

Understanding China's Engagements in South Asia: Is It Assertive Wolf Warrior, A Cooperative Traditional Or A Crucible of Conglomerate?

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Abstract

China's engagements in South Asia have various dynamics. This study seeks to explore these dynamics by integrating theoretical perspectives from both Soft Power and Power Transition Theory, examining how China's diplomatic investments, military and diplomatic postures align with these theories. Within the conceptualization of Chinese engagement in the region and to assess the kind of approach China utilizes, the paper will analyze specific case studies of China's interactions with India, Pakistan, and other smaller South Asian states, which will provide a bigger picture of these approach/engagements that reflects traditional diplomacy or the more assertive Wolf Warrior approach. In terms of methodology, this research adopts an 'eye of the beholder' and qualitative approach, utilizing case studies, primary sources and secondary sources in scientific manner to examine the rhetoric and actions of China.

Keywords: Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, China, South Asia, Assertiveness, Cooperation.

Introduction

China's engagement in South Asia has become a central element of its broader foreign policy agenda, particularly in recent years. This region, traditionally influenced by India and the United States, has become a focal point for Beijing's strategic ambitions. China's engagement in South Asia is diverse, encompassing economic, diplomatic and cultural dimensions (Pal, 2021). However, the nature of this engagement has sparked significant debate among scholars and policymakers: Is China adhering to its long-standing principles of non-interference and mutual benefit, or is it adopting a more assertive stance, reflected in so-called wolf-warrior diplomacy?

The 1950s saw Zhou Enlai formulate the concepts of peaceful coexistence and noninterference, which have historically defined China's foreign policy (Zhou Enlai Peace Institute, 2013). For many years, these ideals have governed China's relations with its neighbors and the larger international community. China has always aimed to build and preserve friendly South Asian relations through economic cooperation and cultural exchange. Projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to improve connectivity and boost regional economic growth, are considered sequels of this conventional strategy. China's diplomatic initiatives in South Asia are anchored by the Belt and Road Initiative, which was introduced in 2013 of which China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is of immense importance. China has made significant investments in infrastructure projects in nations like Nepal, Pakistan, and other to expand its influence and

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promote commercial links in the area. These investments are frequently presented in terms of win-win collaboration and mutual benefit, which is consistent with China's historical foreign policy philosophy. However, as China's influence has spread throughout the world, so have the complexities of its relations with other countries, which has resulted in the emergence of a more assertive diplomatic posture.

China's recent actions, especially those of President Xi Jinping, show a change from its traditional diplomatic approaches to what has been called "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" (Yang, 2022). This strategy, which takes its name from a well-known Chinese action movie, is distinguished by a more combative and aggressive attitude to foreign relations. Chinese diplomats have been speaking more aggressively; they are openly criticizing other countries and vehemently supporting China's interests (Schafer & Brandt, 2020)—many of which are at odds with China's more circumspect past foreign policy. The way China's diplomatic approach has changed over time has brought up significant issues regarding the goals and underlying motives of its involvement in South Asia.

The paper's main research question, subsequently, is on this apparent change in China's foreign policy: Does Beijing's involvement in South Asia represent a new phase of assertiveness, epitomized by *Wolf Warrior diplomacy*, or is it just another chapter of its long-standing diplomatic strategy? Determining the answer to this is essential for understanding China's place in South Asia and foreseeing the wider effects of its foreign policy in the context of the balance of power in the region. China's foreign policy faces a distinct and demanding environment in South Asia. A complicated web of past conflict, economic inequality, and geopolitical rivalries define the region. India offers an effective counterpoint to China's aspirations due to its strategic cooperation with the United States and its historical dominance in the area. In the meantime, smaller nations like Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives must strike a careful balance between interacting with China and preserving their sovereignty in the face of pressure from the neighborhood.

The nature of China's engagement—whether cooperative or confrontational—will influence not only its bilateral relations with South Asian countries but also the region's stability and its alignment within the broader international system.

Building the Theoretical Framework

Given the complex nature of the China's engagement in the south Asia a *hybrid theoretical framework* is charted to carry out the study. A hybrid theoretical framework that consists of the integrations of concepts burrowed from the soft power² and Power Transition Theory³. Power transition theory provide an understanding of how the rising powers such as the China interact with its neighbors and the established powers and predicts that the rising power may use certain assertive postures. Meanwhile Joseph Nye concept of Soft Power focusses on the use of no-coercive measures.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach (Secondary sources, government documents and statements) and focuses on an in-depth analysis of China's diplomatic engagement in South Asia. The methodology considers the viewer's perspective '*eye of the beholder*' and emphasizes understanding how different stakeholders such as China, South Asian countries and global powers such as the United States perceive and interpret China's actions. Incorporating the entire idea into

²Joseph Nye-the ability to co-opt rather than coerce.

³Power transition focuses on differential growth rates and their effect on altering relative power between nations. First enumerated in the concept of "Abramo Fimo Kenneth Organski".

the concept of various case studies. Furthermore, data collection methods involve limited discourse analysis under the eyes of the observer. It is important to note that the language and rhetoric that Chinese diplomats and officials use as part of the underlying strategies and ideologies are crucial to China's overall engagement in the region, which needs to be uncovered.

Conceptualizing *Wolf Warrior* Diplomacy, Diplomatic Investments and Cooperation *vis-à-vis* South Asia

Charting the origin and definitive ground for 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy'

The term "*Wolf Warrior diplomacy*," which has gained popularity recently, is a new approach to Chinese diplomacy that is characterized by a more assertive and occasionally confrontational posture in foreign affairs. The popular Chinese action film "*Wolf Warrior*" (Huang, 2021) which shows a loyal Chinese soldier valiantly defending his country's honor against foreign opponents, is the source of the word. China's diplomatic strategy has changed from being more restrained and cautious to being more brazen and confrontational, as evidenced by the metaphor of the "*wolf warrior*".

Wolf Warrior diplomacy can be linked back to greater geopolitical and domestic shifts in China under Xi Jinping's leadership. Xi's rise to power signaled a fundamental shift in China's foreign policy, with a more forceful and patriotic attitude. This shift is in part a response to perceived foreign threats and criticisms, but it also reflects China's rising confidence on the world arena. Under Xi's leadership, the Chinese government has worked to reframe its worldwide image, portraying itself as a rising power unwilling to accept perceived slights or challenges to its sovereignty and national interests.

Characteristics of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and the notion of Xi's⁴ blend

Wolf Warrior diplomacy has numerous distinguishing elements that set it apart from China's traditional diplomatic approaches. First and foremost, it is assertive. Under this new approach, Chinese diplomats are more inclined to take a firm, and sometimes confrontational, attitude in defending China's interests. This aggressiveness presents itself in a variety of ways, including the use of forceful language, public condemnations of other countries' policies, and a general refusal to back down during international criticism. Another defining feature of Wolf Warrior diplomacy is the use of public forums, particularly social media (see appendix), to communicate directly with foreign governments and global audiences. Chinese diplomats, such as Zhao Lijian, have become notorious for their aggressive Twitter posts, in which they publicly criticize foreign policies and defend China's activities with unusual vehemence. This strategy differs from China's typical discreet and behind-the-scenes diplomacy (see appendix). This trend is obvious in China's disputes with nations such as Australia, Canada, and India, where diplomatic tensions have risen dramatically because of China's strong measures. Worth mentioning is during the wave of corona virus.

The rise of Wolf Warrior diplomacy is intimately linked to Xi Jinping's leadership and vision for China's position within the world. Xi has emphasized the importance of China taking a more proactive approach to preserving its national interests and encouraged Chinese officials to be more confident and assertive in foreign affairs. This move is motivated in part by Xi's aim to strengthen China's reputation as a global power while also resisting what he sees as unjust criticism or containment measures by Western states. Under Xi, nationalistic pride in China has increased,

⁴Xi Jinping, China's Communist party leader/Premier China.

fueling the adoption of a more assertive foreign policy. The Chinese leadership has increasingly relied on nationalist rhetoric to mobilize internal support and explain its strong approach to international affairs. This, combined with China's expanding economic and military capabilities, has encouraged Chinese diplomats to be in hand with Wolf Warrior diplomacy.

Investments and Cooperation A China's traditional approach towards diplomacy

China's traditional approach to foreign relations, that has always prioritized economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, and infrastructure development, stands in stark contrast to Wolf Warrior diplomacy. Historically, China's foreign policy has emphasized noninterference, mutual respect, and win-win collaboration. These concepts were intended to foster long-term relationships based on trust and mutual economic interests, rather than compulsion or confrontation. One of the most important parts of this traditional approach is economic engagements. China has used its economic resources to strengthen ties with governments all over the world, particularly in developing regions. This has been achieved through infrastructure expenditures, trade agreements, and development assistance. Cultural diplomacy has also played an important role, with China constructing Confucius Institutes⁵ worldwide to promote Chinese culture and language, boosting goodwill and soft power.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most notable illustration of China's diplomatic investments and cooperation strategy. The BRI was launched in 2013 (China's Belt and Road Initiative Turns 10. Here's What to Know, 2023), the same year Xi's assuming the leadership, and is marked with a massive infrastructure and investment initiative to improve connectivity and economic integration across Asia, Europe, and Africa. China has committed billions of dollars in the BRI to create roads, trains, ports, and other important infrastructure in nations crucial to its strategic interests, including several in South Asia. The BRI embodies China's conventional diplomatic policy, emphasizing economic development to create international collaboration and long-term ties. It demonstrates China's goal for expanding its influence through economic instruments rather than military force or coercion. The effort is frequently portrayed in terms of mutual benefit, with China presenting itself as a development partner rather than a hegemonic state.

The contrasting nature of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy with Traditional Approaches

Although both Wolf Warrior diplomacy and China's traditional diplomatic procedures share the goal of promoting China's interests, they employ distinct approaches to achieve this objective. The normal or the traditional strategy, as demonstrated by the BRI, depends on establishing economic connections and promoting positive sentiments through collaboration and progress. This approach is typically more complex and enduring, aiming to establish interdependencies and alliances through economic mechanisms and other softer means rather than coercion. On the other hand, Wolf Warrior diplomacy is characterized by a more straightforward and forceful approach, prioritizing swift reactions to perceived obstacles or threats. Wolf Warrior diplomacy, unlike traditional diplomacy, takes place in the public sphere rather than behind closed doors. Its main objectives are to mobilize nationalist feelings and showcase China's worldwide power. In most cases, as it would be vivid in further study, is the case that China sometimes employs a dual strategy that enables it to adjust its diplomatic approach according to the situation. It utilizes economic collaboration in situations where it is most impactful but employs more forceful methods

⁵Public educational and cultural promotion programs funded and arranged currently by the Chinese International Education Foundation.

when it encounters opposition or criticism. Ultimately, the simultaneous presence of these two strategies - one focused on collaboration and economic interests, the other characterized by assertiveness and confrontation - illustrates the complex makeup of China's interactions with the global community and the South Asia. Gaining understanding of the specific circumstances and motivations that lead China to adopt certain strategies instead of others is essential for grasping its overall foreign policy goals and its changing position in the region.

Case studies to understand Chinese engagement in South Asia vis-à-vis regional responses China's engagement with India: it is hybrid one?

“We are two great countries that are developing greater cooperation [...] I hope that during this visit, we will be able to open a new page in the history of our relations,” said Narendra Modi during his informal visit to Wuhan meeting with Xi Jinping on April 27, 2018 (Xinhua News Agency, 2018). This signifies that occasionally, if both countries, due to the strategic environment and interests in the South Asian region, deviate from the very notion of cooperation, they tend to cooperate internationally on many occasions. Such as on the multilateral front-Doha Round of trade talks (Ghosh, 2018), international platforms such as BRICS (Denisov et al., 2019), meeting on the sidelines of G20 and SCO summits, collaborating in BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China), coinciding position on climate change, energy, and food security, cooperation within the Copenhagen and Paris climate change formats. However, this does not mean that they act cooperatively and interactively within the structure of the South Asian region. Their relations are not devoid of the touch of competition and rivalry. This is why, on many occasions, a more aggressive stance has been used.

Historically, confrontation has been chiefly seen as associated with territorial claims. These claims centered around the disputed territory of Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin⁶. Only showing to resolve the issue on the official level, and the Border Defense Cooperation agreement in 2013 still saw the version of aggressive postures during the events of the Doklam plateau in 2017 (Chengappa, 2017), which blew the agreement with continued harsh talks. The Chinese approach of a wolf warrior is most evident here. India has always considered Chinese influence in the South Asian region and is very skeptical of its involvement in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which India regards in its sphere of interests (Mukherjee, 2017). Furthermore, the Galwan Valley clash in 2020⁷, which resulted in casualties on both sides, epitomizes the volatile nature of their relationship. This incident, and others like it, such as the Ardagh–Johnson Line, The Macartney-Macdonald Line, The McMahon Line, Pangong Tso, Kugrang Valley, Depsang Bulge area, Gurung Hill and Requin-La all highlights the assertive and wolf warrior dimension of China's engaging toward India, where Beijing has not hesitated to use military power or showcased diplomatic confrontations to assert its territorial claims (Tellis, 2020; Kantik, 2020). Such a military standoff, followed by aggressive diplomatic statements, underscores China's willingness to engage in brinkmanship, even at the risk of escalating tensions with a regional power like India. Furthermore, the persistent tensions in the China-India-Pakistan triangle further complicate bilateral relations between China and India. Pakistan is seen as a "hotbed" of terrorist threats by India; its nuclear development and continued support from China in the spheres of cooperation further exacerbate the situation.

⁶Aksai Chin, with no economic benefit, is a set of glaciers having strategic geo-political importance.

⁷BBC, India-China dispute: The border row explained in 400 words, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53062484>

However, there is still this notion of trade⁸ (Economics could act as a buffer to conflict despite these strategic tensions). China and India maintain a substantial economic relationship. China is one of India's largest trading partners, with significant investments in various sectors, including technology, infrastructure, and manufacturing) and joint military exercises⁹, which makes the engagement multifaceted and blends traditional diplomacy with assertive "Wolf Warrior" tactics. In such cases, China has engaged in diplomatic negotiations (Zhou, 2024; Qi, 2024), reflecting a traditional approach to managing tensions and preventing conflicts from escalating. This diplomatic engagement showcases China's strategic flexibility, where military pressure is complemented by ongoing dialogue to influence outcomes without prolonged conflict. However, these had been candid.

Engaging Pakistan: an all-weather relation?

The engagement is often described as an "all-weather friendship" (Mehmood: 2015) and is a cornerstone of China's South Asia strategy, as it seeks to counterbalance India's influence. China's engagement with Pakistan for decades has been resilient, although marked by certain transformations and shifts (Faisal, 2020), and further with the mutual trust and the convergence of interests. It is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that initiated the commencement of strategic coordination in relations. Being a focus of scholarly debates, the engagement with the countries is seen multifocally. Small (2015) is a strategic partnership expanding on economic grounds with goals to influence the emerging geo-political environment; Khan and Kasi (2017), a bilateral relationship focusing on security domains and economics since 2000. According to Hussain (2017), relations have deepened and caught in the vortex of conflictual regional dynamics. This makes the partnership between China and Pakistan strategically and economically important, as had once observed by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, '*the Chinese and Pakistani people's friendship began with the advent of mankind*' (Javed, 2020). However, the engagement seems to incorporate traditional diplomatic practices vis-à-vis cooperation predominantly. It has some deep-rooted assertiveness that may be understood, such as the extensive critique over spheres such as India labeling the assistance and aid as a debt trap (Chan, 2020). Furthermore, Haqqani and Ahmed (2022) termed the cooperation folly of Pakistan's China gamble. The fact is if there is an assertive, it is not the overt "Wolf Warrior" tactics being utilized by China with other countries.

Taking the course from CPEC, under the framework of the project, guides cooperation in the energy sector; local firms have built collaboration with China's SOEs¹⁰ for building power plants in Pakistan. This gives access to capital resources that were not available before and created Chinese investors' willingness to invest in Pakistan despite sustainability and political concerns. Projects not prioritized before are now enlisted for implementation (Safdar, 2021). Beyond the CPEC, other aspects have also gained a new set of meanings in Sino-Pak engagements. These include coordination of geostrategic issues, military and defense cooperation (Wezeman et al., 2018), security engagements, and science and technology cooperation. The region's strategic environment (US-India) is making them cooperate, negating the *wolf warrior* assertive approach and accepting the more traditional idea of cooperation.

⁸China's Exports to India were US\$117.68 Billion in 2023, according to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade. tradingeconomics.com

⁹Hand-in-Hand is an annual exercise in India's and China's military diplomacy and interaction. The simulation involves tactical activities in a UN-mandated worldwide counterinsurgency/counterterrorism scenario.

¹⁰State Owned Enterprises.

Although strategic, security, and economic factors primarily drive the Sino-Pakistani relationship, cultural diplomacy also holds considerable importance. China has strategically allocated resources to build cultural connections with Pakistan (Safdar, 2021) using educational exchanges, ‘a primary tool of the engagement’, cultural programs that include learning the Chinese language, and media collaboration such as partnering with struggling media outlets and forging direct ties with the journalists to support its influence at the local level.

Other smaller states: Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives

China's engagement with smaller South Asian states such as Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives reflects a strategic approach that combines elements of both traditional diplomacy and assertive tactics. While these countries are not as strategically important as India or Pakistan, they play a crucial role in China's broader regional ambitions, particularly in balancing India's influence and securing its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region.

Nepal: Predominantly Traditional with Strategic Calculations

Nepal, a landlocked country, has increasingly turned to China as a counterweight to India's influence (territorial dispute over the Kalapani territory), particularly after the 2015 earthquake¹¹ (with China also rushing for influence¹²) and subsequent Indian blockade (Karki, 2022) that strained India-Nepal relations. Also, this territory is of immense importance for India and a priority goal in Modi's foreign policy. Committed to the one-China policy and not allowing its soil against China, the relations between China and Nepal are deep-rooted and age-old (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal, 2019) with frequent bilateral visits, economic cooperation, and assistance, tourism¹³, education¹⁴ and cultural cooperation (Embassy of Nepal in Beijing, 2022). Cooperation in such a manner has deepened significantly over the past decade. This also makes it a fact that China's strategy in Nepal is predominantly traditional and marked with cooperation, emphasizing economic cooperation and development assistance. China has invested heavily in Nepal's infrastructure (many completed projects and others are underway), including roads, hydroelectric projects, and the ambitious Trans-Himalayan Railway project designed to connect China and Nepal via Tibet. Such engagements via investments are part of China's broader strategy for integrating Nepal into the BRI framework, improving connectivity, and creating dependencies to strengthen China's influence. A limited and subtle element of assertiveness, particularly in how it uses economic investments, influences Nepal's foreign policy decisions. For example, in the mistreatment of Tibetans in Nepal¹⁵, China has ensured that Nepal adheres to the one-China policy and does not allow Tibetan refugees to engage in anti-China political activities. A reflection of more strategic use of economic diplomacy, where China's investments are not only for mutual benefit but for strategic interests, too.

¹¹Biswas, Soutik. (2015). *Nepal earthquake: How India and China vie for influence*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-32492273>.

¹²Rauhala, Rauhala. (2015). *China Rushes Aid to Nepal After Deadly Earthquake; Taiwan Is Turned Away*. Times.

¹³Chinese language training for 200 tourism entrepreneurs (40 per year) for five years. Furthermore, with frequent cross-border tourist visits.

¹⁴MOU signed on Youth exchange-2019.

¹⁵Human rights report. (2014). *Under China's Shadow: Mistreatment of Tibetans in Nepal*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/04/01/under-chinas-shadow/mistreatment-tibetans-nepal>

Bhutan: Cautious Assertiveness

Bhutan, a small Himalayan kingdom, shares a strategically sensitive border with India and China, making it a focus of China's regional strategy. The most significant episode in Sino-Bhutanese relations was the Doklam standoff in 2017, in which Chinese and Indian troops fought over a disputed plateau claimed by Bhutan and China. This incident brought Bhutan into the limelight of the India-China rivalry and highlighted its strategic importance. During the early 2021 Sino-Bhutanese meeting, although there was an air of good relations, there was a deep, simmering border dispute (Pollock, 2021) as Bhutan shares 477 KM of the border with China, considered the most remote and hostile terrain. While the relations, Beijing has become increasingly aggressive in its interactions with Bhutan, laying fresh claim land such as Sakteng, where China is constructing new villages that are on Bhutanese territory such as Pangda (Seidel, 2020) at Doklam or Gyalaphug (Gill, 2021) in Pasamlung. China is reinforcing the border near Doklam with dual-use military hardware and infrastructure. China aims to secure a strategic advantage over India at the expense of Bhutan's territorial integrity. Indeed, some wolf warrior tactics and stances are both cautious and assertive. Despite the standoff in Doklam, China continues to pursue a diplomatic solution with Bhutan and initiate talks to resolve the border issue. This reflects caution and subtle cooperation.

The Maldives: Economic Influence and Strategic Ambitions

In the Maldives, China's engagement is driven by strategic economic investments aimed at securing influence in the Indian Ocean (Rasheed, 2023) and is bringing a due importance of Maldives. The Maldives is playing a pivotal role in China's 'String of Pearls'¹⁶ strategy. The Maldives is strategically located only 700 kilometers from the Lakshadweep archipelago and 1200 kilometers from the Indian mainland. China's growing influence in the Maldives raises significant security concerns given its proximity to India. Infrastructure development, such as the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge¹⁷, is embedded in the traditional narrative of economic cooperation and mutual benefit. As the Maldives will provide China with strategic benefits to secure sea routes and counter India's influence, it sets a vast ambition for China compelling it to deal softly via cooperation, investments and developments. China's approach to the Maldives, particularly under the pro-China government of Mohamed Muizzu, is followed by signing various defense agreements and infrastructure deals with China (Loc, 2024) helping China to complete its larger strategy in region and to isolate India from South Asian nations. Although China's significant loans and investments created economic dependencies that increased its influence, showing a subtle assertiveness but with no deliberate wolf warrior tactics.

Discussion

During this study, it has examined China's engagement in the context of South Asia from a perspective of assertive tactics of *wolf warrior* diplomacy and the traditional cooperative mechanism. Whilst analyzing the study has highlighted context-dependent and nuanced strategies that China has utilized and is currently pursuing the same to advance its geo-political interests.

¹⁶The String of Pearls is a geopolitical hypothesis United States political researchers proposed in 2004. The term refers to the network of Chinese military and commercial facilities and relationships along its sea lines of communication, which extend from the Chinese mainland to Port Sudan in the Horn of Africa.

¹⁷China-Maldives Friendship Bridge - from illustration to reality. <https://edition.mv/news/5342>

Therefore it is noteworthy to mention that China's engagement in the South Asia cannot be clearly classified as a wolf warrior or assertive; Rather it is a hybrid approach that adapts itself to the unique geopolitical realities of each country. China is very good to understand its primary goals and can see a best version of future for the country in its interaction with the players of the region. As the economic investments in China are based on the idea of mutual benefits, they still are strategically aimed at securing influence of China in the South Asia and a good balancing towards India's regional dominance. The dual approach in China foreign policy supports the argument that it is characterized by pragmatic balance between soft power, cooperative mechanism and Realist perspectives,

The border disputes highlight China's willingness to use assertive, even confrontational tactics in maintaining its territorial integrity. However, the extensive trade relations between the two nations reflect China's recognition of the economic benefits that come with a cooperative stance, even amid geopolitical tensions. This dynamic underscores the strategic considerations behind China's dual approach, which combines economic and diplomatic cooperation with military assertiveness. The engagement with smaller states such as Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives further illustrates this hybrid strategy. In Nepal, China's economic diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is mostly traditional but subtly aimed at reducing India's influence in the region. The assertive stance during the Doklam-Bhutan standoff reflects a calculated risk taken by China to expand its strategic presence, which was later offset by diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute. In the Maldives, China's strategic economic investments are embedded in traditional diplomatic rhetoric but are driven by broader ambitions to secure sea routes and counter U.S. and Indian influence in the Indian Ocean.

Implications of the Research

The findings of this study have significant implications for understanding China's evolving foreign policy in South Asia. Theoretically, this research challenges the dichotomy between traditional diplomacy and assertive tactics of the *Wolf Warrior*. Instead, it suggests that China's approach is far more flexible and adaptable, using a combination of soft power, economic investment and strategic assertiveness to achieve its geopolitical goals. This hybrid strategy complicates the theoretical frameworks used to analyze China's foreign policy, particularly those that attempt to categorize its actions as either cooperative or confrontational. Practically, the study highlights how important it is for South Asian countries to recognize the dual nature of Chinese involvement. Countries like Pakistan, which are heavily integrated into China's economic and strategic networks, must journey the complexities of these relationships and balance the benefits of economic cooperation against the potential risks of over-dependence on China. For India, the study highlights the need for a nuanced approach that manages economic interdependence with China while strategically countering its aggressive maneuvers, particularly in border areas.

Conclusion

Overall, China's approach to South Asia is complex and multifaceted, combining aspects of traditional diplomacy with economic cooperation and controlled assertiveness to expand its influence, secure strategic interests and contain regional dominance. Relations with major regional powers are therefore a matter of cooperation and confrontation, which is well demonstrated in the case of a complex relationship, strong economic interdependence and persistent strategic rivalry. The territorial disputes and military conflicts currently taking place, for example in the border areas, reflect only such rivalry: assertive tactics are used to strengthen territorial claims, while at

the same time diplomatic negotiations are carried out to manage and contain potential conflicts. Elsewhere, China's cooperation with the other important ally in the region is characterized by cooperation based on deepening economic relations - not least through extensive infrastructure projects and extensive military cooperation. This is a partnership that forms the basis of China's broader regional strategy, providing a balance of power while acting as a counterweight to other regional influences. China's policy towards the small states in this region is shaped by a specific geopolitical context. For example, in the case of conflict-prone countries, China, while always cautious in its engagement, has examined how best to ensure stability, such as through diplomatic efforts and strategic investments related to its ambitious global infrastructure initiative. Another neighboring country shows an example of more assertive engagement, particularly on issues of border disputes: China does not shy away from asserting its territorial claim but is open to diplomatic negotiations. In other neighboring countries, China is pursuing an economic diplomacy strategy that emphasizes massive infrastructure investments to create deeper bilateral ties and promote economic interdependencies, making these countries more aligned with Beijing's strategic goals. In addition, the Indian Ocean Island states have been subject to Chinese economic influence, which was intended to enable them to remain strategically positioned and provide long-term influence, particularly in maritime regions of strategic importance.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Chinese digital diplomacy news



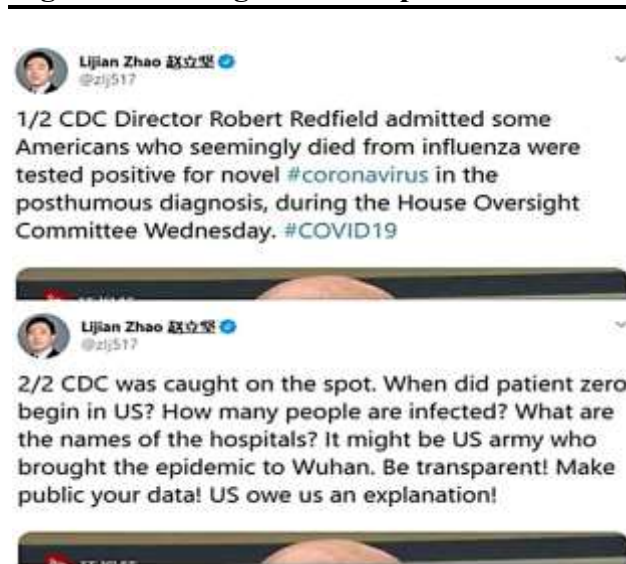
Source: <https://southeastasiacovid.asiasociety.org/chinese-digital-diplomacy-southeast-asia-pandemic/>

Figure 2: Status



Source: X; <https://x.com/mattinglee/status/1376635411972284418>

Figure 3: Tracing China's diplomatic transition



Source: Yuan, Shaoyu. (2023). Tracing China's diplomatic transition to wolf warrior diplomacy and its implications. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*. 10 (837).

Figure 4: China global south



Source:

<https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2020/05/05/meet-lin-jing-chinas-newest-wolf-warrior-in-africa/>

Figure 5: Asiasociety.org news



Source: <https://southeastasiacovid.asiasociety.org/chinese-digital-diplomacy-southeast-asia-pandemic/>
