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China's 'Wedge Strategy'

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Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, recently held a meeting with counterparts in Afghanistan, Nepal, and Pakistan, amidst the border standoff with India, and called for the four nations to “strengthen their connections for regional peace and security.”¹ The timely meeting, possibly motivated due to the ongoing India-China tensions can be taken as yet another instance of Beijing attempting to weaken India's resolve, increase tensions with its neighbours, and reduce New Delhi's influence in the region, thereby acting as a ‘wedge’ in South Asia.

The Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia

China has been steadily moving towards its two centenary goals under Xi Jinping, using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as one of the main pillars of achieving ‘the rejuvenation of the Chinese people.’ The two goals are: becoming a “moderately well-off society” by 2021 to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and becoming a fully developed nation and a leading power by 2049 to mark the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC).² An

important aspect that underlies China's path to pursuing relative power and achieving the status of a leading power is not only the adding and multiplying of its own power, but also the subtracting and dividing the power of potential adversaries.³ Therefore, it can be argued that the elite in Beijing has been using the BRI as a means to not only connect the world with China and expand their influence across the globe but also to act as a wedge and prevent rivals from accumulating power. Timothy W. Crawford has defined this ‘wedge strategy’ as a “state's attempt to prevent, break up, or weaken a threatening or blocking alliance at an acceptable cost.”⁴ China's overtures under the BRI not only seek to prevent and weaken alliances against it, but also to create a wedge among regional powers and their neighbours. This keeps the former occupied with regional instability and a growing Chinese presence, rather than being able to establish themselves as a larger power that could pose a threat to the Middle Kingdom.

China's presence and the importance of the BRI in South Asia plays this dual role. It provides

China with alternative routes for its energy supplies to circumvent the Strait of Malacca along with keeping India occupied within its neighbourhood and preventing it from becoming a larger power and pursuing regional ambitions. Combined with China's claims on Indian territory, this has resulted in China's BRI projects and defence ties with India's neighbours having national security concerns for New Delhi, and keeping the government occupied with alleviating them. Apart from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which passes through disputed territory in Kashmir and poses a threat to India in the north, China's growing relations with Nepal have been sought after to reduce the latter's dependence on India and erode New Delhi's influence in Kathmandu. Additionally, Sri Lanka handing over its Hambantota Port to China for 99-years has raised concerns of the port being used by the Chinese Navy (PLAN). The Sri Lankan scenario is especially worrying for New Delhi as the inability to pay back Chinese debt could also result in this 'debt-trap diplomacy' taking place in the other countries of South Asia. Even in Bangladesh, which has favourable ties with India, China has provided 71.8 percent of Dhaka's military procurements between 2008 and 2018, and has numerous BRI projects in the country.⁵ By courting the smaller nations in South Asia through investments, China has been successful in entrenching its footprint in the region. Championing development, infrastructure, and digital projects, along with providing weapons, Beijing has been increasing

the dependence of the recipient countries on China. This has resulted in reducing India's influence and creating tensions between New Delhi and its neighbours. China, through the BRI, therefore, has been a successful wedge between India and its neighbours.

Central Asia and the Southern Pacific

China's strategy and the BRI have resulted in similar outcomes, although arguably to a lesser extent in Central Asia with Russia, and in the Pacific Island Countries (PIC) with Australia. The BRI in Central Asia, and China's increasing presence in the region has resulted in apprehensions from Moscow. Perceived as Russia's sphere of influence, China's economic and political influence is growing in the region through the BRI and has allowed Beijing to become an influential player through its investments. Arms sales from China to the region have also raised concerns in Russia along with the possibility of a 'debt trap' taking place in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both owing more than 20 percent of their GDP to China.⁶ Similarly, the Southern Pacific, which has traditionally been under Australia's sphere of influence has seen an increasing Chinese presence and growing investments. Debt sustainability amongst the PIC's is of great concern to Canberra as some of the PIC's are already some of the most indebted nations to China.⁷ The possibility of a permanent Chinese presence in the South Pacific would bring the PLAN directly on Australia's doorstep. In both instances, China has used the Belt and

Road Initiative and its investments to increase its footprint, while at the same time attempting to reduce Moscow and Canberra's sway in their traditional spheres of influence.

Implications for India

China's wedge strategy has a threefold effect on India's regional and global ambitions. First, through the BRI, China has increased its presence in South Asia that could provide Beijing with a strategic advantage during times of conflict or for that matter during peaceful time. The possibility of the 'debt-trap' in these countries also raises concerns of their increasing dependence on China. Second, China's presence has resulted in the South Asian nations looking to Beijing as an extra-regional power to balance what they perceive as India's hegemony in the region, thereby reducing India's influence and dominance. Finally, the national security concerns created by the above have resulted in New Delhi concentrating its efforts to offset these concerns causing a distraction from wider regional and global ambitions.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Keegan Elmer, "China holds meeting with Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan as tensions simmer with India," *South China Morning Post*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3095028/china-holds-meeting-pakistan-nepal-and-afghanistan-tensions>, accessed August 4, 2020.

² Robert Lawrence Kuhn, "Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2013,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html>, accessed August 4, 2020.

³ Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security* 35, no. 4, (Spring 2011): 155-189.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ China Power Team, "How dominant is China in the global arms trade?," *China Power*, March 13, 2020, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-global-arms-trade/>, accessed August 4, 2020.

⁶ Temur Umarov, "China Looms Large in Central Asia," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, March 30, 2020, [https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81402#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20from%20the,percent%20lower%20\(%248.9%20billion.,](https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81402#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20from%20the,percent%20lower%20(%248.9%20billion.,) accessed August 4, 2020.

⁷ Roland Rajah, Alexandre Dayant, Jonathan Pryke, "Ocean of Debt? Belt and Road and Debt Diplomacy in the Pacific," *Lowy Institute*, October 21, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2NZkkRv>, accessed August 4, 2020.