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The paradox of competing connectivity strategies in Asia

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ABSTRACT

Competing connectivity strategies are a core component of geopolitics in the twenty-first century – from China's Belt and Road Initiative to Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. To demonstrate the multifaceted consequences of the new multiplicity of connectivity strategies, we propose a conceptual distinction between two forms of competition among connectivity projects: the commonly addressed horizontal competition between central state-driven connectivity strategies and the less explored vertical competition between existing or potential connectivity schemes below and above the level of the nation state. We contend that although typically targeting differing forms of connectivity, strategies across levels of governance are not necessarily complementary. To the contrary, the geopolitical nature of relatively new and nation-state-driven strategies can also severely undermine sustainable intra-state connectivity. By way of illustration, we examine competing connectivity investments in the Bay of Bengal, a subregion of South Asia between the two Asian rivals India and China. Driven at least partly by horizontal competition, centrally devised and executed connectivity strategies oftentimes crowd out pre-existing connectivity based on subnational initiatives or transnational societal linkages. To fully assess contemporary connectivity investments in Asia, future scholarship should take account of the challenges and complications along both dimensions of competing connectivity strategies.

Introduction

Nation-state-driven connectivity strategies have emerged as a core element of international politics in today's multipolar world. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), introduced in 2013, has become a signature foreign policy project of China under President Xi Jinping. A proactive investor in infrastructure across Asia for decades, Japan unveiled its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' in 2016. Together with India, Japan since 2016 also promotes an 'Asia Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC), including investments in 'quality infrastructure' across the Indo-Pacific. India under Prime Minister Modi, at the same time, renamed its decades-old 'Look East' policy 'Act East', in order to instil new energy into its outreach towards Southeast Asia.

Extra-regional powers, likewise, reacted to China's focus on connectivity. The Trump administration's 'America First' agenda notwithstanding, the United States International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC), created in 2018, was tasked with leveraging

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private investments in developmental and infrastructure projects in Asia. And in July 2018, US Secretary of State Pompeo committed $113 million towards projects in the digital economy, energy and other infrastructure across the Indo-Pacific.[1] Last but not least, the EU in 2018 unveiled its own EU–Asia connectivity strategy, a novelty.[2] Although connectivity investments in Asia are not new to any of these powers, geopolitical considerations have intensified these engagements and contributed to the creation of new initiatives on behalf of China's adversaries and competitors from Japan to India, the US and the EU.[3] According to some, a new age of hyper-connectivity has begun: 'Competitive connectivity is the arms race of the twenty-first century'.[4]

Scholars to date have yet to explore the conceptual complexity of competing connectivity. On the one hand, globalisation enthusiasts, China's official rhetoric and multilateral lenders celebrate the complementary nature of investments in connectivity with the potential to economically benefit all Asian economies. On the other, existing scholarly works tend to approach the topic from a geopolitical perspective, focussing mainly on the competition of different connectivity agendas among national actors.[5] To move beyond this somewhat narrow focus and demonstrate the multifaceted consequences of this new multiplicity of connectivity strategies, we distinguish and explore two types of connectivity competitions in the context of Asia's subregions.

A *horizontal* competition is one that occurs among different nation-state-driven connectivity projects and is usually shaped by prevailing geopolitical tensions between different national actors. As a result of horizontal competition, countries on the receiving end of competing connectivity projects often see marked improvement of their bargaining position vis-à-vis countries that lead such projects – as long as such third countries do not have to choose sides. And, indeed, Asian countries from Bangladesh to Indonesia or Kazakhstan have developed a remarkable capability to navigate competing geostrategic demands to their own favour.[6]

In contrast to horizontal competitions, we define those competitions that exist among connectivity projects operating on different levels of politics, both below and above the nation state, as *vertical* competition. As is often the case, centrally devised, nation-state-driven connectivity projects are not the only game in town. For instance, in a number of subregions in Asia, there was and/or remains a host of pre-existing connectivity initiatives led by actors other than Asia's major powers' capitals. In some cases, a vertical competition of connectivity strategies[7] ensued between national- and subnational-level politics, leading to mixed results for connectivity building in the region concerned. Moreover, horizontal competitions often coexist, interact or clash with the vertical competitions, leading to variegated and sometimes paradoxical outcomes for different actors on different levels.

We believe that distinguishing the two types of connectivity competitions helps researchers to better grasp the complexity of both their process and impact. To demonstrate the utility of our conceptual efforts, the rest of this paper employs the 'horizontal vs vertical' distinction to examine how the geopolitical and competitive nature of relatively new and nation-state-driven strategies affect the connectivity schemes operated on levels other than the nation state. Empirically, we choose a site of substantial geopolitical importance and infrastructure investments: China's Yunnan province and the Northeast of South Asia, from Myanmar to Bangladesh to north-east India. We choose this particular subregion because it represents an interesting, though by no means the only possible, configuration of

horizontal-vertical competition: the geopolitical competition between different state actors (and their connectivity strategies) disrupts the sub-national convergence in connectivity building.

Below we begin with a brief debate about the genesis of the current focus on connectivity in Asia. This is followed by our case study. In the final section, we argue that our case can serve as the basis for a tentative theorisation of how competing connectivity reinforces nation-state centrism in international infrastructure politics – with consequences both for the quality of connectivity in Asia and potential connectivity initiatives on levels of governance other than the nation state.

Connectivity across levels of governance

The term 'connectivity' is not tied to any specific social science theory or conceptual approach.[8] Instead, scholars describe it as a 'metaphor'[9] or 'theoretical tool […] shaped by […] bricolage'.[10] Its usage and meaning in research and practice vary accordingly. For instance, Darl Kolb assigns 10 dimensions to it, from the geophysical construction of railways to philosophical notions of communitarian togetherness.[11] Parag Khanna, in just the first few pages of his book *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization*, states that connectivity was 'nothing less than our path to collective salvation', the 'new meta-pattern of our age' or simply 'destiny' – as well as a fascinating conglomerate of technology, geography and human relations.[12] Nonetheless, the term in all its variants brings along several constitutive elements. For one, it is relational. Fundamentally, it is concerned with either a linear or non-linear list of nodes between two or more ends. As such, connectivity also relates to time. Indeed, it entails a 'temporal chaining of one event to the next'.[13] Moreover, connectivity in one way or the other refers to space or territory, typically by way of overcoming spatial hurdles from nation-state boundaries to rivers or long distances. As put by Khanna: 'Connectivity is […] how we make the most of our geography'.[14]

Connectivity in all its meanings also brings an understanding of dysconnectivity to the fore, a state that usually serves as an undesired contrast brought about by inaction or obtrusion.[15] The latter, in turn, points towards the term's strong political component. For cross-border connectivity – functioning roads, railways or electricity grids – to emerge, a degree of political acquiescence is a necessary precondition. Likewise, its absence, as will be seen below, more often than not also follows from (geo)political interests.[16] Consider, for instance, Constantino Xavier's assessment: '"dis-connectivity" remains the default state of affairs between India and its neighbours. […] This sorry state of connectivity today reflects decades of geostrategic divergence, political nationalism and economic protectionism'.[17] Finally, rarely if ever do we speak of connectivity outside a context of some sort of technology, the need for improved technology or the lamentable absence of technology. In many cases, the technological dimension reiterates the political dimension of connectivity, for instance if it is envisioned as a result of major infrastructural investments or of the implementation of new communication technologies, both of which require at least a minimal form of state support.

Moving from its wider usage to the more specific context of international politics, the term 'connectivity' is best understood as a political catchphrase capturing the benefits that policymakers hope for when arguing for closer relations with foreign countries, particularly in and with Asia. The various subregions of Asia have long been regarded as amongst the world's least integrated, at the same time as Asian economies have become ever more

integrated in global markets.[18] Often-cited estimates by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on the need for infrastructure investments for a 'seamless Asia' amount to $22.6 trillion, or $1.5 trillion per year (excluding climate-adjusted costs).[19] According to interview research by Anna Fünfgeld, the prominence of the term connectivity may have originated 'in [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)] and ADB debates about the improvement of cross-border infrastructures as a reaction to the global financial crisis of 2007/2008'.[20] In 2010, a first 'Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity' was adopted and, since then, ASEAN and individual Asian powers from China to Japan and India have embraced the term in a plethora of plans and strategies. The EU and other extra-regional powers followed suit more recently, for instance by way of the 2018 EU–Asia connectivity strategy mentioned above. Both the EU and ASEAN in particular express an understanding of connectivity that is not competitive and exclusive but complementary and inclusive, by inviting collaboration with actors from otherwise competing powers.

Although typically used in the context of major infrastructure development, the term goes beyond the building of roads or railways. Connectivity in the now common understanding across Asia also includes non-physical elements, from regional integration schemes and trade arrangements to common technical standards and internet access but also people-to-people contacts. Its vagueness allows the incorporation of a variety of themes and aspirations, from the often-quoted building of ports by Chinese contractors to what the EU calls 'international rules-based connectivity'[21] or the founding of new development banks, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or the New Development Bank (NDB). Understandings will also vary according to local circumstances. For India, a long-awaited Motor Vehicle Agreement with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal that would allow vehicles from one country to access the other was a major breakthrough in regional connectivity.[22] China, in turn, promotes its massive student exchange, skill development and professionalisation programmes in neighbouring countries[23] as designed to eventually facilitate regional exchange in the trade of goods and, thus, as an element of connectivity. For China's Yunnan province, connectivity investments promised to redefine its very locality from Chinese hinterland to a central node towards South and Southeast Asia. Similarly, connectivity investments promise to turn Bangladesh and Myanmar into vital geographies without which, for instance, India's desire of closer economic ties with Southeast Asia is impossible to realise – hence their increased geostrategic value for its major power partners, from China to India and Japan.[24] Such differences in the understandings of connectivity notwithstanding, China's 'regionalism foreign policy creates potential nexuses for regional cooperation between China and India',[25] particularly so in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Being part of a 'seamless Asia' and connecting Asia's growth regions with its often desperately poor hinterlands, as argued by the ADB and others, opens new frontiers in a world economy that is ever less dependent on western markets. Hence, Jürgen Rüland argued that today, '[connectivity] has become the new panacea for nations seeking to catch up with the modernisation frontrunners'.[26] As such, the term encapsulates globalisation theorists' enthusiasm about the mutual benefits of international exchange[27] and the apolitical, complementary nature of investments in it:[28] 'The grand story of human civilization is more than just tragic cycles of war and peace or economic booms and busts. The arc of history is long, but it bends toward connectivity'.[29]

Whereas all major Asian powers have committed themselves to improving regional connectivity, their approaches to it differ. China's BRI is an extensive cross-regional endeavour. Geographically, it includes land routes from China's western region through Central Asia and

the Middle East to Europe. Within Asia, the BRI's most prominent projects are North to South connections from China to the Indian Ocean, for instance via Pakistan and Myanmar. By contrast, both Japan and India have been focussing on East–West corridors across the Indian Ocean and its littoral countries. Moreover, India's approach is more subregional, physically creating cross-border linkages in its immediate neighbourhood. It also entails an emphasis on transport linkages domestically, within and across India's north-eastern states. While improved internal connectivity benefits local commerce, cross-border connectivity potentially benefits Indian mainland trade and commerce, in line with the economic considerations behind India's decades-old Look East and Act East policies.

Interestingly, while all these connectivity plans encourage cross-border linkages, Asian states have not allowed for a dilution in the border concepts based upon a Westphalian understanding of the nation state. Thus, envisaged cross-border linkages tend to be state-led and less organic in nature. On the one hand, this is surprising, given both connectivity's ideational underpinnings from globalisation theory and the breadth of the term in its current usage. On the other, however, a strict understanding of national borders and sovereignty neatly reflects post-colonial Asian countries' history of foreign policy thinking. National sovereignty promised the autonomy Asian societies longed for while under colonial subjugation. Likewise, to claim respect for national sovereignty remains the first and last line of defence against major powers' intrusion in South and Southeast Asia's de facto often fragile states. To highlight the peculiarity of competing connectivity initiatives in Asia – their reliance on the nation state rather than other levels of government – we distinguish between horizontal and vertical competition. The following empirical section further illustrates the relevance of this distinction.

Act East, India's north-eastern states and connectivity in South Asia

Infrastructure development east of India, via Bangladesh to Myanmar and China, provides a telling illustration of how competing connectivity initiatives in geopolitically contested borderlands interrelate. This complex and fractured region around the Bay of Bengal is situated between the two Asian rivals India and China. Whereas India and Bangladesh recently resolved territorial disputes on land and sea, a border dispute between China and India in Arunachal Pradesh persists. Since independence, New Delhi has regarded Bangladesh as part of its natural sphere of influence (South Asia), but has failed to live up to its desired status of a regional hegemon given a host of lingering disputes from water to local insurgencies and an often heavy-handed approach towards its smaller neighbours.[30] India's north-eastern states – the so-called 'seven sisters' – are connected to the mainland only through a 12 km corridor between Bangladesh and Bhutan popularly known as the 'chicken's neck'. Underdeveloped and culturally distant from the majority population, the north-east has long suffered from a plethora of local insurgencies, some of whom received shelter in neighbouring states.[31] New Delhi, since the inception of its Look East policy in the 1990s and subsequently through the reformulated Act East policy, has attempted to link mainland India through the north-east with Southeast Asia and its vibrant economies. Meanwhile, in the early 2000s China began investing in infrastructure projects in and with both Bangladesh and Myanmar, thereby provoking Indian fears of Chinese intrusion into South Asia.

Post 2009, with the return of democratic processes in Bangladesh, its increased engagement with India included several cross-border projects. Consequently, the bilateral agenda of trade, investment and economic exchanges between India and both Bangladesh and

Myanmar transformed into a larger strategic engagement. Myanmar, in turn, has gained in geopolitical salience as a direct link to the Indian Ocean for China – and a land route to Southeast Asia for India. Initiated in 2008, the not yet operational Kaladan multi-modal project, which involves India and Myanmar through India's state of Manipur (in the north-east), was India's first foray into cross-border connectivity.[32] The political reform process in Myanmar and the subsequent lifting of US sanctions in 2016 allowed New Delhi to engage more vigorously with its eastern neighbour.

A series of recent developments, including India finding convergence with Bangladesh, the return of a semblance of normalcy to the politically troubled north-eastern states, and deepening cleavages with Pakistan stalling any progress in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC, the only regional organisation in South Asia) led to India initiating subregional attempts. Within both a revived BIMSTEC,[33] also comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand, as well as BBIN,[34] connectivity corridors assumed a geostrategic criticality hitherto unknown.[35] While adequate in their own right, such depictions tend to conceal alternative connectivity trajectories and often omit the detrimental consequences that horizontal competition over connectivity brings about. Going back in time allows us to illustrate this argument further.

In 1999, Yunnan province in China – like many other Chinese provinces and as part of its economic paradiplomacy – started a process called the Kunming initiative. Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, would be linked to Kolkata in West Bengal through India's north-eastern states on the one side and to Mandalay and then to Yangon, crossing the Sino–Myanmar border at Ruili/Muse on the other. Yunnan sought thereby to transform itself from a peripheral borderland to the centre of a regional construct linked to South and Southeast Asia via transport and 'growth corridors'.[36] In fact, utilising its geographical proximity to and historical links with Southeast Asia, and engaging across the province's international borders to promote economic development, formed the basis for many of the subsequent narratives of Yunnan's outward engagements.[37]

According to its initiators, the projected Kunming route would revive the ancient southern silk route that allowed for trade in silk, tea, spices and other goods between Assam in India and Yunnan. In that, Yunnan province preceded Beijing's public diplomacy on the BRI, which also exploited the very term 'Silk Road' as well as associated images of civilisational encounters and the origins of world trade, for a benign portrayal of Chinese investments abroad. However, the prospects of a traffic corridor seemed real as significant bilateral trade did exist already. For instance, in the late 1990s, Yunnan was buying annually over half a million tonnes of iron ore from India and exporting in return about a million tonnes of phosphatic ore.[38] Thus, this route, once implemented, would have offered a direct land route across the region, thereby establishing the prospect of a trade and economic corridor throughout India's north-eastern states lacking investments in their indigenous industries.[39] In particular, the two states of Tripura, India's second largest rubber growing area, and Manipur, a bamboo growing state, were hoping for substantial Chinese investment,[40] which would also enable them to tap into markets outside India. Thus, the sustainability of this route was not in question, even for India. The problem lay elsewhere.

In fact, the Kunming initiative turned out to be a cumbersome process. Whereas Bangladesh supported the process vigorously, Myanmar – torn between an ever-growing Chinese presence, rapprochement with the US and intensifying Indian economic and security

interests – played a more ambiguous role. For some participants in the negotiations, a lack of preparation on behalf of the official representatives from Myanmar reflected capacity constraints, primarily; others attributed it to domestic turmoil at the time. In any case, New Delhi was undoubtedly the most reluctant partner, despite going through the motions of repeated discussions and talks. [41] Here, the proposal was sceptically perceived as a Chinese attempt to reach out to the Indian market and flood it with cheap goods. Also, the politico-strategic dimension of India's north-east was of critical significance. Beset with insurgency and low-intensity conflicts, often perceived as having support from its neighbours, the north-east was as yet not on India's agenda of formally opening up to the outside. Still, others in New Delhi and beyond viewed the Kunming initiative as a positive measure to revitalise Assam and also India's adjoining underdeveloped states in the region, as the lack of development in the north-east was widely attributed to a lack of connectivity both within and with the mainland.[42] And indeed, albeit barely visible at the centre, voices from the north-eastern states supported the Kunming initiative and connectivity with China more broadly.[43]

The Kunming initiative was subsequently subsumed under the larger track-two connectivity project of Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Forum (BCIM). In 2013, after several rounds of discussion, many thought it had reached a turning point. A motor rally from Kolkata to Kunming, meant to delineate a future trade corridor, was enthusiastically launched, increasing the BCIM's visibility substantially. Moreover, after Chinese lobbying, the BCIM became part of the official agenda of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's state visit to China in October 2013.[44] Hence, the process evolved from track two – primarily comprising think tanks and subregional actors– to track one, with respective foreign ministries from Delhi and Beijing in the driver's seat. However, reservations about the security implications did not allow India to embrace the process fully.[45] In the meantime, China began embarking on its One Belt One Road Initiative (renamed the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017), which subsumed a variety of subregionally driven initiatives, such as the BCIM, into its national 'grand' strategy.[46]

It is fair to say that since then, the BCIM as an initiative involving both India and China is practically dead. Not only has its format retreated to a track-two process, but India since then slowed the process of Joint Study Group meetings further without approaching any sort of concrete outcome.[47] This is so because of three primary concerns of New Delhi, two of which directly relate to what we term horizontal competition. First, India is ardently opposed to the BRI, as its most extensive individual project, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), runs through territory held by Pakistan yet claimed by India – hence the argument that the BRI effectively violates India's territorial sovereignty.[48] Second, Indian strategists habitually depict the BRI as a form of encirclement against India and intrusion into India's region of influence – South Asia. Third, as mentioned above, fears of Chinese goods swamping Indian markets always stood against the idea of increasing economic connectivity between the two countries.

All of this meant that despite enormous potential gains, particularly for India's north-eastern states, and more than a decade of track-two negotiations with yearly meetings, study groups and reports, the very incorporation of the BCIM into the BRI put an end to the former initiative – which was originally launched as a subnational initiative, between Chinese provinces and Indian states, rather than between national governments. Interestingly, this is despite the fact that the government under Prime Minister Modi, elected in 2014 and re-elected in 2019, not only infused new energy into India's relations with its eastern

neighbours but also repeatedly stated how important the inclusion of India's federal states was in the process.[49] Also, in security terms, the north-eastern states have become more stable than ever, alleviating some of New Delhi's security concerns. But given the structure of India's federal polity, the absence of a meaningful, institutionalised form of engagement between central foreign policymakers and subnational states,[50] and the geopolitical reasoning in Delhi, local ground expectations have not resonated with the central government. Indeed, whenever Indian states' role in neighbourhood policies are mentioned by New Delhi's foreign policy establishment, it excludes China.[51] For instance, although a plan for connecting north-eastern states with Bangladesh presented by the governing Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) general secretary Ram Madhav in 2018 included an invitation for Chinese investments as well as a visit with ministers from the three BJP-ruled north-eastern states of Tripura, Assam and Nagaland to China, Madhav made it clear that this was no attempt at 'connecting North East with China'.[52] Indeed, the recent hostility in the Northern India region completely rules out any convergence over connectivity.

Instead, under Modi, the subregional group of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India (BBIN) assumed some traction. So did the moribund BIMSTEC in recent years, and the inclusion of subnational states, especially those adjoining international borders, has become part of the engagement narrative. In fact, whereas the BCIM with Kolkata as an endpoint still figures in most of the (unofficial) maps of the BRI (but was not mentioned at the second BRI forum in 2019[53]), from an Indian perspective the process by now has been subsumed into the BIMSTEC initiative – which excludes China. With Act East, the Modi government sought to merge both needs, the economic development of its fragile north-eastern states and the geostrategically driven development of closer ties to the adjoining Southeast Asian economies. The continued commitment to reaching out to Southeast Asia was visible in the presence of BIMSTEC leaders at the 2019 inauguration of Prime Minister Modi's second term in office. A draft of the BIMSTEC Master Plan of Transport Connectivity was approved in 2018, yet still awaits finalisation. If realised, the plan would further connect four South Asian economies with Myanmar and Thailand. However, by circumventing the existing and more advanced connectivity corridors by China it will be unable to fully optimise the commerce potential.

Connectivity corridor development in India's Southern Asian neighbourhood points to a lack of convergence between India and China. Certainly, the BCIM was not the first connectivity initiative to face difficulties in implementation, a problem that has plagued India's neighbourhood policies for decades.[54] Yet it is the political differences – horizontal competition – between the two that clearly impeded the creation of a complementary network as well as the maximisation of the resources available. Although beset with its own problems,[55] in a different geostrategic environment the BCIM could have served as an incubator of subregional connectivity investments, taking local needs and preferences into account more rigorously than the present situation. Moreover, by directly involving both large (West Bengal) and small states in the north-east, the BCIM could have empowered the marginalised parts in India's asymmetrical federal polity. Infusing important field knowledge difficult for policymakers at the centre to acquire could have helped with harnessing the emerging trend of Indian border regions engaging in subregional integration processes.[56] Finally, the more inclusive BCIM would have served India's smaller neighbours wary of taking sides better than the pursuit of parallel processes with China and India, separately. After all, India's connectivity corridors, which mainly link its north-east to Bangladesh and Myanmar, have been markedly less ambitious compared to the grandiose nature of China's BRI. Yet the horizontal

competition between states tends to silence subregional voices in the periphery. The economic potentials are subsumed under the increasingly contentious geopolitics of the region, one that has India and China pitted against each other.

Nation state centrism and connectivity in a 'Westphalian' Asia

Our depiction of competing infrastructure initiatives in South Asia shows the utility of contextualising them in inter-state (horizontal) as well as intra-state (vertical) dimensions. For actors on the receiving end of different connectivity projects in Asian borderlands, both the horizontal, Westphalian, nation-state order and the vertical, hierarchical domestic order matter. While the Westphalian order composed of nation-state containers[57] features prominently in academic and policy debates about connectivity, it can also blind us to the tension between connectivity visions forged through state capitals and subnational linkages. In fact, competing connectivity initiatives tend to play out precisely within Asia's most ethnically and culturally diverse borderlands. However, national initiatives tend to outcompete connectivity initiatives on other levels. This may create complications for – if not undermine – connectivity building in Asia, in at least three distinctive ways.

First, nation-state-centrism's preference for bilateralism or subregional multilateralism (as with BIMSTEC and the BBIN) precludes potentially more efficient multilateral arrangements:[58] BIMSTEC, for instance, excludes China, although a key neighbour to all the countries involved in the process. India, in turn, opposes the BRI despite virtually all of its neighbours finding some role within it. Looking beyond South Asia, in Central Asia, Russian acquiescence to China's BRI only came about following western sanctions[59] and despite profound worries that it would compete with Russia's own regional integration scheme, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and related notions of Russian supremacy in Central Asia.[60] Rather than fully aligning the EAEU with the BRI, Putin, from 2016 onwards, propagated his idea of a 'Greater Eurasian Partnership' – including not just China but also the EU and South Asia – with limited prospects so far.[61] Findings from Southeast Asia suggest that Japanese and Chinese connectivity strategies both have a tendency to undermine ASEAN, an otherwise relatively effective form of regional cooperation with a strong commitment to increase connectivity amongst its members.[62]

Similarly, hostility in many western European capitals and Brussels towards the BRI rests in large part on the fear of it essentially undermining European unity[63] as well as connectivity – a vertical competitor to the nation-state-driven BRI. Indeed, and despite its limited success so far, the BRI can be read (and has been read) as challenging the EU's investments in connectivity amongst member states and with third countries, for instance by way of setting diverging technical standards or ignoring European rules for tender processes. Where multilateral or supranational institutions are weaker, as is the case in Asia, effects may be more detrimental still. Hence, competitive connectivity does encourage the multilateralisation of regional affairs, oftentimes driven by weaker rivals and even in cases with a history of opposition to external influence and in which the region is central to a major power's identity (as is the case for India and Russia). As a consequence, on a project level India today is more willing than ever to collaborate with others in third countries – as, for instance, in deep-sea ports or nuclear power plants in Bangladesh.[64] Small recipient states, with their characteristic appreciation of inclusive multilateral setting and seeking to befriend all major powers, welcome this aspect of competing connectivity.[65]

Yet the kinds of emerging multilateral arrangements tend to be fragmented and exclusive: rather than including all major powers and recipient countries, various schemes with one or several but not all major powers exist side by side. Meanwhile, increasing Indian, Chinese and Japanese investments in recipient countries like Bangladesh have, over the past decade, crowded out multilateral lenders such as the World Bank and the ADB. Alongside a decline in their investments relative to those of national actors comes a decline in the influence multilateral lenders have on recipient governments.[66] The emergence of a new multilateral lender, the AIIB, founded in 2016, has not altered the picture so far. To the contrary, China's growing engagement has had a measurable impact on traditional lenders, such as the World Bank, both in terms of a more lenient conditionality and an emulation of the Chinese focus on large-scale infrastructure investments.[67]

Second, our illustration suggests that nation-state-centrism diminishes the space for subnational governments' participation or initiatives, including those particularly affected by foreign connectivity investments. This is most clearly visible for India's subnational states. Naturally, subnational governments in India are less concerned with issues of sovereignty and geopolitics. Instead, in their foreign affairs,[68] they tend to focus on pragmatic welfare gains, border issues from migration and crime to water sharing, and, in some cases, identity issues and cultural exchanges related to ethnic, religious or cultural kinship.[69] As outlined above, India's border states are keenly aware of regional connectivity's potential benefits within a fractured region culturally, economically and mentally distant from the mainland. Indeed, connectivity in many ways is a local affair with success depending on geographical, social, economic and environmental circumstances more intelligible to regional or local governments than to officials residing in national capitals. Yet – and despite the prominent role Chinese provinces continue to play in BRI-related foreign investments – the geopolitical baggage attached to both BRI and its competitors reinforces the dominance of central planners and foreign policymakers in recipient countries, rather than their local peers. Given the fact that on the Indian side, subnational governments at no point in time played a guiding role in the BCIM process, the initiative never fully embraced paradiplomacy as a mode of interaction. Officials from both Bangladesh and Myanmar represented their national capitals, rather than subnational regions.

Interestingly, herein authoritarian China, for which connectivity investments in South Asia and beyond follow from domestic economic considerations as least as much as geopolitical strategic ones, was the outlier. Yunnan province continued to play a driving role in the BCIM process, as outlined above. According to Jones and Zeng, not only is the BRI constituted in large part by pre-existing schemes developed by Chinese provinces, but since its inception in 2013, provinces and state-owned enterprises, amongst other actors, have successfully resisted the centre's attempt to rationalise and centralise the BRI. Rather than aligning the entire nation behind clearly defined goals and/or strategies, as the BRI as a geopolitical 'grand strategy' would have it, provincial governments, state owned enterprises and other actors 'lobbied furiously to influence the translation of Xi's slogans into concrete policy, in order to grab part of the spoils'. Local governments seeking central funding, in often 'poorly designed projects, driven by economic short-termism and approved within a weak, fragmented governance environment', contributed to a further process of fragmentation, rather than centralisation.[70] Ostensibly, where geopolitical sensitivities are high, as is the case in India, subnational governments have far fewer opportunities for real impact.

Third, and related, nation-state-centrism and the dominant model of governance within national capitals in many cases increases the social and political costs on the local level while

at the same time reducing attention to them in the name of the greater geopolitical interest. As has been observed elsewhere, urban areas and specific territories gain through connectivity while many other regions – interstitial locations, rural and peri-urban areas – are left behind: 'state-led projects rely on ambitious physical planning, with masterplans evincing elite, globalization-oriented objectives that neglect local needs and trigger displacement'.[71] For instance, the competitive nature of infrastructure development in Asia tends to speed up project decision-making – with the logical consequence of less time and attention being paid to matters of social and environmental sustainability or safety precautions.[72] As argued by Rüland, nation 'state-centrism and essentially non-participatory infrastructure schemes repeat developmental state practices and a strand of modernisation theory which viewed the "developmental dictatorship" as the most conducive governmental arrangement to kick-start the transformation of traditional societies'.[73] Moreover, indications are that the high stakes involved in geopolitical competition encourage corruption and nontransparency on behalf of competing investors.[74] Hence, geopolitics help national elites in their propensity to dismiss peripheral voices both more knowledgeable about and more affected by envisaged connectivity projects, with detrimental consequences for local livelihoods as well as projects' functional sustainability.

Conclusion

As an effort in conceptualisation, the preceding discussion shows that there are potentially two aspects of competing connectivity. One is the horizontal competition between national actors. Here, future empirical studies should look into how, precisely, horizontally competing connectivity projects interact within recipient countries, and the extent to which they undermine or complement each other, including technical aspects of interoperability and standard setting. In fact, once understood in economic rather than geopolitical terms, major powers' transnational connectivity initiatives promise benefits to all parties, from recipient countries to those seeking to bolster their trade with them. Moreover, depending on their capacity, recipient countries might stand to gain considerably from horizontal competition as they are increasingly in a position to choose amongst partners for their internal infrastructure development. On another level, however, competition over connectivity projects in third countries seems less constructive. Despite both India and China being deeply invested in the development of connectivity infrastructure regionally, geopolitics does not provide for an enabling environment where states convergence on the connectivity corridors. Each is planning to the exclusion of the other.

The other aspect of competing connectivity is the vertical competition between national and subnational actors, including subnational governments, local businesses and civil society. Whereas there are ample empirical examples for the success of subnational actors' connectivity initiatives, from Chinese provinces in particular, the BCIM discussed above suggests that the current geopolitical scenario has reduced the space for their counterparts in recipient countries. In that sense, the very adoption of the BRI as a national strategy has, in some cases at least, undermined its proclaimed motive, which is the establishment of sustainable connectivity across Asia. In particular, harnessing pre-existing societal linkages in Asian borderlands – arguably a natural entry point for increasing connectivity in line with the professed aim of furthering people-to-people contacts – has become more difficult as capitals motivated by geopolitics tighten their grip. Herein lies the paradox of competing connectivity in Asia.

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Notes

1. Wroughton and Brunnstrom, "Wary of China's Rise."
2. European Union External Action Service, "Connecting Europe and Asia."
3. Li, "Belt and Road Initiative," 169–87; Schulze and Blechinger-Talcott, "Introduction: Dimensions of Sino–Japanese Rivalry," 726.
4. Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization*.
5. Kavalski, "Unexpected Consequences of China's Cooperation," 1–19; Junxian and Yan, "China's New Silk Road," 105–30.
6. See, for instance, Paul, "When Balance of Power Meets Globalization," 50–63.
7. We understand a connectivity strategy as a foreign policy proposal or set of foreign policy proposals, which assign infrastructure investments in the widest sense a key role in furthering a country's wider foreign and/or domestic policy goals. Examples include the BRI as well as Act East, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the EU's connectivity strategy for Asia.

8. Tellmann, Opitz, and Kolb, "Operations of the Global."
9. Ibid., 212.
10. Ibid.
11. Kolb, "Exploring the Metaphor of Connectivity."
12. Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization,* 5–7.
13. Tellmann, Opitz and Staehli, "Operations of the Global," 212.
14. Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization,* 6.
15. Kolb, "Exploring the Metaphor of Connectivity."
16. Also see Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization,* 18; and Lobo-Guerrero and Kuntz, "Connectivity as Problem."
17. Xavier, "Sambandh as Strategy."
18. Fünfgeld, "Dream of ASEAN Connectivity," 287–311.
19. Asian Development Bank, *Meeting Asia's Infrastructure Needs*, vii.
20. Fünfgeld, "Dream of ASEAN Connectivity," 299.
21. European Union External Action Service, "Connecting Europe and Asia," 3.
22. Despite the fact that Bhutan opted out of the agreement.
23. Benabdallah, "Contesting the International Order by Integrating It," 92–108.
24. Plagemann, "Small States and Competing Connectivity Strategies."
25. Freeman, "China's 'Regionalism Foreign Policy,'" 81–97.
26. Rüland, "Old Wine in New Bottles?"
27. Kolb, "Exploring the Metaphor of Connectivity," 140.
28. Ironically, this is precisely what is now being challenged by a 'new buzzword': decoupling. See, for instance, Rachman, "Worlds Apart."
29. Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization*, 6.
30. Destradi, *Indian Foreign and Security Policy in South Asia*.
31. See Lintner, *Great Game East*.
32. Interestingly, this was initially designed to establish an access for India's mainland via sea to its north-east region that was being denied by its eastern neighbour, Bangladesh.
33. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Formed in 1997 and headquartered in Dhaka, BIMSTEC was moribund for years. With the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) taken hostage by Indo–Pakistani tensions, BIMSTEC gained some new impetus in the late 2010s.
34. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative. The BBIN is a loose cooperation scheme focusing on concrete connectivity-related issues, such as the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement.
35. Hampered by a lack of financial means when compared to China's BRI, New Delhi has begun collaborating with Japan on several of the transport corridors within India as well as within Bangladesh (The Dhaka Metro Line). Whereas India has always been wary of any untoward presence in the north-east, involving Japan is viewed differently in terms of its own status as a geostrategic ally vis-à-vis China.
36. A similar and more successful initiative was the North–South Economic Corridor from Kunming to Bangkok and Hanoi. See Tubilewicz, "Paradiplomacy as a Provincial State-Building Project," 931–49.
37. Summers, "(Re)Positioning Yunnan," 446.
38. Indiresan, "Kunming Initiative."
39. Ibid.
40. Bhaumik, "Kolktata to Kunming."
41. Author interviews with five former participants in the track-two process in May 2015: three academic experts in Delhi, one Bangladeshi think tanker in Dhaka and one senior Bangladeshi diplomat in Dhaka.
42. Gupta, *How India Manages Its National Security*.
43. See, for instance, Bhattacharjee, "Act East through Northeast." Interestingly, West Bengal, despite being the endpoint of the prospective corridor, showed very little interest and, if it did, only supported the BCIM process in an ad hoc manner.

44. Krishnan, "China Highlights Outcome of Manmohan's Visit."
45. Interview with former diplomat engaged with the process, C. V. Ranganathan, 4 January 2020, Bangalore.
46. And, in fact, some scholars understand the BRI less as a novel initiative than as a unifying package for all these initiatives and projects that had been around already. See Summers, "China's 'New Silk Roads,'" 1628–43.
47. Iyer, "Reviving the Comatose Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor."
48. Business Standard, "Modi Told China."
49. Jain and Singh Maini, "India's Subnational Governments Foray," 305.
50. As Nimmi Kurian argues, India's institutional fora such as the Ministry of External Affairs' States Division and the Inter-State Council, so far, failed to effectively mediate between border states and the centre. See Kurian, *Future Is Federal*. In fact, an assessment of 314 episodes of international engagements by India's states, from 1996 to 2018, revealed that subnational states' engagement in international affairs was a function of the partisan political relationship the state incumbents have with the national incumbents. See Sharma, Destradi, and Plagemann, "Partisan Federalism and Subnational Governments' International Engagements," 566–92.
51. See, for instance, Saran, "Role of Border States in India's Foreign Policy."
52. Press Trust of India. "India Plans to Connect North East with Bangladesh's Chittagong Port: Madhav," *India Today*, August 15, 2018. https://www.indiatoday.in/pti-feed/story/india-plans-to-connect-north-east-with-bangladesh-s-chittagong-port-madhav-1315378-2018-08-15
53. The Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. "Joint Communique of the Leaders' Roundtable of the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation." April 27, 2019. http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2019/0427/c36-1311.html
54. See, for instance, Ramachandran, "Trouble with India's Projects in Myanmar."
55. Including greatly diverging capacities on behalf of India's state governments to engage in paradiplomacy; interview with two anonymous South Asian diplomatic sources (2015 and 2017).
56. See Kurian, *Future Is Federal*.
57. See, for instance, Rahman, '*Pickled' Infrastructure and Connectivity*.
58. Rüland and Arndt, "How China and India Compete."
59. 'Chinese analysts recognize that Russia's rapprochement with China is driven by Western sanctions': see Makocki, *Silk Road Goes North*, 7.
60. China prior to 2013 tried to move the SCO towards closer economic cooperation and policy coordination in areas such as energy to trade and, perhaps eventually, a free trade area. Once it became clear that Russia resisted this, Chinese efforts shifted toward OBOR and later the BRI. Yet, 'Russia's concerns about growing Chinese influence in Central Asia have not gone away'. See Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 76–7.
61. Köstem, "Russia's Search for a Greater Eurasia."
62. Mueller, "Challenges to ASEAN Centrality and Hedging."
63. Gabusi, "No Losers?," 96–108.
64. Rafee, "Bangladesh's Tryst with China's BRI."
65. Plagemann, "Small States and Competing Connectivity Strategies."
66. For evidence from Bangladesh, see ibid. For quantitative evidence, see Hernandez, "Are 'New' Donors Challenging World Bank Conditionality?," 529–49.
67. Zeitz, "Emulate or Differentiate?," 265–92.
68. For a detailed comparison of foreign policy interests at the centre and in China's Yunnan province, see Liu and Song, "Beyond the Hinterland."
69. Jacob, *Putting the Periphery at the Center*.
70. See Jones and Zeng, "Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative,'" 1422, 1428.
71. Kanai and Schindler, "Peri-Urban Promises of Connectivity."
72. See Rüland, "Old Wine in New Bottles?," 9–10.
73. Ibid., 10.
74. Consider the Bangladeshi power sector, where emergency powers have been renewed repeatedly, thereby circumventing the legal need for open tenders and opening the door for corrup-

tion alongside major foreign investments. According to the World Bank in 2017, infrastructure costs in Bangladesh exceed costs in any other country. See BDNews24.com, "Bangladesh Infrastructure Is World's Costliest." Elsewhere, too, '[crony-driven] development deepens existing social inequalities, facilitates widespread social injustices such as indiscriminate land grabbing by government officials in Cambodia and Myanmar, and poses serious obstacles to social reform policies'; see Rüland, "Old Wine in New Bottles?," 10.

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