

【論説／Articles】

## Balancing Acts and Proximity Relations

: Small States' Responses to China-India Hegemonic Competition in South Asia

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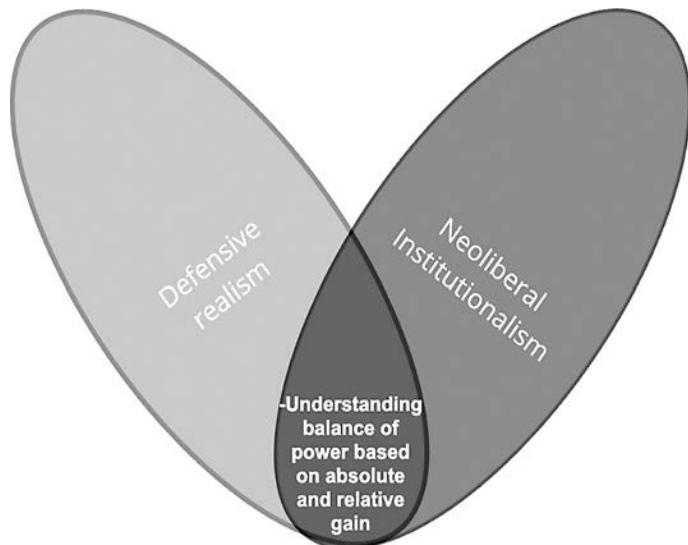
### Introduction

The ascent of China as a global power has emerged as a focal point in international politics, captivating scholarly attention, particularly within the realms of neorealism. Numerous academic discourses have delved into the implications of China's rise, with a predominant focus on its competition with the United States, the world's foremost power. However, amidst this discourse, there exists a critical gap in understanding the intricate relationships between China and other significant powers, especially in regions beyond the Sino-American rivalry.

This academic study endeavors to address this void by scrutinizing the nuanced interactions between China and other allied great powers, specifically within the context of South Asia. The region, characterized by its geopolitical significance and the historical status quo maintained by India, stands as a crucible where the unfolding dynamics of global power play manifest uniquely. As China extends its influence globally, its heightened engagement in South Asia, owing to geographical proximity, necessitates a comprehensive examination of the region's structural dynamics.

Drawing inspiration from Mearsheimer's regional structural analyses in

Figure 1: Integrative approach of defensive approach and neoliberal institutionalism



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Europe and Northeast Asia, this study discerns South Asia as a region devoid of an absolute hegemon, thereby setting the stage for both India and China to vie for dominance. While Mearsheimer alluded to China's intentions in Northeast Asia, This study contends, based on China's strategic engagements with regional states, that China harbors significant aspirations to establish hegemony in South Asia.

In light of historical precedents, the United States, along with its allies, has traditionally pursued an offshore balancing strategy, a trend persisting since the Cold War era. This strategy, marked by a deliberate delegation of responsibility to great powers to counterbalance emerging threats, is expected to be evident in Asia, particularly in South Asia, against the backdrop of China's ascendance. Remarkably, India emerges as a distinctive

player, autonomous from the United States, thereby positioning itself as an ideal partner for the U.S. strategy of buck-passing against China.

This study contends that South Asia, despite lacking a clear regional power, is witnessing active and purposeful engagements from both China and India, both vying for hegemonic status. To navigate the complex web of South Asian politics involving diverse actors, this paper adopts an analytical tool that amalgamates neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. This integrative approach explores the dynamics of hegemonic competition between large nations, emphasizing the role of defensive realism while also examining cooperative arrangements and political proximity between small and large countries through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism. By incorporating small nations into the hegemonic struggle, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the evolving geopolitical landscape in South Asia.

## **Power Balance Under Hegemonic Struggle**

### **1.**

The realist perspective asserts that the pursuit of power lies at the core of states' objectives, akin to an inherent characteristic of human nature. Within this framework, great powers strategically position themselves to attain power, a crucial means to secure international interests such as safeguarding their survival in the tumultuous global system (Rosenau, 1969). The dichotomy of neorealism, represented by defensive and offensive trends, further scrutinizes the behavior of great powers, each driven by a distinct approach to augmenting their perceived power.

Defensive realism, as articulated by scholars like Gilpin (1981), prioritizes the preservation of the status quo among great powers through the balance of

power. Conversely, offensive realism, as advocated by Mearsheimer (2001), underscores the imperative of power escalation to fortify the security of great states. Despite their differences, both trends converge on the significance of relative gain, especially in an anarchic global setting where small countries grapple with the constant fear of deception and threats during interactions with their larger counterparts.

The realist tradition's historical emphasis on relative gain has, however, marginalized the role of small countries, whose material power is often limited. Yet, other theoretical traditions contend that small countries possess alternative forms of power that enable them to play significant roles in the international system (Rothstein, 1968). While defensive and offensive neorealism discount the influence of international institutions, democratic values, and interdependence on state behavior, they acknowledge the impact of states' traditions, culture, history, and religion.

In dissecting the external behaviors of states, this study directs its focus toward defensive realism. This choice stems from the framework's aptitude for analyzing the dynamics of power distribution and the significance of cooperation, especially relevant in South Asia (Kang, 2007). Conversely, offensive realism, although adept at explaining power and hegemony pursuits, might not comprehensively encapsulate the diverse drivers of state behavior (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Defensive realism's emphasis on the role of small states in balancing against larger powers aligns with the complexities of South Asia, a region devoid of a clear potential hegemon (Walt, 1987). Small states in this context prioritize security maintenance and resist the dominance of any single state. India, for instance, seeks strategic partnerships with regional states to counterbalance China's ascendancy (Larson, 2019), while China endeavors to engage smaller South Asian countries to curb India's influence

(Shahiduzzaman and Islam, 2020).

This study contends that defensive realism offers a nuanced understanding of the balance of power dynamics in South Asia compared to offensive realism. While the initial analysis identifies a hegemonic struggle between China and India, subsequent exploration reveals that smaller South Asian countries engage strategically with both powers, culminating in a burgeoning balance of power in the region. Therefore, this study posits that amidst the hegemonic struggle, a delicate power balance is emerging in South Asia.

## 2.

The ascent of China presents a formidable challenge to the existing status quo, sparking scholarly debates on whether China can peacefully reshape the regional order or if conflict is inevitable. This paper delves into various theoretical frameworks, including power transition theory, balance of power theory, hegemonic stability theory, and offensive realism, to scrutinize the likelihood of an unavoidable conflict.

According to the balance of power theory, war seldom ensues among great powers due to their endeavors to maintain stability through the alignment and realignment of power. Waltz contends that, in a bipolar system, great powers ensure peace by balancing power, minimizing miscalculation, and diminishing the chances of war, with the emphasis on preserving the status quo rather than maximizing power (Waltz, 1979).

Mearsheimer argues that the breakdown of a bipolar system may lead to war, underscoring the role of military power distribution in shaping peace or conflict. The primary sources of war are identified as competition for power and security dilemmas among great powers, which may either dominate or resist domination within a region (Mearsheimer, 2001). Power transition theory introduces the notion of a rising power becoming dissatisfied with

the existing order, potentially leading to war against the dominant hegemon (Organski, 1958). Other factors, such as power parity and the willingness to challenge the dominant power, further influence the probability of war (Werner & Kugler, 1996).

While the above discussion primarily follows a one-way causal factor, attributing the outcomes of world politics to the international system, this aligns with Mearsheimer's perspective, emphasizing the influence of the anarchical international system on states' behavior (Mearsheimer, 2001). Nonetheless, defensive realist Waltz introduces a two-way causal approach, considering interactions between units (individuals, states) and the international structure (Waltz, 1990). This study contends that understanding the balance of power in South Asia, lacking an official hegemonic actor state, requires a defensive realist approach.

In the absence of an absolute hegemon in South Asia, this study underscores the active roles played by great powers, China and India, seemingly competing to become regional hegemons. The analysis draws from the structural perspective of offensive realism, where great powers' competition is justified as a means of ensuring survival within the international system. The study contends that a balance of power can be formed even without an absolute hegemon, and the pursuit of hegemony remains a significant incentive for great powers.

The involvement of small countries in the hegemonic struggle adds complexity to the balance of power dynamics. Small countries are often perceived as neutral, yet this study explores the incentives that drive them to engage in the balance of power game with great powers. Two perspectives are identified: economic benefits and security assistance offered by great powers, and the impact on small countries' domestic politics, where aligning with a great power aids in maintaining ruling power.

Neoliberal institutionalism, akin to balance of power theory, concerns itself with power balance under hegemonic struggle, emphasizing the importance of absolute gain in maximizing benefits for states (Larson, 2019). Institutions can regulate behavior to mitigate conflict potential and ensure mutual gains, but the study argues that South Asia has failed to establish effective institutions for this purpose. Defensive realism emphasizes maximizing security in the face of potential threats, acknowledging that states may cooperate but ultimately prioritize security over mutual gains (Kang, 2007).

In conclusion, the concept of absolute gain is pivotal for understanding potential cooperation under a hegemonic struggle and power balance in South Asia. The study utilizes neoliberal institutionalism to analyze power balance dynamics, incorporating small countries into the hegemonic struggle between China and India. The focus is on maximizing security for all parties involved, providing insights into power relations and their impact on the region.

## **Conventional Debates on Cooperation and Conflict in Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism**

This study poses the inquiry of whether anarchy leads to cooperation, conflict, or a combination of both. To seek possible answers, it delves into how neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism address issues of cooperation and conflict. Ultimately, the study aims to integrate these concepts with the structure of South Asia and assess whether both theories sufficiently explain politics in the region. Both theories concur that anarchy is a constant in international politics (Mearsheimer, 2001; Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Milner, 1991). Neorealism asserts that conflict is inherent, and optimistic cooperation between states is rare, with pessimistic cooperation considered

nonexistent. Waltz contends that when states contemplate cooperation, they face constraints from international politics in two ways. First, there are uncertainties about potential gains and how they will be divided, questioning who stands to gain more. Second, states fear dependence on others for survival, leading to a preference for conflict over cooperation (Waltz, 1979). Neorealism argues that conflict is more prevalent in anarchic structures. Consequently, this study aims to discuss anarchic relations in two steps: first, by exploring theoretical discourse on anarchy and its logical contributions to cooperation and conflict according to neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism; and second, by determining the most suitable approach to explaining South Asia.

Kenneth Waltz, a key figure in defensive realism, derived his assumptions from two sources: Imre Lakatos' model theory of construction and microeconomic theory. The first two assumptions were drawn from the former, and the latter three from the latter source (Reus-smit, 2005).

1. The international system is anarchical, lacking a central authority.
2. States' primary intention in the international system is survival, necessitating the maximization of power for security.
3. Political actors, including individuals and states, are atomistic, self-interested, and rational.
4. Actors' interests are considered exogenous to social interaction, and social relations are not a significant determinant of interests.
5. Society is viewed as a strategic realm where actors come together to pursue predefined interests. Actors are perceived as atomistic rational beings forming social relations to maximize their interests.

John Mearsheimer, a prominent offensive realist, presented five assumptions to comprehend the structure of international politics (Mearsheimer, 2001).

1. The international system is anarchic, signifying the absence of a higher authority over governments.
2. Great powers inherently possess some offensive military power.
3. States lack certainty about the intentions and usage of other states' offensive military capabilities.
4. Ensuring survival is the primary goal of great powers, emphasizing security as their utmost priority. Power maximization is the sole means to ensure security and survival, making states perpetual power maximizers.
5. As rational actors, great powers are aware of how to strategically act for survival in the external environment.

Mearsheimer's subsequent addition is that survival is a principal objective and a common motive for all states, providing a strong incentive for great powers to engage in offensive behavior. He identifies three patterns of behavior: fear, self-help, and power maximization (Ibid., 2001). Both neorealists concur on the anarchic structure of international polities and agree that anarchy compels states to possess military powers for survival. However, they differ on the types of military power needed—defensive or offensive. Waltz posits that states seek defensive capability to secure their position in the hierarchy, making security their primary goal (Waltz, 1979). Conversely, Mearsheimer prioritizes maximizing offensive power for survival. Similar to Waltz, Mearsheimer acknowledges the zero-sum nature of power and recognizes the zero-sum mentality among great powers, wherein one's gain is perceived as another's loss (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Both neorealists coincide on the difficulty of cooperation among states due to their zero-sum mentality. Waltz argues that the anarchic structure of international politics restricts cooperation in two ways: concerns about gain distribution that may benefit others and the risk of becoming dependent on

others through cooperative endeavors and exchanges of goods and services (Waltz, 1979). Mearsheimer contends that two factors impede cooperation: states always consider relative gain, and there is a constant awareness of the potential for cheating. Despite acknowledging the possibility of cooperation, both neorealists maintain that it is challenging to achieve and sustain (Mearsheimer, 2001).

It is noteworthy that both neorealist approaches focus on great powers. Since great powers prioritize relative gains over absolute gains, cooperation becomes more challenging. However, the logic of balance of power allows great powers to form alliances and cooperate against common enemies, as seen in the case of the South Asian region. The USA, India, Australia, and Japan have formed the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to collaborate more effectively in addressing the rise of China. Consequently, it can be inferred that neorealism, in concentrating on the dynamics of great powers, may have overlooked the broader world of smaller countries and their actions within the anarchic world structure.

Robert Keohane also adopted the Lakatosian model to formulate neoliberal theory, accepting three elements from neorealism: international anarchy shaping state behavior, the state as the paramount actor in world politics, and the assumption of states as inherently self-interested (Reus-smit, 2005). Despite sharing common factors, neoliberalism diverges from neorealism's conclusion that anarchy restricts opportunities for cooperation. Instead, neoliberalism perceives the potential for viable cooperation under constant anarchy, in contrast to neorealists who argue for cooperation under hegemony against a common enemy. Neoliberal institutionalism contends that while cooperation is possible under anarchy, additional factors create opportunities for cooperation in international relations and expedite the process. Cooperation flourishes when states encounter each other with

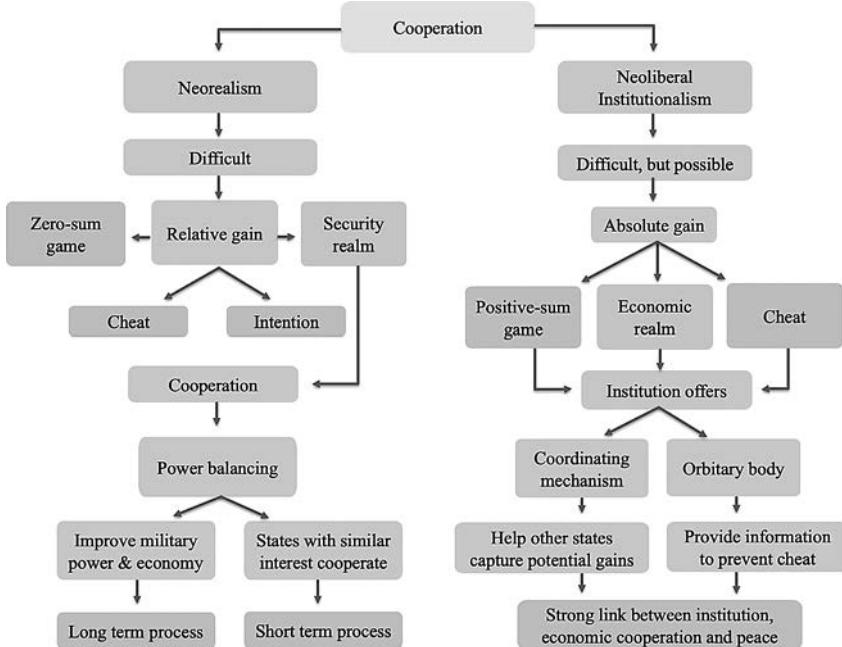
common or mutual interests, even when interactions among states are minimal. Neoliberal institutionalism acknowledges concerns about cheating despite common interests but proposes a solution through international institutions. These institutions function as a central authority to escalate the cost of cheating, minimize transaction costs, and enhance information (Keohane, 1984).

In this regard, institutions are regarded as coordinating mechanisms to facilitate gains for states from cooperation and as impartial bodies providing information to prevent states from cheating (Keohane & Martin, 1995; Kay, 2011). However, neorealism criticizes the limited influence of institutions on states and perceives minimal opportunities for stability. Additionally, neorealism emphasizes concerns about relative gains, whereas neoliberalism focuses on absolute gains. Keohane posits that in cooperation, a state seeks to increase its absolute gains, considering its own preferences for its own welfare rather than others' (Keohane, 1984).

This study resolves the debates over absolute and relative gains by acknowledging that one perspective subscribes to a strictly competitive mindset, suggesting that states are indifferent to whether they obtain any gains or not. On the contrary, the study recognizes another theoretical approach that is more generous in mindset. According to this approach, if gains are available in the interaction, a state is inclined to participate, even if others achieve more gains than itself. Both perspectives, while carrying extreme and one-sided views, are not common in real-world political exercises. In practical interactions among states, rational behavior prevails, guided by their relationships with stakeholders.

The motivations of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism differ, with neorealism emphasizing independence and neoliberal institutionalism emphasizing interdependence (Grieco, 1988). This study explores the

Figure 2: Cooperation debate between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism



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potential collaboration between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism, specifically examining how neoliberal institutionalism, with its focus on absolute gains, aligns with the balance of power. The analysis also delves into why both relative and absolute gains can contribute to hegemonic struggles and power balances.

In his paper, Snidal notes that states are concerned with both absolute and relative gains (Snidal, 1991). He contests the realist assertion that relative gains limit international cooperation, arguing that such limitations are primarily found in bipolar cases characterized by competition and rivalry (Ibid., 1991). This study challenges the notion that absolute gains will never

result in a zero-sum game, positing that they can coexist with positive-sum games. Snidal further contends that a decline in relative dominance, whether due to an increased focus on absolute gains or other factors, heightens the hegemonic state's attention on relative gains, particularly concerning a rising challenger (*Ibid.*, 1991).

In simpler terms, when countries cooperate primarily for absolute gains, a third party may become more aware of their relative gains, potentially leading to competition for hegemony or a balance of power struggle. This argument is particularly relevant to case studies involving small countries collaborating with a larger country based on an absolute gain perspective. The study examines how the larger country's peer competitor perceives and responds to such collaborations. It suggests that the rival peer competitor is likely to view the situation through the lens of absolute gain relative to its own position, often resulting in a zero-sum game that contributes to hegemonic competition and power balance dynamics in a region.

Powell supports a similar concept, describing how a state seeks to maximize its economic well-being through absolute gain while considering constraints, and how these constraints can transform absolute gain into relative gain, influencing future outcomes for different states (Powell, 1991). A state may express concerns about its primacy or hegemonic role without necessarily focusing on relative gains or anticipating a great power war. Jervis adds that a state might worry about the faster growth rate of other states (even if based on absolute gains), posing a future risk to its primacy or hegemonic position (Jervis, 1993).

Nevertheless, neorealism primarily observed the behaviors of great powers, identifying a competitive nature rooted in relative motives. This study posits that competition among or between great powers persists unless a common enemy emerges. Historical examples include great powers forming alliances

to defeat common foes during the First and Second World Wars. The theory acknowledges that its approach tends to have a one-sided and overly focused perspective on great powers and their competition. Consequently, it fails to recognize or overlooks potential cooperative frameworks between great powers involving harmless competition or non-competitive relationships with smaller countries. This study categorizes four types of relationships among states.

Type One: Relationships between harmless great powers based on absolute gain

Type Two: Relationships between competitive great powers based on relative gain

Type Three: Relationships between a small country and an unfriendly/angry great country

Type Four: Relationships between a small country and a friendly/harmless great country based on absolute gain

These relationship divisions aid in understanding situations where states are competitive in terms of relative gain. Conversely, it highlights relationships that prioritize absolute gain, fostering cooperation under anarchic conditions. This study assumes that cooperation is often more seamless in type one and four relationships, where the sense of relative gain is less pronounced. In contrast, type two relationships lack generous cooperation due to the strong emphasis on relative gain. The outcomes of type three relationships are uncertain, as small countries, apprehensive in such situations, may be compelled to interact and cooperate with unfriendly or angry great countries or collaborate with other major powers for hedging. Small countries typically seek a secure zone to avoid the wrath of a larger country unless they have a reliable shelter. While this study does not dismiss the neoliberal idea of minimizing cheating through institutions, it

emphasizes that institutions are not the sole mechanism to address this issue. Sometimes, a regional hegemon might step in to minimize cheating, aiming to uphold its dominant position in the structure. Numerous regions, like South Asia, witness cooperation without strong and effective institutions. This study assumes that in regions where institutions play a limited role, cooperation can still occur under a similar framework.

Given that individual small countries are seemingly non-threatening to great powers, these powerful nations typically do not view them as direct threats. Moreover, a status quo great power may perceive certain other great powers, either in the same region or a different one, as harmless or friendly. Consequently, these two great powers might engage in cooperative endeavors based on absolute gain, falling under the category of 'type one.' This explains why, in many instances, the USA, the UK, France, Australia, and Japan have been observed aligning on the same page regarding international issues. In such situations, states with a friendly understanding do not harbor concerns about relative gains. However, when two great powers vie for hegemony, their interaction may align with the relative gain calculation, resembling 'type two.' In this scenario, the two peer competitors, wary of potential deception and uncertain about each other's intentions, place greater importance on the distribution of gains.

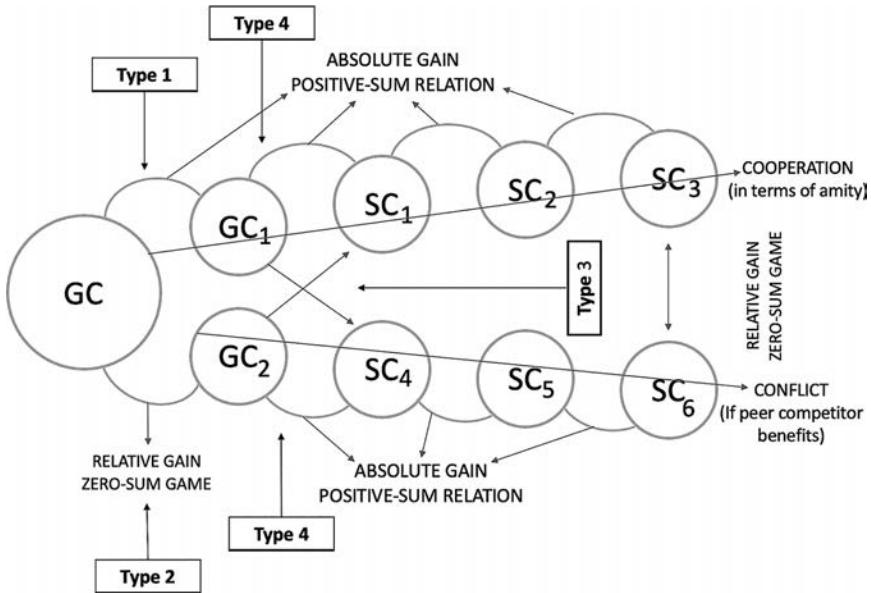
The preceding discussion delves into the dynamics of type one and two relations among great powers concerning amicable and antagonistic interactions. Type three and four relationships come into play when a great power engages with its smaller counterparts. This paper seeks to comprehend situations that have not been extensively explored in neorealist approaches. If a great power perceives a small country as having no significant ties with its peer competitor, their relations are assumed to be positive-sum, driven by the absolute gain stimulus, and fall into the 'type four' category. Conversely,

if the great power calculates that interacting with the small state could benefit its peer competitor, it may approach any interaction with the small state from a relative gain perspective. Consequently, the motive for relative gain may lead the great power to cooperate more with the small country than its peer competitor does, aiming to undermine their relationship instead of taking rigid initiatives. For instance, China's substantial investments in Sri Lanka's infrastructure in recent years, including the construction of a deep-sea port and other major projects, are seen by some analysts as a strategic move to establish a foothold in the Indian Ocean and counter India's influence in the region.

These four relationship types emerge as a consequence of anarchy, signifying the absence of a central authority above states. In this environment, states bear no moral obligation to act ethically, nor do they face punishment for wrongful actions. Consequently, the primary motivation for a state's behavior is to attain gains. Each state possesses the autonomy to determine the nature of gains—whether relative or absolute—it seeks from another country based on their relationships. Anarchy does not constrain the opportunity for cooperation, nor does it mitigate the risk of conflicts. While one could argue that these relationship types are socially constructed ideas, this study contends that they are not mere constructs driven by social perspectives. Unlike socially constructed ideas that can lead to various state behaviors due to divergent interpretations, these relationship types avoid such ambiguity and contribute to a more coherent understanding in the realm of political thought.

This study posits that the proposed framework can effectively elucidate the dynamics of cooperation and conflict among South Asian countries. Some small countries maintain relations with India based on the perception that India is friendly or harmless, facilitating feasible cooperation. The relations

Figure 3: framework of cooperation and conflict



(GC= Great Country, SC= Small Country)

Source: Created by the author

between Pakistan and China or Bhutan and India, for instance, become understandable within this framework. Furthermore, when Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka engage with India from an absolute gain perspective, China tends to view these relations from a relative gain perspective, and vice versa. Consequently, engagement between a large and a small country, driven by considerations of absolute gains, may propel a region into hegemonic competition when viewed from the perspective of a peer competitor. Hence, the majority of small countries in South Asia await offers from larger states, aiming to capitalize on the hegemonic competition between China and India. From the standpoint of larger countries, both China and India vie to establish trustworthy relationships with small South

Asian countries, seeking to shape a regional structure where other small states can follow suit with trust. This framework will be utilized to explore the research question of the study, which investigates “why and how India and China have come to engage in a hegemonic struggle and balance of power strategy in South Asia.” The paper will empirically analyze the reality of hegemonic struggle and balance of power concerning the relationships between major countries (China and India) and the smaller countries of South Asia. Therefore, the study employs neoliberal institutionalism to examine cooperative arrangements and political proximity between small countries and larger counterparts, emphasizing absolute gains. Additionally, it utilizes neorealism to analyze the cooperative dynamics and political proximity between a small and a large country from the perspective of relative gains, considering the larger country’s peer competitor.

## **Hegemonic Competition in South Asia**

### **1. India as a Leading Power in a Rule-Based Regional Order**

India stands as the predominant nation in South Asia, exercising substantial influence in regional politics. Since gaining independence, India has been a crucial ally to Western nations in their endeavors to establish a rule-based international order, emphasizing democratic principles, safeguarding fundamental human rights, and upholding international law. Bolstered by its rapidly growing economy and increasing military strength, India has evolved into a formidable force within the region. Its proactive stance against the expanding Chinese influence underscores India’s determination to assert itself as a dominant regional power, actively competing with and surpassing challengers in the area.

Geographical location, demographic size, economic standing, natural

resources, and military prowess are pivotal factors determining a state's status in global politics. India, encompassing 72% of the land surface in South Asia, holds the position of the largest country in the region. Its geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean has historically positioned India as a vital hub for maritime connections linking West, South, Southeast, and East Asia. Additionally, its land connections to the West, through West and Central Asia, and to the East, via Southeast Asia, are equally significant. Historian F. Braudel aptly notes that India serves as the crossroads of Asia, bridging East and West through both land and maritime routes (Baru, 2020).

In terms of demographic size, India is home to over 77% of the South Asian population. Projections suggest that India is poised to surpass China soon, becoming the most populous country. India's multi-ethnic composition presents both opportunities and challenges. With more than 50% of its population under the age of 25, India boasts a demographic advantage, and by 2030, the dependency ratio is expected to be slightly over 0.4%, a favorable factor (ILO, n.d.).

India's economy stands among the fastest-growing globally. From 1950 to 1980, the Indian economy recorded an average annual growth of 3.5%. This growth accelerated to a compound annual rate of 5.5% between 1980 and 2000, and from 2000 to 2012, India experienced an impressive annual GDP growth of 7.5% (Baru, 2020). In the fiscal year 2021-22, India registered a growth of 8.7%, surpassing the previous year's 6.6% (Mukherjee, 2022). Presently, India holds the position as the fifth-largest economy, boasting a GDP of \$2.623 trillion and a per capita income of \$1850 (India GDP Capita - 2022). Projections indicate that by 2030, India is expected to emerge as the world's second-largest economy after China, based on purchasing power parity, with a GDP of \$46.3 trillion (Baru, 2020).

Endowed with abundant reserves of coal, iron ore, and manganese ore,

essential for economic expansion, India further solidifies its economic potential. As a nuclear power equipped with a formidable conventional military force, India ranks 4th on the Global Firepower Index (GPI) 2022 (Global Firepower Index, 2022). With 1.45 lakh active military personnel and modern military assets, including 564 fighter jets, 37 combat helicopters, and 13 frigate ships (Gatopoulos, 2021), India stands as the fourth most powerful state in Asia (The Times of India, 2021). This collective strength unequivocally supports India's pursuit of regional dominance relative to other nations in the region.

### **The recognition and Support from the USA and Allies to India**

The United States (USA) and its allies not only acknowledge but actively support India's position as a dominant force in the region, contributing to the maintenance of a rule-based regional order. Vincenzo Giummara, leader of the European Union (EU) Parliamentary Delegation to India in 1998, articulated the perspective that India serves as "a factor for the stability and protection of democracies and human rights in the South Asian region." This recognition has prompted the USA to extend substantial support to India's ascendance, particularly gaining momentum after the election of George W. Bush as the President of the USA. The United States has strategically aligned itself with India based on the shared interest of countering the growing influence of China in Asia. While acknowledging India's commitment to an independent foreign policy, the USA anticipated alignment with broader American interests in the Indo-Pacific region (Tellis, 2016).

Despite the historical connection between the United States and Pakistan, which favored Pakistan over India in crucial moments, the dynamics of this relationship have shifted for various reasons. One significant factor is China's extensive presence in Pakistan through initiatives such as the

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, both nations faced challenges related to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Presently, India stands as the principal strategic partner of the USA in Asia, as affirmed by the official website of the U.S. Department of State, which explicitly states that “the United States supports India’s emergence as a leading global power and a vital partner in efforts to safeguard the Indo-Pacific as a region of peace, stability, and growing prosperity” (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). This commitment is evident in India’s active participation in the USA’s “Indo-Pacific Strategy” (IPS), openly addressing China as a threat to U.S. interests in the region. The IPS aims to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific, primarily in response to concerns over China’s contentious claims in the South China Sea. Given China’s strengthened position in the Indian Ocean through the Belt and Road Initiative, India has been recognized as a pivotal obstacle to China’s regional dominance.

In response to the perceived threat from China, the USA has forged several alliances, with India playing a key role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) alongside other U.S. partners. Beyond multilateral discussions, the USA and India engage in bilateral dialogues to enhance their strategic partnership, exemplified by initiatives like “The 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue,” serving as a primary framework for ongoing discussions between the two nations. Furthermore, the USA and its allies support India through trade and investment, the provision of advanced military technology, joint military exercises such as the Malabar military exercise, knowledge partnerships, among other avenues. In a recent bilateral meeting, President Biden expressed a commitment to making the India-USA partnership the “closest on earth” (Seli, 2022a).

### **Increasing Dominance of India in the Region**

Following the Cold War's conclusion, India underwent a transformation from an introspective non-aligned state to a multi-aligned regional power in Asia, underscored by its proactive foreign policy. The trajectory of India's regional dominance is evident in its assertive stance, notably challenging China and its longstanding rival, Pakistan, to safeguard its prevailing regional dominance.

### **Engagement in Direct Military Conflicts**

India has actively participated in numerous military conflicts since gaining independence, strategically positioning itself as a regional power. Significant wars with historical rival Pakistan transpired in 1965 (First Kashmir War), 1971 (Liberation war of Bangladesh), and 1999 (Kargil war) (Tandon, 2021). Beyond major conflicts, both nations have been entangled in border skirmishes and surgical strikes. In the context of China, the Sino-Indian War of 1962 marked a significant military confrontation. Recent instances include small-scale border standoffs, such as the 2020 face-off in the Galwan Valley, where casualties occurred on both sides. These military engagements underscore India's resolve to counter any threats to its regional dominance with robust military responses.

### **India's Doctrines as a Dominant Power**

India has articulated several doctrines to caution other nations about the potential repercussions of challenging its regional dominance. The "Indira Doctrine" advocates for the bilateral resolution of regional issues, discouraging external intervention. It also posits that India views the presence or influence of external powers in the region as detrimental to its interests (Mohan, 2003). Analogous to the "Monroe Doctrine" in the

United States, which warned against European colonization in the Western Hemisphere, India's doctrines assert its regional authority. Additionally, the "Gujral Doctrine" delineates principles for dealing with Pakistan and neighboring countries. As a nuclear power, India adheres to the "Minimum Credible Deterrence" doctrine, incorporating a 'no-first-use policy' with assured second-strike capability. Emphasizing maritime security, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has adopted the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) ideology to foster community development in the Indian Ocean Region (Baru, 2020).

### **Different Policy Measures**

To fortify its regional position amid China's expanding influence, India initiated the "Look East" policy in 1991, fostering economic and geopolitical ties with Southeast Asian nations (Haokip, 2014). The "Neighborhood-First" Policy aims to cultivate amicable relations with neighboring countries in various domains, countering China's growing presence. In the maritime realm, India commits to maintaining a 'Rule-Based Order' (RBO) in the Indo-Pacific, responding to perceived security threats from China's assertive military activities (Business Standard, 2021).

### **Intervention in Domestic Affairs of Small Neighbors**

As a regionally dominant power, India has intervened in the domestic affairs of neighboring nations with the intent of conflict resolution. India played a pivotal role in the 1971 liberation war in Bangladesh, despite it being initially considered a Pakistani internal matter. However, interventions have not always been successful; for example, India's military involvement in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict in 1987 led to unintended consequences, with India losing its trusted status in post-civil war Sri Lanka, subsequently

allowing China to establish influence in the region. The attempted military coup in the Maldives in 1988 further exemplifies India's hegemonic authority.

### **Indian Altruistic Initiatives**

Although India is not actively pursuing hegemony, neorealism posits that a hegemon must make altruistic sacrifices. India has committed substantial financial aid to neighboring countries through Lines of Credit (LOC), increasing from \$3.27 billion in 2014 to \$14.7 billion in 2020 (Seli, 2022b). India's support extends to Sri Lanka during its economic crisis, exemplified by \$1.85 billion provided over ten years through eight LOCs and an additional \$3.8 billion in the current year (Correspondent, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, India assisted Bangladesh and other neighboring countries with medical supplies, masks, sanitizers, and free COVID-19 vaccine doses.

### **Engagement in Multilateralism**

India has emerged as a leader in various regional multilateral forums, underscoring its commitment to multilateralism. The renewed focus on the "Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation" (BIMSTEC) exemplifies India's dedication to multilateral collaboration. Trilateral and quadrilateral initiatives like the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Sub-regional Cooperation further showcase India's leadership capacity in the region.

In summary, the above discussion illuminates India's prominent role as a regional power, particularly in response to the perceived threat from China. India has implemented various countermeasures to address the Chinese influence in the region, positioning itself as a formidable player. The unfolding political competition between India and China, without direct military engagement, adds a layer of complexity to the interconnected and

interdependent global political landscape.

## **2. Chinese Foreign Policy in South Asia**

China has strategically aimed to cultivate a positive international image, aligning with its foreign policy objectives while avoiding the creation of a threatening environment that might instill fear among other nations. The concept of “Economic Prebalancing” has gained prominence, characterizing China’s ascent without direct confrontations with major powers. Positioned between soft and hard balancing, economic prebalancing prioritizes economic development as a means to bolster military capabilities.

This approach is rooted in China’s emphasis on “Comprehensive National Strength,” underscoring the development of diverse national capabilities rather than a singular focus on military prowess. Furthermore, China’s aversion to direct competition with major powers aligns with its principles of “Peaceful Rise” or “Peaceful Development” and the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.” Recognizing that an aggressive stance would hinder relations, China, as articulated by Xi Jinping, commits to deepening ties with neighbors based on principles of amity, sincerity, mutual benefits, and inclusiveness (Grossman, 2020a).

These foreign policy principles manifest in key features of China’s engagement with South Asian countries:

**“India-centric” Strategy:** Beijing’s policy agenda in South Asia is characterized by a strategic focus on military ties with India’s neighbors, particularly shaping relations in consideration of India’s regional influence.

**Territorial Conflict Resolution:** China, while facing territorial conflicts, adheres to a commitment to address disputes according to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, refraining from resorting to force or aggressive measures.

Dominant Ties with Pakistan: The relationship between China and Pakistan holds paramount significance, surpassing all other bilateral relations in South Asia.

Financial Assistance: China consistently provides substantial financial assistance to countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, contributing to infrastructure development and economic projects.

Despite China's success in cultivating a positive image among Bay of Bengal littoral states through economic engagement and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), potential tensions persist. Issues such as border disputes, military base establishment, disregard for democratic values, and engagement with the Taliban could pose challenges to China's recent successes. Additionally, India and other external powers view China's presence in South Asia with skepticism, actively portraying it as a potential threat (Grossman, 2020a).

### **Threat Perception to Each Other**

The preceding discussion highlights India's pivotal role in the established rules-based regional order in South Asia. However, China's increasing engagement with South Asian countries poses a threat to this existing regional order. This paper aims to analyze whether China will smoothly integrate into the current regional order or if it will resort to offensive force to establish a new order in South Asia. Ghazala Jalil argues that China does not harbor expansionist intentions that might lead to a war with the USA block. Instead, China, characterized as a status quo power, is likely to conform to the existing system (Jalil, 2019). Deng Xiaoping's "low profile" foreign policy advocated a non-aggressive stance until the opportune moment, reflecting China's attempt to fit into the prevailing system. However, recent developments, such as the assertive "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy under

President Xi Jinping, suggest a departure from this defensive posture. China's military assertiveness, naval displays in the Western Pacific and the South China Sea, tensions with Australia, increased coast guard patrols, and aggressive actions in regions like the Taiwan strait and Galwan valley indicate a shift towards a more assertive and competitive strategy (Roy, 2022).

Contrary to Jalil's argument, the emerging reality challenges the notion that China's foreign policy is guided by defensive realism. Scholars like Shifrinson contend that China's growing economic might will prompt it to adopt assertive and competitive strategies, potentially disrupting the existing system (Shifrinson, 2020). John Mearsheimer, an offensive realist, argues that security competition and armed conflict between the dominant and rising powers are inevitable, presenting challenges for China's peaceful rise or the establishment of a new system (Mearsheimer, 2010). The paper questions whether China can peacefully reshape the system in South Asia, especially considering India and its allies' determination to maintain the existing order.

This research also explores India's response to the threats posed by China's growing involvement, challenging India's historically prominent role in the region. Three key points are framed: India seeks increased engagement with the USA and its allies, supports South Asian countries in upholding democratic values, and may interfere in the domestic politics of neighboring countries to promote pro-Indian parties. The earlier discussion in this paper underscores that China's economic rise and assertive approach not only threaten the existing system but also weaken Western democratic values. China's actions are perceived as a threat by the ruling authorities, especially as India strengthens its ties with Western allies.

## **Present Balance of Power through Cooperative Arrangements and Proximity Politics Amidst Hegemonic Struggle in South Asia**

China and India are engaged in a hegemonic struggle in South Asia due to their ambitions for regional dominance and the perceived threats they pose to each other's interests, driven by their pursuit of relative gains. India seeks support from the United States and its allies to counter China's rise, while China aims to establish its dominance in the region. India has pursued various policy measures, engaged in military conflicts, and formulated doctrines to maintain its regional dominance. Both China and India aim to increase their power and influence in the region while minimizing the power and influence of their rival. That is how both India and China get engaged in a hegemonic struggle.

From a relative gain perspective based on type two in Figure 3, China's rise as a global power has led to its increasing assertiveness in the region. China seeks to expand its economic and political influence in South Asia through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with investments in infrastructure projects that allow China to gain access to key trade routes and resources while increasing its political leverage over recipient countries. India, as the dominant regional power in South Asia, views China's growing presence as a direct challenge to its influence. India perceives China's activities, such as the development of ports and military installations in neighboring countries, as threat attempts to encircle and undermine its position. As a result, India has taken steps to counter China's rise and protect its regional dominance. The hegemonic struggle between China and India impacts the region in several ways. Firstly, it leads to increased competition for influence among South Asian countries. China's economic investments and infrastructure projects offer attractive opportunities for smaller countries, but they also raise concerns about debt dependency and potential

loss of sovereignty. India, on the other hand, offers an alternative to Chinese influence and promotes a rule-based regional order. Secondly, the hegemonic struggle between China and India has implications for regional security. The border disputes between China and India, such as the recent clashes in the Galwan Valley, highlight the potential for military confrontations. Both countries have been increasing their military capabilities and conducting joint military exercises with their allies. Small countries in South Asia play significant roles in this struggle, as their actions and alliances can influence the balance of power dynamics in the region.

Despite the hegemonic struggle, proximity relations between large countries and small countries in South Asia under the balance of power can also be observed from an absolute gain perspective based on type four in Figure 3. Small countries in the region strategically align themselves with dominant powers, such as China or India, to maximize their absolute gains. For small countries, cooperation with a dominant power offers economic benefits, development assistance, and security guarantees. By aligning with a large power, small countries can access investment opportunities, infrastructure development, and technological advancements. They can also benefit from diplomatic support and protection against potential threats from other regional actors.

The proximity of South Asian countries to India and China is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be understood through an integrative analysis. Small countries in South Asia navigate their relationships with India and China based on a variety of factors, including historical ties, geographic location, economic interests, and security concerns. In this analysis, it is evident that certain countries, such as Bhutan, maintain closer ties with India, driven by historical, cultural, and economic factors. Bhutan aligns its interests with India to ensure its security and sovereignty, given

Table 1: Proximity of small South Asian countries to India and China: An integrative analysis

Country	Proximity to India	Proximity to China	Factors Supporting Proximity
Afghanistan	Medium	Medium	Security cooperation with China, economic support from China, economic and security cooperation with India
Bangladesh	High	Low	Strong economic cooperation, infrastructure projects, and strategic partnership with India
Bhutan	High	Low	Historical, cultural, and economic ties with India, strategic alignment, and economic support from India
Maldives	High	Medium	Historical ties and security cooperation with India, increasing engagement and infrastructure investments from China
Nepal	Medium	Medium	Historical ties with India, increasing engagement with China for economic diversification and infrastructure projects
Pakistan	Low	High	“All-weather friendship” with China, significant economic and military support, historical tensions with India
Sri Lanka	Medium	Medium	Chinese investments in infrastructure projects, cultural and historical ties with India, mutual security concerns

Source: Created by author

its geographic proximity and dependence on India for trade and economic assistance.

On the other hand, countries like Pakistan are closer to China, as demonstrated by their “all-weather friendship” and deepening economic and military cooperation. Pakistan sees China as a strategic partner that can counterbalance India’s influence and support its economic growth and development. Other countries, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Afghanistan, maintain more balanced relationships with both India and China, seeking to maximize their relative and absolute gains. These countries leverage their geographical positions and engage

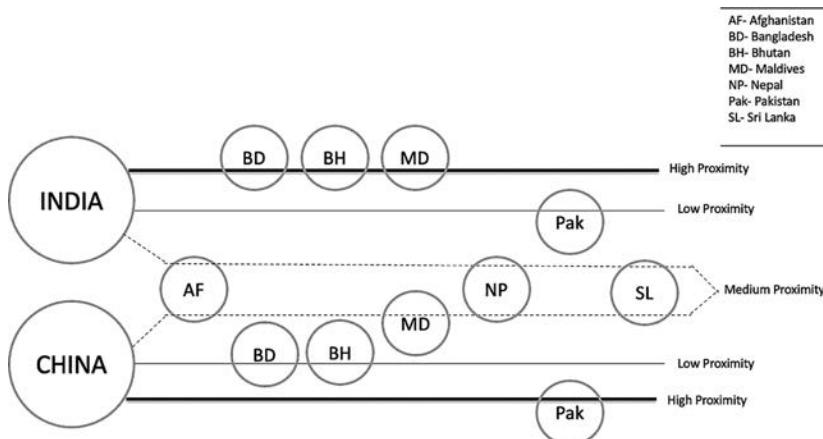
with both powers to diversify their options for economic development and infrastructure projects.

Overall, the proximity of South Asian countries to India and China is influenced by a combination of historical, geopolitical, economic, and security considerations. The integrative approach allows us to understand the nuanced dynamics and varying degrees of closeness between these countries and the two regional powers. It is important to note that these dynamics can be complex and subject to evolving circumstances.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the rise of China and its increasing engagement with South Asian countries has led to a clear hegemonic struggle between China and India in the region. While historically, great powers had no significant interest in South Asia, the competition between China and India has given rise to various political outcomes, including regional balance, global alliances, value exports, and the possibility of war. This study has argued that small countries cannot be ignored in this scenario, and their role in the region must be explored to understand the balance of power in South Asia in the framework of proximity relations. By modifying neorealism and incorporating the role of small states into the analysis, this paper has attempted to examine the hegemonic struggle between India and China in relation to smaller countries. Overall, this study concludes that the balance of power amid the hegemonic struggle of great powers in South Asia can be best understood from the perspective of relative gain, and cooperative arrangements between small countries and their large counterparts are understood from the perspective of absolute gain. In essence, an analytical approach integrating modified defensive realism and neoliberal institutionalism can be highly effective in analyzing the complex international relations of South Asia.

Figure 4: Extent of proximity between small countries in South Asia and China or India



Source: Created by the author

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