half-of-2022-balancing-act-in-geopolitics/>.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Nitasha Kaul, "Bhutan's Foreign Policy Balancing Act," East Asia Forum, November 26, 2022, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2022/11/26/bhutans-foreign-policy-balancing-act/>.
- 12 Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, "The Changing Contours of Bhutan's Foreign Policy and the Implications for China and India," Observer Research Foundation, July 21, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-changing-contours-of-bhutan-s-foreign-policy-and-the-implications-for-china-and-india>.
- 13 Hasith Kandaudahewa, "Sri Lanka China Relations in 21st Century?" CGTN Global Watch, January 9, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/>.
- 14 Elizabeth Colton, "Maldives' Dexterous Diplomacy: Global Multilateralism as Foreign Policy," London School of Economics, December 26, 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2023/12/26/maldives-dexterous-diplomacy-global-multilateralism-as-foreign-policy/>.
- 15 Soumya Bhowmick, "Bangladesh's Economic Progress," East Asia Forum, February 25, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/02/25/reimagining-bangladeshs-economic-progress/>.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Saroj Kumar Aryal, "India's 'neighbourhood first' policy and the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI)," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 4 (2022): 744-756, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911211014282>.
- 18 Biswas Baral, "What's the Status of the Much-Discussed China-Nepal Railway?" *The Diplomat*, June 8, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/whats-the-status-of-the-much-discussed-china-nepal-railway/>.
- 19 Meera Srinivasan and Ananth Krishnan, "Chinese vessel Yuan Wang 5 reaches Sri Lanka's Hambantota port," *The Hindu*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.
- 20 Nadia Clark, "The Rise and Fall of the BRI," Council of Foreign Relations, April 6, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/rise-and-fall-bri>.
- 21 Lakshmy Ramakrishnan, "The Indian Ocean Region: A Theatre of Opportunity," *The Geopolitics*, November 25, 2023, <https://thegeopolitics.com/the-indian-ocean-region-a-theatre-of-opportunity/>.
- 22 Ananta Agarwal, "China and Nepal's rail line must traverse mountains, geopolitical tensions and enormous costs to get off the ground," *South China Morning Post*, September 11, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/global-economy/article/3191957/china-and-nepals-rail-line-must-traverse-mountains>.

- 23 Amit Ranjan, "China's New Claim in Eastern Bhutan: Pressure Tactic or Message to India?" Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, July 20, 2020, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/chinas-new-claim-in-eastern-bhutan-pressure-tactic-or-message-to-india/>
- 24 Nilanthi Samaranyake, "As Tensions with India Grow, Maldives Looks to China," United States Institute for Peace, January 18, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/tensions-india-grow-maldives-looks-china>.
- 25 Sisir Bhandari and Rajib Neupane, "South Asia Amid Global Contestations," *The Kathmandu Post*, January 11, 2024, <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2024/01/11/south-asia-amid-global-contestations>.
- 26 Naresh Kumar, "Nepal, MCC and the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy," Indian Council of World Affairs, October 21, 2021, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=6519&lid=4480.
- 27 Gaurav Raja Dahal, "Nepal Factor in the Indo-Pacific Strategy," *The Kathmandu Post*, October 20, 2021, <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2021/10/19/the-nepal-factor-in-the-indo-pacific-strategy>.
- 28 Avasna Pandey, "Nepal: US Indo-Pacific Strategy at One Year," East Asia Centre, May 21, 2023, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Nepal%20-%20US%20Indo-Pacific%20Strategy%20at%20One%20Year.pdf>.
- 29 Lasanda Kurukulasuriya, "The Geopolitics of Sri Lanka's Energy Crisis," *The Diplomat*, February 16, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.
- 30 Hasith Kandaudahewa, "Sri Lanka's Strategic Dilemma: Navigating Great-Power Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3533622/sri-lankas-strategic-dilemma-navigating-great-power-rivalry-in-the-indo-pacific/>.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Mimrah Abdul Ghafoor, "Beyond Realpolitik: Enlisting the Maldives into the U.S. Indo-Pacific Vision," South Asian Voices, February 6, 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/beyond-realpolitik-enlisting-the-maldives-into-the-u-s-indo-pacific-vision/>.
- 34 U.S. Department of State, "The United States' Enduring Commitment to the Indo-Pacific: Marking Two Years Since the Release of the Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy," Office of the Spokesperson, February 9, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-enduring-commitment-to-the-indo-pacific-marking-two-years-since-the-release-of-the-administrations-indo-pacific-strategy/>.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Gopilal Acharya, "Bhutan: US Indo-Pacific Strategy at One Year," East West Center, May 21, 2023, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/bhutan-us-indo-pacific-strategy-one-year>.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Kevin Rudd, "Why the Quad Alarms China: Its Success Poses a Major Threat to Beijing's Ambitions," Asia Society, August 6, 2021, <https://asiasociety.org/>.
- 39 Sheila Smith, "The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know," Council on Foreign Relations, May 27, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/>.
- 40 Yasiru Ranaraja, "Guest Opinion: Belt and Road Initiative fuelling Sri Lanka's vision to become maritime hub in Indian Ocean," *Xinhua*, June 10, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230610/688130c6be894e2ca6109ef9b15f8205/c.html>.
- 41 Athaulla A. Rasheed, "The Role of the Maldives in the Indo-Pacific Security Space in South Asia," E-International Relations, February 9, 2021, <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/02/09/the-role-of-the-maldives-in-the-indo-pacific-security-space-in-south-asia/>.
- 42 Kamal Dev Bhattarai, "Understanding BRI in Nepal," *The Annapurna Express*, March 24, 2023, <https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/understanding-bri-in-nepal-40041/>.
- 43 Toshiro Nishizawa, "China's double-edged debt trap," East Asia Forum, September 19, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/09/19/chinas-double-edged-debt-trap/>.
- 44 Abhijnan Rej, "Mike Pompeo Visits Sri Lanka and the Maldives in a Bid to Win Friends and Influence People," *The Diplomat*, October 29, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/mike-pompeo-visits-sri-lanka-and-the-maldives-in-a-bid-to-win-friends-and-influence-people/>.
- 45 Gopilal Acharya, n. 36.