



# People-to-people relations in shaping the geopolitics of China and South Asia: A historical perspective

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## Abstract

China-South Asia relations, these days, revolved around the interplay of geopolitical balancing amid various mutually intersecting connections. These two regions are not only spatially connected but also enriched by long historical ties with diverse cultures. Shaped by enduring human wisdom. Both civilizations have a profound shared cultural legacy. Each tradition and culture values harmony, spiritual calm, peace, dedication, and social harmony, closely linked for centuries through trade and exchange with spiritual and cultural sharing. The ancient Silk Road, Tea Horse Road, and Himalayan Salt Route were the means of transportation connecting these two civilizations. Contemporary philosophers have their roles to play as a cornerstone of civilizational discourse within and outside of their civilizational sphere. Inheriting civilizational lineage, South Asia and China have prioritized neighborhood diplomacy, emphasizing the importance of people-to-people relations.

## Keywords

Connectivity, cultural exchange, people-to-people relations, salt route, Silk Road

## JEL Classification

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## 1. Introduction

Geopolitics in international relations can be used to analyze the relevance of geographical and cultural factors and their influence on political decisions or outcomes, interacting with nongeographic factors. Geopolitical factors, in the fundamental sense, not only cover the geography, but also the people living there, and the historical narratives they have made for their distant past and their perceptions of the near future. In geopolitics, the geographic territory is important, but it refers to more than just a region's size, composition, and resources. It also incorporates the local community, the officials whom they support, and the ones they oppose (Lacoste, 2012). To Granieri (2015), geopolitics is an approach to studying contemporary international affairs that is anchored in the study of history, geography, economics, and culture, or it is the study of the realities and mentalities of the localities. Geography influences geopolitics with the help of history and culture, and helps in shaping policies based on their location, climate, and resources. Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping people-to-people relations between neighboring areas by fostering shared experiences and mutual understanding of interconnectedness, and these forces act as bridges between communities across neighborhoods. The locality and nearness serve as both a resource use and a mitigation of shared worries and stewardship.

The shared cultural heritage and traditions between China and South Asia offer opportunities for mutual collaboration, strengthening ties through common beliefs, historical connections, nature, and culture. Since international relations is diverse and ever-evolving, it focuses on the complex social, economic, and political interactions that occur between countries (Ahmed, 2020). It incorporates all the aspects that involve understanding the multifaceted context between nations and the factors that induce their interactions. Despite their differences, primarily in their focus on the past versus the present, idiographic versus nomothetic approaches, history remains invaluable to international affairs. It offers empirical examples, sharpens theoretical insights, fosters historical consciousness of the context, and makes informed judgments about human behavior (Koliopoulos, 2019). Modern geopolitics underscores the importance of significance of location, culture, and historical relations that inform foreign policy.

China's relations with its neighbor in South Asia flourished into the early modern era, and the ties were vitalized through old trade routes (Thampi, 2020). China and its South Asian neighbors have mutual understanding that still promote cooperation in several areas. Both civilizations have a long history together. The relationship between China and South Asia can be characterized by a complex interplay of opportunities and threats, especially between China and India. A rich environment for analysis may be produced from the perspectives of conspiracy theories (Keeley, 1999) and constructive development (Wendt, 1999). Conspiracy theorists may explain the debt traps and hegemonic ambitions that highlight the risks of unbridled Chinese influence in the infrastructure investments in South Asia. However, constructive development can be explained as the advantages of regional cooperation and infrastructure development as a counterargument, and shows the ways to engage constructively. By fostering cooperation in the face of competition and utilizing regional synergies, China, as a global economic power, and India, as a regional leader, can create opportunities for both China and South Asia.

Two regions are basically dependent on the issues of common environmental issues and physical connections. When people are co-located, they are far more likely to interact and form links than when entirely remote (Carmody, 2022). It means physical proximity has a rationality that makes it close, even with the development of digital communication. While diplomatic and cultural cooperation is essential to ensuring regional peace, stability, and prosperity, addressing the environmental challenges and economic integration are also essential. Community-level relations across borders can enrich the social fabric and strengthen efforts in biodiversity preservation and economic growth. South Asia is integral to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Environmental preservation in the Himalayas is one of the common and significant areas of cooperation, which must be a unifying factor in regional ties. Concerns may emerge about China's plans to dam rivers originating in Tibet potentially causing desertification in South and Southeast Asia (Manhas & Led, 2024). Natural disasters, predominantly environmental warming, floods, landslides, tidal waves, and so forth, are serious threats to South Asia. Conflicts of interest between neighbors and the involvement of extraterritorial powers may lead to further complications. As soft power theory focuses on the ability of public relations to play a central role in crafting narratives that promote cultural values, political ideals, and national identity (Nye, 1990). Other theories from

international relations and critical studies also explain the dynamic interplay between public relations and geopolitics. Soft power theory focuses on the ability of public relations to play a central role in crafting narratives that promote cultural values, political ideals, and national identity (Nye, 1990). The Insights from international relations and critical studies highlight the dynamic interplay between public relations and geopolitics. From the lens of soft power theory, agenda-setting, and power hegemony, people-to-people relations have a role in shaping geopolitics, and they reinforce each other. The importance of individuals and communities living on the frontiers has a significant role in facilitating relationships that shape and solve problems across borders. The frame of collective regional vision depends on the will and cooperation of these people. Accordingly, a collective regional vision is built through their efforts, guided by the principles of mutual harmony, benefit, and respect for common well-being.

As China and India's rise as economic superpowers and their strategic locations have reshaped them into a pivotal arena of global geopolitics, with a dense population and a growing market perspective, South Asia is central. The region has turned out to be a focal point for 21st-century power dynamics. India's 'Neighborhood First' policy (Mathieu, 2024) and China's neighborhood diplomacy (Kan, Har, Ann, & Peter, 2017) both emerge from regional connectivity, trade, and cultural exchange. Both try to strengthen ties with their neighbors and aim to continue their positions, advancing their long-term strategic interests. China and its South Asian neighbors have a shared interest in maintaining peaceful and cooperative relations. The economic development with scientific and technological advancements signals China's emergence as a global power, marked by its vast territory, burgeoning economy, and large population. This has attracted attention, and developed nations view it as a challenge to their dominance. China's border is closely linked with five countries of South Asia. Countries with cross border look to China as a potential partner for development, however they have cross border disputes carried by history. Some of them have unsolved claims and complaints. Historical relation may have vital role by documenting and interpreting actions that influence decision-makers' beliefs, domestic pressures, and national interests (Jadesola-Babatola, 2020). History have the role and significance that interpret the past, its impact on the present, and to shape the future. Its documentation provides insights into current affairs and inform better diplomatic decisions on bilateral relations. This paper attempts to analyze the historical antecedents of the relationship between China and South Asia, with Nepal, focusing on the evolution of socioeconomic and cultural relationships since ancient civilization. Highlighting the historical significance of the Silk Road, Tea Horse Road, and Salt Route in strengthening regional ties throughout the civilizations, it explores the possible areas that could revitalize the historical connections between China and South Asia within the framework of China's *BRI* and India's *NFP* a topic that has not been thoroughly examined so far.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This study follows the approach of historical institutionalism (Steinmo S. , 2008) to studying politics that focuses on real-world empirical questions, has a historical perspective, and examines how institutions influence political behavior and outcomes. Historical antecedent necessitates a way of thinking that is mindful of social and intellectual growth over time. It highlights the inevitability of contemporary events and their impact on the distant past. The scholars have been more interested in recording the types and categories of diplomatic relations and engagement. This qualitative analysis is based on secondary sources, such as research works, journal articles, conference proceedings, and government reports. A sample of recorded interviews of experts and officials, with editorial notes, is taken as a source of information. The role of non-state actors is instrumental in increasing and expanding international relations in this age of interdependence. The monographs, booklets, and periodical publications of nonstate actors related to diplomatic relations are also taken as sources of information. Community groups of knowledgeable people and their experiences have a role to play in international affairs. Expert ideas and experiences, documented by the business community, intellectuals, and religious groups, have also been taken as references.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### Historical Antecedents of China-South Asia Religious Cultural Relations

China and South Asia boast a distinct civilization that adds happiness to each other. They are the cream of history and the crystallization of human wisdom. The South Asian culture emphasizes harmony, inclusiveness, spiritual wholeness, and hopes for the future; the Chinese culture values peace, determination, self-discipline, and social commitment. Renowned ancient scholars from China traveled to South Asia through Nepal and Scholars from the South also traveled through these routes. As an established set of ancient civilizations, South Asia has been in close touch with China since time immemorial. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the flagship project that the Chinese President launched in 2013. Carrying ancient Silk Road civilization heritage, this project aims to improve connection, trade, investment, technology, financial integration, and people-to-people contact between Asians, Africans, and Europeans. With the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, neighborhood negotiation has become important for China. From the viewpoint of the BRI, Southeast Asia has a place of prominence. There is a huge demand for structured investment in South Asia. BRI could be an opening for these economies to move towards economic development by bridging the investment gap. China shares a more than 5,000-kilometer border with five South Asian countries (Sangroula, 2017). They have also enjoyed cultural, religious, and commercial ties since the historic days of civilization. These facts support cooperation and collaboration for a common destiny.

#### Current Scenario

Meanwhile, many South Asian countries participate in BRI and share prosperity through investment, connectivity, and infrastructure development. This region is important for China's neighborhood and peripheral diplomacy. Management and resolution of regional complications, such as conflicts in the South China Sea competing territorial and maritime claims and China's apparent disagreement with territorial sovereignty in India's border region in Jammu and Kashmir, can complicate and compel the involvement of forces outside the region. China's increased involvement in South Asia may have posed a challenge to India as a regional economic and diplomatic heavyweight. There is a need for the provisions of extensive resources for initiatives, which are likely to outpace other sources of funding. If China increases its involvement in the region and promotes connectivity in Asia primarily through the *Belt and Road* initiative, India may have to extend its socioeconomic outreach across South Asia, stressing infrastructure development. By strengthening People-to-people relations and adopting a lift-all-boats approach to help its neighbors, India can gain from its rise. While disputes persist, closeness and contiguity can be used to foster joint benefit and to make neighborhood ties

#### Early Civilizational Relations

Huntington, (1993) on his hypothesis states that the future of global clashes will be motivated basically by cultural and civilizational differences rather than political or economic factors. To him, nation-states will remain key players, but the main conflicts will occur between different civilizations. The deep-rooted cultural differences, increased interactions between civilizations, the resurgence of religion, and the West's dominant yet challenged position, which groups within a civilization support each other in conflicts against other civilizations. This further highlights the potential for violent conflicts along civilizations' fault lines, which are divided over their civilizational identities. Civilizations can be seen as imaginary communities that may differ significantly in terms of time and space. They can cross national boundaries and operate at both subnational and international levels. Despite their broad geographical and sociocultural diversity, they can consist of multiple elements and remain in a continuous state of evolution. In the context of international relations, they can represent transnational, interhuman, and de-territorialized cultural communities (Bettiza, 2014.). One should promote unity within the civilization, incorporate culturally similar societies, and develop a deeper understanding of other civilizations to coexist peacefully in a multipolar world rather than military supremacy (Huntington, 1993).

#### Contributions of Contemporary Philosophers

Contemporary philosophers have their roles to play as a cornerstone of civilizational discourse within and outside of their civilizational sphere. Buddha, Mahabira, and later Kautilya (based on the Vedas) in civilization in the Indian subcontinent, and Confucius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi (the primary proponents of

Taoism had played pivotal roles in shaping the philosophy and teachings were the most influential philosophers in South Asia and the respective civilizations. Philosophies in both civilizations emerged in the same period, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Buddhist teaching followed the spiritual way of awakening to the true wellbeing of life and society, and Confucius stressed humanity, morality, and ethics with a special focus on societal harmony and mutual respect. Furthermore, the tradition of pilgrimage tours facilitates enduring connections between Chinese and South Asian civilizations. Philosophers like Fa Xian and Xuan Zang's tour to India demonstrates profound spiritual and intellectual exchanges. In the same way, Indian scholars traveled to China to spread Buddhist teachings. Notable figures, like Sangha Bhadra from Sri Lanka and Ratnaratha from India, further enriched these cultural exchanges in the 5th and 6th centuries, respectively. Monks from South Asia, including Sri Lanka and India, Burma, and Bhutan, travelled routes through Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Burma to spread Buddhism in China. All these two-way interactions help to facilitate the exchange of spiritual philosophies, scientific knowledge, and skills in production and marketing, agriculture and nature conservation, medical care, and astronomical discoveries, along with technological innovations. This kind of interaction promotes the shared legacy of cultural diffusion and mutual enrichment between South Asian and Chinese societies.

China and South Asia, with Nepal, are close neighbors on the two sides of the Himalayan Mountains and have a glorious history of relations. Since time immemorial, the Indian subcontinent, as an Indo-Aryan civilization, has been in close touch with Chinese civilizations. Bilateral relations today are not only purely political and government-to-government. It is a multifaceted network of relationships that includes connections among diverse ranges of players. It is the combination of contributions to the ongoing evolution of relationships including individual relations, relationships between communities, organizations, universities, and educational institutions, and others. The Track Two Diplomacy developed by Montville (1991), with multi-trajectory diplomacy, is not a substitute for Track One but it can compensate for the restraints required on leaders by their people's emotional attitudes. As part of public diplomacy, People-to-people connections complement traditional and formal diplomacy, though the power of civil connections is often underestimated. People-to-people relation is the general notion of soft power. Soft power relations talk about the simplest form of power through which states attempt to carry out their intentions without resorting to coercive power. Scholars' opinions about cultural diplomacy are that the peaceful methods that two parties employ to convince one another go back much further in time. It was experienced even in the city-states of Ancient Greece. The priority is determined by the subject, or actors, of cultural diplomacy. Kobierecki (2016) stated that it remains uncertain whether the use of table tennis for diplomatic purposes was deliberate or purely coincidental. The ping-pong diplomacy proved to be a significant diplomatic achievement, marking a breakthrough in relations between two hostile nations and having a profound impact on both China and the United States. People-to-people relation is the collaboration among ordinary people of connecting nations, at numerous levels without authorized interference and leadership. Cheuk (2013) brought up the situation in which traders successfully preserve their business interests in China by establishing long-term relationships of trust with Chinese suppliers.

### **High-Level Family Relationships**

Historical records show multi-faceted bilateral and multilateral relations among these civilizations, which have evolved since those days. Srongtsen Gampo, the king of the Tubo Kingdom married a Nepalese princess, Bhrikuti. The Nepalese artisan Arniko visited China and built a Buddhist pagoda in Lhasa. Nepal and China had started exchanging representatives before that. Chinese well-known monks in the Tang dynasty came to Ind Lumbini on pilgrimages. There is a myth that lord Manjushree came to Nepal from the Wutai more than two thousand years ago, cut the southern mountain of Kathmandu, and drained the water from the lake to make the Valley (Shrestha, 2016). All these myths and historical facts show that China, Nepal, and South Asia have a traditional friendship and these beautiful legends give vivid expression to the passionate desire of the people living in these two civilizations for friendship. The age-old history of People-to-people relations between the Indian subcontinent, Nepal, and China is glorious and deep-rooted.

## **Silk Road, Salt Route, and Tea-house Road**

From the beginning of ancient civilization, the relationship between China and South Asia has been intertwined with two-way traffic. The elements of exchange are two categories. The first type is the exchange of material goods and services, and the second type is the exchange of knowledge and ideas. The exchange of material things ranges from everyday consumable goods to high-value materials like gold and silver. Similarly, the ideas range from spiritual values to technical know-how. Huibian (1994) claimed that these two faceted exchanges were carried through four routes: (1) The Central Asian Silk Route that is divided into the northern route passing through the Taklamakan Desert and the Tianshan mountain ranges, and the southern route through the Kunlun Mountain; (2) The Assam-Burma and Yunnan routes- originated in Chengdu or the famous Southern Silk Road, the earliest route for the China-South Asia interface; (3) The Maritime Silk Road, with a network of sea routes that connected a broad range of Asia with the Indian subcontinent, Europe, and Africa; and (4) The Tibet-Nepal Salt Route, which came into being in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century (Deepak, 2001), serving as another pathway for China-South Asia connectivity. All these routes have played a significant role in facilitating the exchanges of material, cultural, spiritual, and technical know-how. They serve as the main means to enhance civilizational ties. These historic Routes have a vital role in making connectivity and expansion of the Himalayan orogeny, giving rise to a distinct civilizational domain that connected the civilizations fostered in the South Asian subcontinent, including the Ganga-Brahmaputra basin, and Chinese Civilization flourished in the Yangtze and Yellow River basins with histories spanning thousands of years.

The trade between China and its southern neighbors has been carried out since early times. The Silk Road was not only the trade route of goods but also the spread of civilization. According to Kurin (2002) and Winter (2016), Silk Road system has existed for over 2,000 years, with specific routes changing over time. Agreeing to them along with daily consumer goods, goods of high value like gold, silver, and spices, tea and herbal medicines, fruits and flowers, animals like- horses and sheep, instruments like music, arts and architecture, philosophical and religious ideas also have traveled through those routes. It was not only to promote commodity exchange but also socio-cultural and political relations, and to share wisdom. Though traveling was dangerous through risky roads, highlands, life-threatening heat, heart-hitting colds, and deserts, Buddhist monks together with merchant caravans from both Chinese and Indian civilizations traveled to Central Asia, to China, and to exchange their philosophy, ideas, and goods, and elaborate monuments in several places. Several trans-Himalayan routes connected western and south-western China, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Xinjiang to South Asia (Williams, 2016). These routes were of considerable importance to the development of the region. The routes using the valley systems of the southern Himalayas are termed the Salt routes. They provided a vital contact between South Asia and the Tibetan plateau (Fisher, 1986).

### **Trans-Himalayan Connectivity**

Salt often referred to as white gold was used as currency for commercial transactions, and its vital importance is also evident in the term salary. Humans were forced to explore, inhabit, or travel in search of salt, in previously uninhabitable or dangerous places, and these passes were termed the salt route. These pathways were also used by missionaries and scholars, disseminating scientific knowledge, philosophical and theological concepts, linguistic and cultural ties, and scientific know-how that facilitated a deeper understanding of one another and grew acceptance and fraternity. Each story associated with the Silk Road and the Salt route bears witness to human ingenuity, tenacity, and the global quest for wealth. The salt route served as a crucial link between South Asia and Tibet, enabling trade through several mountain passes (Williams, 2016). Despite the hazards that made both men and animals susceptible, caravans braved these treacherous routes, transporting valuable goods on the backs of mules and yaks (Fisher, 1986). These caravans reached Baltistan, Ladakh, Zaskar, Spiti, Kinnaur, Garhwal, Kumaon, and the Middle Hills of Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Monyul (Santiago, 2022). Salt, extracted from the icy lakes of the Chang Tang plateau, moved across western and central Tibet, Ladakh, Nepal, and Bhutan. They almost have to cross the southern mountain passes, spreading salt and wool in exchange for cereals from Nepal and other southern regions. Commodities they usually exchanged were Tibetan salt and wool, as well as rice from the Middle Hills of Nepal and other southern regions. At the same time, social and cultural connections were made through trade.

As mentioned earlier, trade with Nepal occurred through border passes like Dolpa along the Karnali (Budha, 2021), KoraLa along the Budhi Gandaki, and Nangpa La along the Kosi River. These transboundary rivers, originating from Tibet's high plateau, lie beyond the Himalayas. The Lhasa-India route made Tibet and Nepal key allies in the Trans-Himalayan trade, with Nepal serving as the central hub connecting various peoples (Abdenur et al., 2016). Although the ancient salt route, once used for other commodities, remains active among Tibetan travelers (Fisher, 1986). These days, few remaining caravans no longer carry traditional goods like salt and wool, but rather transport Chinese-manufactured items such as electronics, modern clothing, and various consumables (Santiago, 2022) and are also used for trekking routes for adventure tourism. With her initial scholarships, China has proposed for BRI, an opening for constructive ideas with an understanding of refining the concept, vision, and development. The Belt and Road Initiative, envisioned as a modernization of the Silk Road with the salt route, is not solely a Chinese venture; the participating countries stand to benefit equally from these initiatives. With initial proposals, China has opened the door to constructive ideas, refining the concept, vision, and development of this ambitious project. The tea-horse road, formed in the late 6th century, passed from Samoa, led to Lassa, and continued to Nepal, Burma, and India was the critical trade route connecting China and Southern Asia. This Tea-horse road was a long route connecting the Sichuan-Tibet-Nepal-Burma-India, which was officially recognized and helpful in expanding and promoting inland and external commerce in China and South Asia. These civilizational and historical interactions show the significance of public relations among neighboring people to open avenues for advancing socio-economic and cultural ties. These cooperative historical ties provide insights into contemporary disputes and the possible way forward to further development for the mutual benefit of the people.

### **Revitalizing the Relationship**

#### ***Rebuilding Trans-Himalayan Connectivity***

China's most significant and far-reaching program to date has five key goals: enhancing connectivity and cooperation, policy coordination, infrastructure development, unrestricted trade, financial integration, and fostering people-to-people connections. Nepal aims to serve as a Himalayan bridge between Central South Asia and Southeast Asia, and the vision of building a *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakum* is the main goal of the neighborhood's policy of India (Sidhu, 2017). Therefore, she should welcome BRI's connection to Europe and the extension of China's railroads to Lumbini and Kathmandu. China has begun reopening the Aranico expressway, which was damaged by the landslide caused by the earthquake, and the Rasuwa Gadhi customs. If China agrees to extend the Qinghai Railway to Kasha on the Nepalese border, the road network between the two countries will go smoothly. The proposed Kerung- Kath- Lumbini railway will be another milestone in infrastructure development in Nepal (Sapkota, 2024). Recently, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh have implemented electricity (where the street, road, and market connectivity was already in place in different forms). It also helps to connect China and South Asia and increase the mobility of goods and services among people. Market connectivity needs to be strengthened by institutional connectivity to reinforce macro and mega policies. This necessitates collaboration between the public and private sectors, especially local governments, as well as financial and legal integration, bartering systems, and other infrastructure.

#### ***The Cross-Border Phenomena***

Sociocultural, economic, and political variables with historical practices determine the border interaction. Scholars have categorized and analyzed cross-border phenomena into three theoretical methods: a flow approach, a cross-border collaboration approach, and a people approach. The flow approach considers boundaries as artificial constraints that result in economic hindrance. This approach emphasizes cross-border physical flow. The cross-border cooperation approach sees the nearby area as an area of spread of activity, focuses on cross-border assistance, and plans to overcome inconsistencies. This approach trusts cross-border cooperation to promote the socio-economic expansion of adjoining regions.

The people view borders as a socially constructed phenomenon. It is separated by national identity, values culture, and linguistics. Physical barriers have a role but they cannot govern the existence of borders. Several sociocultural, geo-economic, and political factors can form the border. Some authors have equally emphasized people, perception, and behaviors as the factors for success and cross-border economic flows that are determined by socio-cultural and economic factors (Anderson, 2023; Decoville,

2019; Setnikar et al., 2014). Complications of the border interface can be solved with mutual trust and intense cooperation. However, existing literature has little insight into the complex puzzle of formal and informal incorporation, interaction, and their significant effects on diplomatic relations. In the context of China-South Asian countries, the peripheral areas do not have intense economic activities; however, people from the border area in South Asia countries can cross more frequently and perform their activities than people away from the border obstacles.

### *Trade and Transport*

Trade today is a primary engine that drives global economic growth and prosperity. Trade is not just about the sale and purchase of goods and services, buyers and sellers, marketing, firms, and distributors nor is it only about customs and borders. It is also exported and imported within specified areas and people with a series of common and uncommon journeys to explore new markets, travel to new destinations, and visit to meet unknown people to exchange ideas and cultures for the mutual benefit of the countries and peoples. According to Pigman (2016), trade today is an inescapable, indispensable component of a global economy that enables the world's billions to work, earn a living, and consume and invest the fruits of their labors. It indicates the requirement for the arrangement of people through the realm, exchange of ideas, transfer of technology and products and to know the commonalities and differences of each other. There is significant potential for cooperation between China and South Asian countries in areas such as green energy, modern agriculture, medical care, and cultural tourism. In 2023, trade between China and these countries reached nearly \$200 billion, doubling from 2013. Since Nepal embraces a unique position due to its border with Tibet, sharing longstanding cultural, trade, and family ties with Tibetans, Beijing views its relationship with strategic. Additionally, Nepal's proximity to the populous Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, which share strong cultural and familial connections, offers an opportunity to boost bilateral trade, investment, and tourism.

### *Focus on Public Diplomacy*

Public diplomacy can also be done by influencing people to think and feel. Graham has integrated emotion theory from international relations and communication studies to show how public diplomacy engages cultural emotions, identity, and affective responses in foreign publics (Graham, 2014). It requires person-to-person communication through a variety of ways. Everyday diplomacy involving engagement and building relationships can make the links and communications systems between countries, even in tension or breakdowns of formal diplomacy. Such contacts could be through professional bodies like chambers of commerce, associations of industrialists, traders, educational institutions, and organizations of art and sports. Exchange of books and newspapers, joint research and publications, and television programs would also fall in the ambit of people-to-people contacts. They can have an impact on opinion-making and cultivating relationships. Online webinars and interactions may be effective ways during the difficult period. Public diplomacy helps to go beyond the traditional one-way track.

### *Cultural Exchange and Working in New Environments*

Cultural exchange often involves learning and adapting to new environments and ideas. This flexibility is certainly helpful to develop knowledge and skills for the worker or participants before, during, and after the work. Meissen (2005) highlighted cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their people to foster mutual understanding. Similarly, working and living in a new environment provides a great experience for scholars and international visitors. Arndt, (2005) stated that cultural diplomacy can be traced back as early as the Bronze Age, and it is argued that cultural diplomacy has been a norm for human intent upon civilization. People have repeatedly used cultural diplomacy to influence and shape society. Cultural exchanges play an important role in influencing each other's norms and values, promoting better and clearer understanding, and having the power and reputation to enable them. China continues to commit to the Belt and Road Initiative, both locally and globally. It aims to connect people from different cultural backgrounds, enable educational and cultural exchanges, share knowledge, and build good relationships and policies that best suit their neighbors. The organization of joint cultural festivals, exhibitions, and performances, the shared history, arts, and traditions can enhance cultural relations.



Buddhism has widespread acceptance and deep roots in both China and South Asia. People's level dialogues, conferences, and pilgrimages can deepen the spiritual connection between the regions. Promoting dialogues between different religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Chinese traditional religions, can build mutual respect and harmony. Renowned linguist Noam Chomsky argues that all languages are essentially dialects of a single, universal human language. Despite their apparent differences, he believes that languages share fundamental similarities (Chomsky, 2024). While each society and culture has its distinct way of using language, these variations, though important, stem from a common linguistic foundation. When we speak our language, people may understand it, but when we speak in their language, people will truly feel it. We are interested to emphasize on improving cultural exchanges. We need to teach and increase the literacy of the languages of neighboring countries. Studies have stressed that there is a need to develop literacy in foreign languages. Especially promotion of languages of neighboring countries is necessary to incorporate as part of an overall strategy to strengthen cultural exchange and bilateral ties. In recent days, China has emphasized sharing knowledge and wisdom of Chinese culture and philosophy with the literacy of the Chinese language.

### ***Media, Entertainment, and Sports***

Media enterprises can be another area of collaboration. Entrepreneurs can jointly produce films, TV shows, and documentaries together, focusing on shared stories or historical connections to promote cultural awareness. Use of social media platforms like WeChat, TikTok, and others can be used to run awareness campaigns that focus on cultural exchange, travel, and educational opportunities between China and South Asia. Bilateral sports tournaments in cricket, football, badminton, martial arts, Taekwondo, are popular in South Asia and China. The organization of events as a common platform for youth exchange and mutual understanding. Summits and conferences can help to interact with each other, share ideas, and collaborate. Youth volunteers from South Asia and China can work together on developmental and social projects, especially in areas such as education, health, and environmental protection.

### ***Think Tank Meetings and Conferences***

Think tanks can inform and influence policy outcomes. These include government research departments, university research centers, consulting firms, professional NGOs, and other institutions focused on knowledge production and innovation. As ideal actors, they can interact with policy frameworks at different levels, either in the framing stage or consensus-building (Bhatnagar, 2021). Think tanks can mobilize planners or political actors that may be local, national, regional, or even global in scope. Think tanks have more credibility than the work of campaigners because they preserve their intellectual independence. We need more think tanks to have enough policy research institutes to help address the challenges and opportunities we have to face in people-to-people bilateral relations. Exchange of these people or working together in a common agenda can work as a pillar of people-to-people relations and cultural exchanges, and provide intellectual support for the in-depth development of cooperation. Think tanks and academic institutions can be encouraged to collaborate on areas like history, economics, and international relations to foster a deeper understanding. Universities in China and South Asian countries can develop student exchange initiatives on culture, language, technology, and business. This can enhance mutual understanding and promote long-term relationships.

### ***Research, Study, and Collaboration***

Countries in both regions have faced similar challenges, such as melting ice in the high Himalaya and rising sea levels due to global warming and environmental threats. There is the need for an increasing propensity to research, study, and discussions on different aspects. Collaborative research and interactions among academia and think tanks can help to solve and mitigate the problem. Though various government and university exchange programs are in operation, exchange of experts and students for research and to further enhance joint research and educational careers. Connectivity, cooperation, and collaboration among developing countries can provide a transformative solution to the issue of capital contra-flow. Collaboration on innovation can help in poverty reduction and promote economic growth. Collaboration for joint technology development beyond the physical border is more effective for knowledge production. Benkler (2001) highlighted that digital technologies enable collaborative peer production, offering a new way to create public goods. Innovation and technology initiatives can play a

vital role in addressing shared challenges across Asia. South Asian countries are benefiting from China's innovations and learning strategies, including bridging technology gaps to foster growth. These approaches align with the broader development interests of both China and South Asia, supporting mutual development. Creating an environment of collaboration, Countries in both regions can develop joint innovation and startup hubs where Chinese and South Asian entrepreneurs can collaborate on tech projects, business ventures, and digital platforms.

Professionals, politicians, and cultural workers graduated from Chinese universities, and Chinese people graduated from Universities in South Asia shows the new generation of scholars is continuing exchange of ideas and culture. These students from South Asia can gain first-hand experience of Chinese society, education, and lifestyle, and Chinese Students can learn from South Asia. The experiences and friendships they build form the foundation of lasting relationships.

### ***Tourism Development***

Tourism can contribute to economic growth, poverty reduction, and regional balance, and is flourishing globally. South Asian countries have also gained significant attention in recent years. Countries close to China are making efforts to attract Chinese tourists globally.

South Asian countries are facing several challenges, including a lack of proper planning, insufficient infrastructure, political instability, and weak coordination among stakeholders due to the lack of connectivity and hospitality-related constraints. As a center of Buddhism, western China is likely to see a significant movement of people traveling to South Asia for spiritual purposes and pilgrimages. Many Chinese tourists, particularly younger generations, are seeking to personalize their trips, choosing destinations and experiences. South Asia could be the ideal destination for these travelers. Policies aimed at attracting tourists, improved road and air connectivity can help to increase the number of tourists. Relaxing visa requirements for tourists between China and South Asian countries can help to promote tourism and allow citizens to better understand each other's cultures and lifestyles. China's visa-free moves are a hit with Southeast Asian tourists; geopolitical gains are also on the itinerary (CNA, 2022). It is historically important for both regions to promote joint tourism projects that focus on shared heritage, such as the ancient Silk Road and Buddhist pilgrimage.

## **4. Conclusion**

Geopolitical relations between China and South Asia have been shaped not only by formal diplomacy and statecraft. These are also the result of geographical proximity and the long history of people-to-people connections. Civilizational connections, common spiritual philosophy, economic relations, together with close connections in public level have played a crucial role in the foundation of geopolitical dynamics that exist today. The shared borders, and strategic connections to natural resources, and the cultures shaped by diverse landscapes have influenced both cooperation and conflicts. The shared geography has played a significant role in the increased interactions among the people between these two regions. The historical antecedent shows that both civilizations have shared and deep connections through the ancient Silk Road, Tea-Horse Road, and Salt Route. These roads are the means of sharing cultural-religious ideas, art and architecture, and scientific exchanges, let alone facilitating product trade. The proposed project, Silk Road and Salt Route corridor, aims to revive these historical ties, fostering business and economics, trade and connectivity, science and educational cooperation, adventure, and pilgrimage. India's Neighborhood First Policy may emerge as a strategic framework that can reshape the China-South Asia relation.

The wonderful landscapes and diverse cultures can become a key destination for millions of Chinese people in South Asia. Enhancing trans-Himalayan connectivity can help to promote opportunities for trade, transport and pilgrimage. Research and collaboration across various fields offer the potential for academic and scientific collaboration that could benefit humanity. Both BRI and NFP aim to cultivate a sense of belongingness and shared destiny among their participants by enhancing connectivity, reducing financial burdens, and improving socio-economic relations. South Asian countries, along with Nepal, should make an effort to increase collaboration and connectivity that China and India seek to promote. Several challenges may hamper the realization, including geopolitical tensions, economic disparities

among participating nations, and resource use and environmental concerns. Greater connectivity, a key component of the BRI and India's NFP framework, could establish the economic corridor, facilitating infrastructural and financial integration through cross-border road and rail links.

Understanding and cooperation at the people level in different avenues are essential to gain and ensure mutual economic and sociocultural benefits. Cross-border management, economic relations focused on public diplomacy, collaborative research and exchanges may be vital areas for strengthening people-to-people ties. China has expressed its interest in a collaborative way to improve the livelihoods of the people living in these areas. Nepal, along with South Asia, should respond constructively to this opportunity. The trans-Himalayan routes connecting with the Silk Road have long served as a vital gateway for tourists, traders, and travelers between China and South Asia. They were the historical means for sharing ideas, philosophy, and cultural diffusion, which can still offer the potential to usher in a new era of prosperity. Now is the time to forge stronger, more dynamic people-to-people relationships that go beyond diplomacy and create long-lasting ties, based on mutual respect and understanding.

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