

6 China's Public Diplomacy and Its Foreign Policy Towards Central and South Asia

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This chapter analyses how China has promoted its interests under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) using a set of strategic tools, which we define as enmeshment and appeasement. More specifically, the analysis considers the dynamics characterizing China's BRI in Central and South Asia, in order to outline patterns of engagement along the route. The chapter uses the case study of Russia and India, which represent key actors for the BRI, owing to the competition over power and influence in which China is engaged on its Western and Southern border with these two regional powers. Based on a systematic analysis of two Chinese newspapers—the *Global Times* and *People's Daily*—the empirical sections highlight China's public diplomacy strategy towards Russia and India's concerns over the BRI. In addition, the chapter sheds light on how enmeshment and appeasement are deployed to alleviate these fears and the extent to which they enable China to navigate challenging bilateral relations.

Belt and Road Initiative, public diplomacy, regional powers, Sino-Russian relations, Sino-Indian relations

In September 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a Chinese government-led economic and political strategy, as a way to connect selected countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. As at March 2021 a total of 139 countries had joined the BRI, making it a symbol of Xi's presidency in Beijing and of China's stance in the world power hierarchy. Some 40% of the world's GDP and 63% of the world's population are now within the aegis of the BRI (Sacks, 2021). The BRI could deliver numerous benefits to China: it could boost its economy by addressing industrial overcapacity at home, expand its markets, improve its innovation level, and provide jobs. But equally important to Beijing's material gains is a less tangible, yet crucial, component that has accompanied the BRI's development over the past eight years, namely its framing to domestic and foreign audiences. The BRI has come to represent much of China's image in the world, and, for this reason, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has coupled the economic outreach with an unprecedented public diplomacy effort. Such a deployment of the public diplomacy toolkit was partly prompted by mounting critiques questioning the viability and sustainability of the project and its goals. The main claim is that the BRI ultimately aims to boost Beijing's political and military influence and challenge the United States' global standing. One of the most potent assessments of China's rise in strategic terms came from the US Department of Defense (2017), which explicitly stated that “China most likely will seek to establish additional military bases in countries with which it has a longstanding friendly relationship and similar strategic interests”. The Chinese Government, unsurprisingly, denies

pursuing a “political agenda” and stresses instead that the intended result is a “big family of harmonious coexistence” (Xi, 2017).

Two of the most ambitious components of the BRI are the land route traversing Central Asia before reaching Europe, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), defined by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang as the BRI's “flagship project” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014). In these two regions, China is confronted by two giants: its strategic partner Russia in Central Asia, and its perceived long-standing thorn in its side, India in South Asia. Within this complex landscape, this chapter provides a comprehensive and timely analysis of China's strategy of promoting the BRI on its Western and South-Western periphery in the post-2013 period. The key questions addressed are “how does China deploy its public diplomacy in its foreign policy towards Central and South Asia?” and “how does it navigate its relationship with the two neighbouring hegemony, Russia and India?” To this end, the chapter advances “enmeshment” and “appeasement” as key toolkits in China's public diplomacy arsenal. Enmeshment is a strategy employed to attract countries in regional and global institutions with the aim of co-opting them into following the rules or sharing the ideology or objectives of that institution. However, appeasement is defined as a concessionary tool useful in making small compromises to preserve appearances, but which might have minimal influence on the policy as a whole.

To develop these points, the chapter is divided into three sections. Section one provides a review of the literature on the BRI's public diplomacy, highlighting the main tools used by Beijing. The following section then explains the selection of the case studies. The third section delves into the empirical analysis by assessing appeasement and enmeshment, two strategies used by China to promote the BRI while also attempting to mitigate India and Russia's concerns. Finally, the chapter ends with some conclusions, which briefly discuss the potential implications that China's strategy has for bilateral and regional dynamics.

China's BRI public diplomacy

Public diplomacy is understood in this chapter through the words of Hans Tuch as “a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies” (1990, p. 3). While we do recognize that public diplomacy does not have to be solely state-driven, in the context of China, which provides limited independent civic space, we concentrate our analysis on state actors' communication and actions. Nonetheless, as Nye writes, unlike propaganda, “public diplomacy also involves

building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies” (2008, p. 101).

By way of illustration, for nearly two decades, China has dedicated significant efforts to promote an image of a “peaceful rise”, implying a developing, peace-loving, and trustworthy nation, responsible towards its own citizens and the world (Zheng, 2005). China accentuated its public diplomacy efforts, particularly to counter the US perception of a “China threat”, and later, to promote its gargantuan BRI project. In 2010 Beijing launched its global footprint through CCTV, China Radio International, Xinhua and China Daily and their branches abroad; by 2014, China was estimated to spend \$7-\$10 billion annually on international propaganda (Brady, 2015). The BRI appeared high on both the media and research agenda. Many of these media outlets later promoted the BRI heavily, especially ahead of key summits. For example, in the run-up to the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, China Daily featured “bedtime stories” for children, in English, explaining how the BRI “is China’s idea, but it belongs to the world. ... we lead happier lives if we cooperate and this is why countries want to join the Belt and Road” (*China Daily*, 2017, 0:14, 1:17–1:21). Beyond using the media as part of public diplomacy, the Chinese Government also sought to involve think tanks, researchers, and academics. Two think tanks that work specifically on the BRI have been set up: the Silk Road Think Tank Network and the Silk Road Think Tanks Association. Xi Jinping himself asserted at the 2016 Silk Road Forum in Warsaw, and then again in 2019 at the inaugural meeting of the Belt and Road Studies Network, that think tanks are key to advancing the BRI and called for “for more high-quality research results to push Belt and Road construction to a higher level” (*China Daily*, 2019).

From Beijing’s toolkit of BRI public diplomacy, several other tools are commonly identified: cultural tools, including Confucius institutes and cultural events; exchanges, such as those between sister cities and educational institutions; elite-to-elite, referring to government visits and military diplomacy; international diplomacy which includes media interviews, press briefings, journalist visits and Chinese media presence abroad; and financial tools, such as loans and debt relief (Custer et al., 2019). When discussing China’s BRI public diplomacy towards India and Russia, this arsenal is present, but this chapter also identifies what the authors call “appeasement” and “enmeshment” strategies, inspired by the literature on foreign policy, specifically hedging (Goh, 2005; Koga, 2018). Enmeshment occurs when China draws and entices countries in regional and global institutions that it has established—or in which it has significant leverage—to benefit the BRI and bolster its image. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are

two main organizations that epitomize the security and economic organizations that Beijing is using to promote the BRI, under the promise of enhancing regional integration and mutual benefits to assuage neighbours' concerns over its "threatening rise". On the other hand, appeasement has been used by China as a concessionary tool to show its willingness to make small compromises, which might have no influence over policy, but which maintain appearances.

The importance of Central Asia and South Asia in China's BRI

The use of two case studies allows for a detailed inquiry into a contemporary real-life phenomenon and for comparisons that enrich our understanding, in this case, of China's discourse and behaviour towards two of its powerful regional neighbours. The selection of case studies was primarily determined by the importance of Central Asia and South Asia in China's BRI, and the influence exercised by Russia and India in the area. Central Asia is the first test case through which this chapter assesses China's BRI public diplomacy in relation to its regional hegemon, Russia. If the BRI is to thrive, then Central Asia, which links Beijing with the major European capitals, is a linchpin for China's interests. The BRI has been spearheading China's efforts in paving its path through Central Asia, consolidating the efforts China has started over the last two decades; for example, between 2001 and 2015, Chinese–Central Asian trade grew 32-fold (Russell, 2017). From being only a peripheral economic player in the 1990s, China has surpassed Russia in 2015 to become the region's second-largest trade partner and lender (Denver, 2015), reflected later in the 2018 trade figures of \$41 billion (Umarov, 2020) in comparison to Russia's trade in the region of \$25 billion (Miholjcic, 2019). Beyond trade, China has managed to engage the Central Asian states at multiple other levels, including energy, politics, and military affairs, becoming a serious contender to Russia's regional status quo. For Russia, retaining its sphere of influence in Central Asia is a major aspect of its self-identity as a Great Power and can be traced back to the early 1990s in Russian foreign policy documents. Any encroachment by other powers into this sphere is not looked upon kindly, as illustrated by the wars in Georgia and Ukraine. In brief, Russia's concerns are summed up around the BRI's expansion in Central Asia, not only through BRI infrastructure projects, but also BRI energy-related projects (Freeman, 2017; Stronsky and Ng, 2018), which have somewhat side-lined Russia so far. China's further expansion through institutions such as the SCO and AIIB also rang alarm bells for Russia, concerned over its diminishing influence in the area (Lanteigne, 2017).

South Asia represents the second test case through which this chapter assesses China's BRI promotion strategy, in relation to its South-Western regional hegemon, India. The sub-continent is the location of the CPEC, which comprises a set of energy, infrastructural and social projects. China's development-stability nexus represents one of the main drivers behind the CPEC, as Beijing sees an opportunity in a stronger Pakistani economy to stabilize Pakistan and reduce the security risk to Xinjiang stemming from cross-border terrorist activities (Ferchen and Babiarz, 2017). The political and financial capital that China has invested in Pakistan—around \$25 billion according to the latest data—makes the CPEC an important indicator of how the BRI is developing and what China's approaches to it are. In addition, as Andrew Small (2018) aptly noted, South Asia is “the main battleground for BRI's future—with India as its chief opponent and Pakistan as its chief enthusiast”. In Pakistan, the announcement of the CPEC was met with enthusiasm; for instance, 85 per cent of Pakistanis surveyed in 2017 considered the CPEC as important for the country's development (Gallup and Gilani Surveys, 2017). At the same time, concerns emerged within the country around the equitable distribution of infrastructure projects across all four provinces, with some provincial and opposition leaders contesting the Pakistani Government's decision to have more projects in Sindh and Punjab, as opposed to Balochistan and Kybher Pakhtunkhwa (Boni and Adeney, 2020). It is therefore important to further investigate the way in which China has navigated its political and economic relations in these two key regions.

In addition to analysing the academic literature, media articles and public speeches were reviewed, placing public diplomacy and foreign policy at the centre of this work. A systematic review of the *People's Daily*—the mouthpiece of the CCP—was conducted, based on searches using filters for titles containing “India” or “Russia”, along with keywords “Belt” and “Road”. The period assessed was 1 September 2013 (only a few days later, Xi Jinping announced the BRI in Kazakhstan) to 31 January 2019. The newspaper database Nexis was used to retrieve all articles. Similar searches were conducted on *Global Times*, a Chinese newspaper dedicated to foreign audiences, known for its nationalistic sentiment and more hawkish stance in foreign policy. The analysis was conducted on the articles headlines by focusing on the vocabulary used and the meaning implied, coding the titles, and grouping them into themes (Develotte and Rechniewski, 2001; Sari, 2019).

Empirical survey of China's behaviour on its western frontier

Russia has been China's strategic partner in the post-1990 era, but it is a relationship fraught with issues, reminiscent of its patchy past. However, contemporary politics, economic interests and mutual energy dependency often bring these two countries together. By 2020 the trade flow between Russia and China amounted to \$107 billion in comparison to \$58 billion in 2010 (UN Comtrade Database, 2020). Russia and China frequently show mutual support in the UN Security Council and embark on joint military exercises in a show of force often aimed at Western democracies. In a similar vein, in light of recent sanctions imposed by the EU and US on both China and Russia, they strengthened ties with the pledge "to reject the politicisation of human rights and interference in their countries' internal affairs" (Kuhrt, 2021). Nonetheless, despite Xi stating that "strategic cooperation between China and Russia can effectively resist any attempt to suppress and divide the two countries" (Gavin, 2021) and Putin describing the Sino-Russian relations as "the best in history" (*South China Morning Post*, 2021), many contentious points remain, including animosity from the past and mutual suspicion about current hegemony. In addition, geostrategic competition is fierce, both in Central and South-East Asia, as also reflected in BRI and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) projects (Burcu, 2020). The dynamics behind China's engagement with the region are further unpacked to investigate how China advances the BRI through the lenses of enmeshment and appeasement.

Enmeshment

The SCO primarily focuses on Central Asian security-related concerns; terrorism, along with separatism and religious extremism, are the "three evils" mentioned in the SCO Charter, a concern widely shared by its member states. Nevertheless, the SCO also represents another tool for promoting the BRI.

After initial hesitations, Russia eventually joined both the BRI and the AIIB, but only once China agreed to use the SCO as a facilitating platform for co-operation between the BRI and the EAEU, a new Russia led economic union meant to bring Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan closer together. Putin officially endorsed China's initiative at the 2017 BRI summit in Beijing that he attended as the guest of honour. As Dubnov (2018) writes, this was a convenient compromise: "Russia was forced to recognize [to some extent] China's leading role in financing and investment in Central Asia, and China promised to consider Russian interests in the region". This agreement is even more interesting given that it came against the backdrop of older discussions over the course the SCO should follow,

since both Russia and China have attempted to drive it in opposing directions. Russia did not want the SCO to become a vehicle for trade under China's lead, especially since significant investments have been made in the region under the BRI label, so in 2012 Russia postponed a Chinese-backed initiative to create an SCO Regional Development Bank and later, in 2016, to create an SCO free trade zone. Equally, Beijing was not interested in building up a common political and military front with Russia, which could be seen as an opponent to NATO, nor in a merger between the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, as Russia proposed at the 2014 SCO Dushanbe summit. Chinese media and researchers now highlighted the importance of the SCO summit for the organization's 10-year strategy; as Xia Yishan (2015), a research fellow with China Institute of International Studies, wrote in the *Global Times*: "One of the most important topics on the agenda is cooperation with China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union". The two initiatives are said "to further promote regional economic integration", to be "complementary", and to "help Russia fight against the West's punitive measures" (J. Liu, 2015). Multiple other editorials in the *Global Times* reinforced the same message, which was reflected in article titles such as "One Belt, One Road can bring China and Russia closer", "Trump cannot alienate China-Russia ties", "Russia-China rivalry in Central Asia overblown" and "China-Russia ties broaden global horizon".

Appeasement

Sino-Russian bilateral relations have always oscillated behind the façade of their partnership and even their perceived alliance. Since China launched the BRI in 2013, Russia has hoped to become a prominent hub in the project. According to a well-documented academic paper that surveyed and interviewed 50 of the most prominent Russian experts, analysts, and pundits, some of which are closely affiliated with state institutions, all expected Russia to play a bigger role in the BRI (Gabuev and Zuenko, 2019). Some of those surveyed in the report saw the BRI as an opportunity at the bilateral level for Russia to attract Chinese investment in high-tech industries or to develop the Far East. At the regional level, the BRI was interpreted as a way to stabilize Central Asia jointly, whereas at a global level, it was seen as a way to create a centre of power on equal footing with China that would bring the US-led order to an end. Some further expressed concern about China's ambitions in the region, pointing out that the expansion of Chinese capital is the main aim of the BRI, and Russia should thereby at least contribute to the transport component, owing to its transit potential. Part of the "New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor" initial memorandum of understanding foresaw a

high-speed railway from Moscow to Siberia and Beijing, only to later go through Astana and bypass a large section of Russia (Black, 2017). Despite this change, the project initially continued with two planned legs: Moscow–Kazan and potentially Kazan–Beijing. However, the first leg alone from Moscow to Kazan proved problematic; the China Development Bank offered approximately \$7 billion over 20 years at a four per cent annual interest rate, but it was not deemed competitive by Russian Railways, who wanted a larger loan and a longer timeframe to repay it (Trickett, 2017). Russia acted cautiously, while China reemphasized that the BRI is not about aid but about attracting foreign investment, and Russia is no exception. As for the Kazan-Beijing leg, this was left on the back burner with no noticeable progress being registered. Russia's cautiousness is best captured in the words of the Russian Ambassador in China, Andrei Denisov:

China has everything done smoothly and quickly with those partners who use its full-cycle projects: Chinese technologies, materials, labor, etc. We do not need this as we have our own technologies. And we will not do anything to our own detriment. There must be a different approach: measure twice and cut once. So we are measuring for the time being.

(Korostikov, cited in Gabuev and Zuenko, 2019)

To assuage Russia's concerns about its activities in Central Asia and the BRI, China has taken several steps. First, in May 2015 China promised to support the EAEU. Russia hopes to use the EAEU to reclaim some power in its perceived sphere of influence in Central Asia and as a platform for its "great power aspiration" (Crisis Group, 2017; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017). The Sino-Russian pact came against the backdrop of a hesitant Russia, which remained evasive for the first couple of years after the BRI was launched about whether it would join the project (Gabuev, 2015; Lukin, 2018). The optimists' voices in Moscow eventually prevailed, and Russia joined the BRI in the hope that it would attain material benefits at a time when it faced numerous economic sanctions from the West after the Crimean crisis. In 2014, in response to the mass protests in Ukraine, which ousted the pro-Russian president Yanukovich, Russia annexed the south of Ukraine, Crimea. The USA and the EU retaliated by imposing sanctions on Russia, some of which continue at the time of writing. However, Moscow seems to be losing patience with the BRI and slow EAEU development; a survey of Russian experts close to the Kremlin suggests that the lack of significant materialization of the BRI on the ground is arousing suspicions among those who

initially expressed reluctance towards BRI membership (Gabuev & Zuenko, 2019). After a slow start, Russia and China announced the establishment of a separate Investment Cooperation Fund worth \$10 billion in 2017, which is to be invested in cross-border projects as part of the BRI and the EAEU (Seddon and Hille, 2017), and a free trade agreement was signed in 2018, signalling mutual support in their bilateral relations.

Current Sino-Russian relations are marked by a concerted effort, as noticed in Chinese media and official speeches, in presenting a sound bilateral relationship. Sergei Lavrov, then Russian's foreign minister, reiterated how the BRI-EAEU will "effectively complement each other" and "their further harmonisation will allow laying the foundation for forming a new geopolitical configuration" (Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2019). The Chinese were as generous in presenting bilateral relations to be "enjoying the healthiest and most mature relationship between big powers", to quote Dai Bingguo, former state councillor (Zhao, 2018). When looking at the *Global Times*, an English language newspaper often addressed to foreign audiences and closely associated with the Chinese Government, almost all editorials on the BRI emphasize the positive relationship between China and Russia. For example, the editorial of Li Jianmin, a fellow of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, states:

China needs Russia's support and cooperation in advancing reform of the international system and global governance and implementing major strategies like the "One Belt and One Road" initiative. ... China has to give a helping hand to Russia whenever needed, whether it's for political, moral, strategic and economic considerations. It's necessary to follow the principle of achieving mutually beneficial, win-win results.

(J. Li, 2015)

Those who do not toe the line are quickly reprimanded and reminded to do so. In March 2019 an important daily Russian newspaper was slammed by the Chinese embassy in Moscow for "examining the consequences of the slowdown in China's economy for Russia" (Baev, 2019). Equally, when bilateral relations are weakening, foreign scapegoats are often found. Li Xing, director of the Eurasian Studies Centre at Beijing Normal University, illustrates this best when he warns that "certain Western countries" are "damping down the prospects of China-Russia relationship and driving a wedge between the two Eurasian countries" because their aim is to "stir up troubles in many places in the world, and go against the will of the people

there” (X. Li, 2019). The desire to maintain the image of a close ally has been mainly substantiated through the building up of closer security ties. Numerous joint military drills have increased in scale and frequency. In 2015 China passed a law that allows the People's Liberation Army to operate abroad on counter-terrorism missions, which acted as “a precondition for enhancing Chinese-Russian anti-terror cooperation abroad” (Odgaard, 2017). In the same year, a joint simulation of a terrorist attack in the Far East was described by the Russian Defence Ministry as “the first ever joint Russian-Chinese naval assault” (Sputnik, 2015). From 2016 onwards more joint drills ranged from the Baltic Sea to the Sea of Japan and, more importantly for China, in the South China Sea. These exercises culminated with Vostock in September 2018 as the most symbolic military exercise of the Sino-Russian prowess.

A similarly positive Sino-Russian trend was noticed when analysing 119 articles retrieved in the *People's Daily*, based on the search criteria described earlier. The most common theme identified was positive Sino-Russian relations, followed by economic development, and more importantly, the benefits that this bilateral co-operation brings to the world. Fifty-one articles referred to positive bilateral relations mainly in terms of the “comprehension strategic partnership” established between the two countries, describing their relations in grandiose terms such as “golden era”, “unshakable” relations, and “major country relations”. Economic development is the second coded theme and includes trade and energy partnerships; only two of the 33 articles specifically mention that the BRI will benefit Russia, while the others refer to mutual economic benefits. The third coded theme refers to “Sino-Russian relations being beneficial to the world”; this ranges from “helping Eurasian integration” and enhancing “regional, global growth, prosperity” to “balance[ing] global communication” and “promote[ing] world peace”. Other themes identified referred to other types of collaborations, including art and research exchanges. Importantly, no article has been identified shedding a negative light on Russia or the Sino-Russian bilateral relations.

Empirical survey of China's behaviour in South Asia

Appeasement

Evidence of appeasement can be found in the way in which China navigated India's concerns regarding the CPEC. In August 2016 an article in the China state-run *Global Times* argued that “Beijing has reassured that it will not step back from ambitious CPEC despite Indian concern” (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2016). While China might not be willing to step back

from the CPEC, it has sought to offer some concessions to India to assuage its concerns. In December 2016, in the wake of remarks made by the Southern Command Commander, Lt-Gen. Amir Riaz of the Pakistani Army, who noted that India should shun enmity and join the CPEC project, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying, said that "I wonder whether the Indian side takes this offer made by the Pakistani general as a goodwill gesture" (Express Tribune, 2016). In November 2017, the then Chinese ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, argued that Beijing was prepared to rename the CPEC to address India's concerns. The ambassador had mentioned during a speech in Delhi that China could "change the name of CPEC" and "create an alternative corridor through Jammu and Kashmir, Nathu La pass or Nepal to deal with India's concerns" (Times of India, 2017). In January 2018 a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry conceded that Beijing was "ready to work with [the] Indian side through dialogue and communication for a better solution. This best serves the interests of the two countries" (Aneja, 2018). These are noteworthy developments as they demonstrate China's desire to appease India on what is an extremely sensitive topic for the leadership in New Delhi. This is not to say that India has bought into China's narrative, nor that such a strategy has resolved India's reservations regarding the CPEC. In fact, a study of the editorials published in the five major newspapers in India shows New Delhi's negative perceptions of the BRI. A total of 167 editorials were identified mentioning China, out of which 73 (43.7% of the total) dealt with the theme "China's rise", thereby demonstrating the attention paid to these dynamics within India. Importantly, the study also analysed the perception, positive or negative, expressed in the editorials scrutinized. The results suggest that 96 out of 167 opinion pieces expressed a negative view of China overall (Chatterji and Ray Chaudhury, 2016). The dynamics outlined in this section are representative of a wider paradigm of appeasement that China has adopted, as also reflected in other instances across South Asia.

The Maldives is a case in point, since India's perception of the BRI is that it undermines its core interests in what New Delhi considers to be its strategic backyard. The Republic of the Maldives has been in the Indian sphere of influence for years. However, since the announcement of the BRI, Beijing has deepened its engagement in the archipelago with investments focusing primarily on infrastructure. As was the case with other countries along the BRI, one of the major concerns was related to the \$1.5 billion debt (Reuters, 2018) accumulated by the Maldives towards China. Owing to this growing financial dependence, there was another episode that caused serious concerns in India. In August 2017, three Chinese warships docked in Malé, crossing what New Delhi defined as "red lines" (China

Military, 2017; Kazmin, 2018). According to an Indian government official quoted in *The Indian Express*, “we can’t stop what the Chinese are doing, whether in the Maldives or in Nepal, but we can tell them about our sensitivities, our lines of legitimacy” (Malhotra, 2018). To appease India’s concerns, China has framed its engagement in the Maldives as something potentially beneficial to India too. As Long Xingchun, Director of the Center for Indian Studies at China West Normal University, argued in the *Global Times*, “the building of infrastructure by China in the Maldives has created favorable conditions for the business and personnel of Indian companies”, framing China’s initiative in the country and, by and large, the South Asian region as “a constructive ‘two-plus-one’ mechanism—China and India plus another South Asian country” (Long, 2018). Along the same lines, another *Global Times* editorial postulated that “the development of peripheral countries will sooner or later make India realize that it’s wrong to hype the China threat” also adding that China was going to “patiently wait” for India to grasp “the essence of the Belt and Road initiative” (L. Liu, 2017). As the Sino-Indian competition over influence in the Maldives demonstrates, China’s inroads in the region have been met, at least nominally, by attempts to frame its growing influence as potentially benefitting India too, as a way of appeasing the leadership in New Delhi.

Enmeshment

In addition to the attempts made at framing China’s inroads in South Asia as non-detrimental to India, another strategy that China has used in its public diplomacy toolkit has been that of enmeshing regional powers into Beijing-led institutions, with mixed results.

By integrating New Delhi into an organization like the SCO, whose primary aim is to contain the spread of terrorism, a joint concern in relation to Pakistan is addressed. As an opinion piece in the *Global Times* reported, “combating terrorism is a priority for Pakistan, but it is also a big concern for India” (Su, 2018). At the 2013 Heads of State Summit of the SCO, Salman Khurshid, the Indian Minister of External Affairs, highlighted that India had long suffered from terrorism and that the Indian Government was of “the firm view that only multilateral efforts and integrated actions can help effectively counter these negative forces including the related evils of drug trafficking and small arms proliferation” (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2013). Along the same lines, point 2 of the Astana Declaration, agreed at the summit in June 2017 at which both Pakistan and India joined the organization, mentioned that member states would “step up joint efforts [...] primarily in fighting terrorism, including cyber-terrorism, separatism, extremism, cross-border organized

crime” (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2017). At the SCO meeting of the Council of Heads of Government in October 2018, India's external affairs minister argued that terrorism is “the most overwhelming threat to our common goals of development and prosperity” and that “governments must assume their national responsibility and cooperate with each other” (Embassy of India, Russian Federation, 2018). In an interview published by *Xinhua* in May 2018, B. R. Deepak, a sinologist and professor of Chinese Studies at the Delhi-based Jawaharlal Nehru University, explained that one of the potential benefits of the inclusion of both India and Pakistan within the SCO was that “the expansion of the SCO would entail a more coordinated approach on terrorism” (*Xinhua*, 2018). Here the elite-to-elite public diplomacy effort was visible in the way in which the new Indian membership of the SCO was framed as a way to address one of the key concerns of India in relation to Pakistan, as well as to integrate New Delhi into Beijing-led institutional structures to enhance regional co-operation and multilateral organizations.

However, these efforts did not necessarily translate into a modification of India's position on the BRI. India's opposition to the initiative was clear from the beginning, and its enmeshment in the SCO did not change this much. The geographical route of the CPEC, which passes through Gilgit-Baltistan (that is part of the wider Kashmir dispute), was the first obvious point of contention, along with concerns over China's expanding influence by land and sea. India has expressed its opposition to China's BRI, a position it maintained at the SCO meeting in Qingdao in 2018 and in Bishkek in 2019, when all SCO members except India re-endorsed the BRI. On all those occasions, Modi made clear calls for the BRI to be transparent, inclusive and respectful of the territorial integrity of countries (Krishnan, 2018). Nevertheless, China will most likely continue to promote the BRI through the SCO. In a 2019 interview, the SCO's Secretary-General Vladimir Norov (a former Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan) explained the importance of the BRI for the liberalization of trade and tourism:

By actively participating in the BRI, our countries can raise their export capacity. China is open and is promoting this. At the same time, by actively participating in the BRI, our countries can very successfully use infrastructure projects to modernize and develop new transport communication linkages.

(Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2019)

While most SCO members are supportive of China's BRI, as Malone and Mukherjee put it, the relationship between China and India "might be best seen as one of geostrategic competition qualified by a growing commercial cooperation" (2010, p. 1).

The AIIB is another important institution that exemplifies the dynamics of enmeshment presented in this chapter, as well as those related to financial diplomacy. This, along with the BRI, are Xi Jinping's signature projects. They were both launched in the same year for a similar purpose: to improve infrastructure and economic connectivity throughout Asia and the world. Without a doubt, the AIIB was initially designed with the thought that it will aid the promotion of the BRI. While the AIIB is a Chinese-inspired and Chinese-led institution, it has 92 shareholders from all around the world, and it is meant to invest in BRI-related opportunities that align with its sustainable infrastructure priorities, not with the interest of the Chinese state or companies. Unlike the BRI, the AIIB has been praised for improving its practice and developing into a truly multilateral forum. This might explain why India has joined the AIIB but not the BRI. India's logic is clear; as Wu (2019) writes, India is concerned about "the relative gains China might accrue through the BRI in its own backyards—South Asia and the Indian Ocean". At the same time, he noted that India's decision to co-operate with China on the AIIB has been primarily driven by the considerable economic benefits that derive from joining the organization. Out of \$20 billion worth of projects approved by the AIIB in its first five years of operation, India has received \$6 billion, almost one third. As the Indian vice president of investment operation at the AIIB noted, the bank is "very, very apolitical", also highlighting the multilateral nature of the bank (Krishnan, 2020). China might have failed to see that "enmeshment" does not always work for the purpose of promoting the BRI unless it considers improving its practice of answering calls for transparency and settle debt trap accusations.

Conclusion

This chapter advances enmeshment and appeasement, two borrowed concepts derived from foreign policy literature, as key toolkits in China's public diplomacy arsenal. Enmeshment is meant to attract countries in regional and global institutions with the aim of co-opting them into the system and goals of that institution. Appeasement was deployed as a concessionary tool to keep bilateral relations on track, deescalate tensions, preserve appearances and maintain China's positive image. Through the BRI, China projects strength across the world, and more so towards its regional rivals, Russia and India. For now, China keeps Russia and India engaged sufficiently through economic, strategic, and institutional enmeshments and by

presenting policies as convergent interests and “win-win” situations to partly assuage or postpone their concerns over “China’s threatening rise”. China is trying to avoid antagonizing Russia, as a potential regional competitor, while simultaneously trying to navigate a difficult relationship with India by enmeshing these two regional powers.

Future work is needed to assess the extent to which China’s strategy of appeasement and enmeshment is likely to continue. In Russia’s case, appeasement and enmeshment worked in the short term and enabled the two countries to maintain their bilateral relationship. External circumstances such as sanctions have also pushed China and Russia closer together. However, differences over an unequal trade partnership, competing EAEU and BRI projects and rivalry in Central Asia might continue to require a long-term strenuous public diplomacy effort. In India’s case, enmeshment failed to persuade India, and relations might become even more strained as the Indo-Pacific strategy gains shape, which is aimed at strengthening political, economic, and military co-operation between India, the USA, Japan, and its allies. Undoubtedly, China has a difficult task ahead when dealing both with contending regional hegemonies such as Russia and India, and with its peripheries, Central and South Asia, which have traditionally been areas of interest for Russia and India, and which remain unpredictable regions with authoritarian or hybrid regimes.

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