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CHINA'S GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS AND APPROACHES IN THE SOUTH ASIA REGION

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Abstract: This article analyzes China's geostrategic interests and political approaches in the South Asian region. As South Asia increasingly becomes a key area in global politics and economic relations due to its strategic location, large population, and economic potential, China is making the region a growing priority within the framework of its broader foreign policy and global ambitions. The article examines China's role in developing trade and investment relations with South Asian countries through economic reforms, with particular attention given to the significance of the "Belt and Road Initiative" in enhancing infrastructure development and regional integration. It discusses the complex aspects of China-India relations, China's strategic partnerships with other countries in the region, and the debates surrounding "debt-trap" diplomacy. The article also explores China's expanding presence in terms of access to the Indian Ocean, military cooperation, and regional security, as well as efforts to secure energy and natural resources, its rivalry with the US Indo-Pacific strategy, and China's long-term geostrategic objectives.

Keywords: China's foreign policy, South Asian countries, geostrategic interests, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), String of Pearls strategy, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), the United States of America, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), regional security, infrastructure diplomacy, energy security, geoeconomic approach, strategic partnership.

INTRODUCTION: South Asia is a region of significant geopolitical and economic importance in global politics due to its strategic location, large population and rich resources. As a crossroads of maritime and land trade routes, it has become an arena of competition between major powers, especially global powers. In recent decades, China's geostrategic interests in South Asia have increased sharply. This is due to its desire to gain economic dominance, energy resources and regional influence, as well as to counter rival powers. This article analyzes China's multifaceted approaches to the region and considers the impact of these approaches on the political, economic and security environment of South Asia. The relevance of the study is that it sheds light on China's emergence as a global superpower and its strategic actions in South Asia. The role of this region is especially important within the framework of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. Through diplomatic relations, economic investments and military cooperation, China has deepened its influence. The article discusses key issues such as China's control over strategic ports, its need for energy and resources, and its "debt trap" diplomacy, which has sparked

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debates about economic dependence. It also analyzes China's competition with the US Indo-Pacific strategy and its long-term goals to change regional dynamics.

RESEARCH METHODS: This scientific article combines qualitative and analytical research approaches. The main goal is to identify China's geostrategic interests in South Asia, analyze the political and economic approaches implemented on the basis of these interests, and explain the dynamics of relations with countries in the region. During the writing of the scientific article, scientific books and articles by political scientists, analytical documents of research centers were widely used.

DISCUSSION: South Asia's geopolitical importance is due to its proximity to the important sea lanes through the Indian Ocean that provide global trade and energy flows. The region is home to over 1.9 billion people, a large part of the world's population. India, located in the region, stands out as an emerging economic power. Economically, South Asia is experiencing steady growth. According to the World Bank's 2024 forecast, India's GDP is expected to exceed US$3 trillion, making it one of the fastest growing economies in the world [1]. The region's proximity to conflict-prone areas of the Middle East and its role as a "buffer zone" between major powers make it an important place in global security dynamics. Politically, South Asia is a region of states with diverse systems of governance. While India has chosen the path of democracy, Pakistan has a mixed political system, and the remaining small states have diverse political structures. The rivalry between India and Pakistan over their nuclear capabilities and unresolved territorial disputes (Kashmir issue) further complicate the region's place in global politics. The integration of South Asian countries into global institutions such as SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and their expanding ties with major external powers are increasing the diplomatic weight of the region. As a rising power, China is seeking to expand its influence in South Asia. Through this, it aims to secure its economic interests, balance India's dominance in the region, and achieve strategic dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. The "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects clearly demonstrate China's economic and geopolitical ambitions in the region [2].

China's objectives in South Asia are multifaceted and include economic, strategic, and political interests. Economically, China seeks access to markets and resources in South Asia and secure maritime routes through the Indian Ocean. The Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, is a key pillar of China's economic strategy. It has seen major investments in infrastructure projects in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), worth more than $60 billion, is intended to connect China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Gwadar port. This would give China direct access to the Arabian Sea [3]. Strategically, China

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seeks to counterbalance the influence of India, which it sees as a regional rival in South Asia. China is seeking to strategically surround India by developing strong ties with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. This approach is often referred to as the "String of Pearls" strategy [4]. It allows China to protect its maritime interests and project its presence in the Indian Ocean by developing ports and infrastructure in the countries surrounding India. Politically, China wants to maintain stability in South Asia to secure its investments and ensure that regional governments align with China's global geopolitical goals. This includes supporting smaller states such as Nepal and the Maldives to reduce dependence on India and developing partnerships to strengthen China's "soft power." China's support for authoritarian regimes or mixed regimes in the region is consistent with its non-interference in domestic politics and differs from the West's approach [5]. China's economic reforms began with policies aimed at opening its economy to the global market, attracting foreign direct investment, and promoting export-led growth. As a result of these reforms, China has become the world's second-largest economy by nominal GDP, with an emphasis on industrialization and infrastructure development. By the early 2000s, China was facing overproduction in its steel and cement industries, which prompted it to seek overseas markets and investment. The Belt and Road Initiative emerged as a solution to these problems, and became a means of channeling excess capital and expertise into overseas infrastructure projects, securing trade routes, and increasing geopolitical influence [6]. South Asia, with its proximity to China and rapidly developing economies, has become one of the key regions under the Belt and Road Initiative. The region's geographic location, connecting East Asia to the Indian Ocean and beyond, is in line with China's goal of securing maritime and land trade routes. According to a study published in the journal PLOS One in 2023, economic growth, industrialization, and rising savings in China and South Asia have significantly boosted trade cooperation under the Belt and Road [7]Initiative. This cooperation reflects China's goal of integrating South Asia into its global economic strategy and expanding transport and trade links by harnessing the region's potential. The Belt and Road Initiative aims to connect Asia, Africa, and Europe through infrastructure, trade, and cultural exchanges [8]. South Asia is central to this strategy because it serves as a "bridge" between East Asia and the Indian Ocean, and provides access to markets in Africa and Europe. The region is home to Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and the Maldives, all of whom are key partners in the Belt and Road Initiative, and projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM) and the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (THICC)

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are underway. South Asia's role is not only economic, but also geopolitical. The Belt and Road Initiative is seen as a diplomatic tool to expand China's "soft power" through infrastructure, digital technologies and cultural exchanges. However, the initiative has also raised some concerns, particularly from India. India sees the Belt and Road Initiative, and especially the CPEC project, as a strategic move by China to encircle it through alliances with neighboring countries against it [9]. Nevertheless, South Asia remains an attractive region for Chinese investment, having achieved an average annual economic growth of 7.6% between 2014 and 2018.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched in 2015 and is a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative. Its total investment is estimated at 62 billion US dollars. The main objective of the project is to connect the city of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province with the port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea coast of Pakistan through a network of roads, railways, pipelines and energy projects [10]. The first phase, covering the period 2015-2020, focused on developing energy and infrastructure, which was intended to overcome Pakistan's long-standing energy shortage and modernize its transport network. In 2016, Chinese cargo was delivered to the port of Gwadar by land, marking the partial commissioning of the corridor. The strategic importance of CPEC is that it provides China with a direct access to the Indian Ocean and bypasses the dangerous Strait of Malacca. For Pakistan, the corridor promises economic transformation through job creation, industrial growth, and improved transport links. The Rashakai and Dhabiji Special Economic Zones are being built with the aim of transforming Pakistan into a regional manufacturing hub [11]. However, Pakistan's debt to China of more than $29 billion by 2024 and a lack of transparency in the projects have drawn criticism [12]. Since 2020, CPEC has been expanded to focus on industrial cooperation, agriculture, and digital infrastructure development. The Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC), co-chaired by Pakistani and Chinese officials, coordinates these efforts. Despite geopolitical tensions and internal political instability in Pakistan, CPEC remains a model for the Belt and Road Initiative and demonstrates China's ability to advance its strategic goals while adapting to local conditions [13].

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China's infrastructure projects in South Asia are not limited to Pakistan, it has also invested significantly in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh. These projects are part of the "Maritime Silk Road" of the "Belt and Road" initiative, which will facilitate China's access to the Indian Ocean and strengthen trade networks. Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean has become a focus for Chinese investment. The port of Gambantota, one of the key projects of the "Belt and Road", was leased to China for 99 years in 2017 after Sri Lanka defaulted on a $1.1 billion debt [14]. This has led to accusations of "debt trap diplomacy", with Sri Lanka's debts to Japan, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank being much higher than its obligations to China. The Colombo Port City projects aim to transform Sri Lanka into a regional financial hub, but they have raised concerns about their environmental impact and growing Chinese influence. Nepal officially joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017, and its Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor project aims to improve transport links across the Himalayan mountain range. The project includes highways, hydroelectric power plants and a rail link to China [15]. However, the projects have been slow to progress due to financing disputes and geopolitical risks related to India. Nepal's desire to balance China with India suggests it is taking a cautious approach to Belt and Road projects, prioritizing economic benefits but avoiding becoming overly dependent on Chinese loans. Bangladesh has become a key partner of the Belt and Road Initiative, with projects such as the Payra Port and the Padma Bridge serving to boost transport links and trade. In 2025, Bangladesh officially joined the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which marks the country's deeper integration into China's economic corridors [16]. These projects aim to take advantage of Bangladesh's rapidly growing economy and strategic maritime access. However, as the amount of debt borrowed from China has reached record levels, there are concerns about debt sustainability [17].

The economic reforms of China in 1978 and India in 1991 transformed both countries into global economic powers, paving the way for significant growth in bilateral trade. By 2024, trade between China and India was expected to reach US$135.9 billion, making China India's largest trading partner, surpassing the United States [18]. India's exports to China, which included iron ore, cotton, and organic chemicals, were US$16.8 billion, while imports from China, mainly electronics, machinery, and pharmaceuticals, amounted to US$118.4 billion, resulting in a trade

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deficit of US$101.6 billion. This imbalance reflects India's dependence on Chinese manufacturing, particularly in the electronics and active pharmaceutical ingredients sectors; by 2023, 70 percent of India's active pharmaceutical ingredients imports came from China. Economic cooperation is not limited to trade, but also encompasses investment and technology. Chinese companies such as Xiaomi, Vivo and BYD are investing heavily in India's consumer electronics and automotive industries, creating jobs and contributing to the "Make in India" initiative [19]. At the same time, major Indian IT companies such as TCS and Infosys operate in China and serve the digital market there. While China joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement in 2022, India withdrew from the agreement in 2019, reflecting its cautious approach to economic integration with China [20]. The risk of the Indian market being oversaturated with Chinese products and strategic vulnerabilities have led to this.

The 3,488-kilometer Line of Actual Control (LAC) border dispute between China and India remains a major obstacle to stable relations. The dispute dates back to the colonial-era McMahon Line Agreement of 1914 and involves competing territorial claims in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. The 1962 Sino-Indian War resulted in China gaining control of Aksai Chin, exacerbating the historic distrust [21]. In recent years, the border has seen sporadic clashes. The most serious incident occurred in June 2020 in the Galwan Valley, where 20 Indian and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers were killed [22]. It was the bloodiest conflict since 1962, prompting military deployments, economic retaliation, and a partial disengagement. In October 2024, both sides agreed to resume patrols in the Depsang and Demchok areas, indicating a easing of tensions, but tensions remain over unresolved issues in other parts of the Line of Control. These border disputes are being further complicated by infrastructure development. India is concerned that China is building roads, airstrips, and villages near the Line of Control as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, which it sees as a strategic encroachment. India is responding by ramping up its own border infrastructure, with the Atal Tunnel and roads in Arunachal Pradesh being built to increase its military presence. The Line of Control disputes reflect a broader geostrategic competition, not just territorial claims, where both countries are seeking to expand their spheres of influence using military and economic means.

The relationship between China and India is increasingly defined by geostrategic competition. The two countries are competing for leadership in Asia and shaping the global order. China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, launched in 2013, is the cornerstone of its global strategy, aiming to increase connectivity through infrastructure projects across Asia, Africa and Europe. South Asia is a key part of this initiative, as is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which India opposes because it passes through disputed territories such as Gilgit-Baltistan. India sees

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the "One Belt, One Road" projects, particularly the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka and the Payra Port in Bangladesh, as part of China's "String of Pearls" strategy, through which China seeks to encircle India by sea and land. India is responding by promoting its own regional initiatives, such as the "Act East Policy", the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor with Japan, and the International North-South Transport Corridor with Russia and Iran. These initiatives are intended to increase India's influence in the Indo-Pacific and Central Asia and counter China's dominance. India leads the Quad group, along with the United States, Japan, and Australia, and is strengthening military ties with Western countries, signaling its intention to counter China's growing influence [23].

RESULTS: The US Indo-Pacific Strategy, formalized by the Trump administration in 2017 and further refined under the Biden administration, aims to preserve the principle of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP). The strategy emphasizes the international rules-based order, the freedom of navigation, and strengthening alliances to counter China's growing influence [24]. The 2022 US National Security Strategy singles out China as "the only adversary with the ambition to change the international order and the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so." This approach clearly demonstrates that US-China competition is shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region. The FOIP strategy is based on three core principles: security, economic cooperation, and governance. On the security front, the United States has deepened alliances with India, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN countries, and has strengthened cooperation through joint military exercises and defense agreements. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which includes the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, is a key pillar of this strategy. Created in 2007 as a simple platform for dialogue, the Quad has now expanded its scope to include military exercises, vaccine diplomacy, climate change, and collaborative initiatives on key technologies such as 5G and artificial intelligence [25]. The Quad's development reflects a growing consensus among members to counter China's aggressive maritime actions and promote a rules-based order in the region. In South Asia, the United States has chosen India as a key partner, viewing it as a counterweight to China. India's military capabilities, including its naval and nuclear arsenals, make it an equal competitor to China, but its policy of "strategic autonomy" limits its ability to form a full-fledged alliance with the United States. The United States has sought to strengthen economic and security cooperation with smaller South Asian states such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives, with the aim of broadening their strategic options and reducing their dependence on China [26]. U.S. assistance to support Rohingya

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refugees in Bangladesh and for economic diversification is aimed at counterbalancing China's infrastructural influence. The United States also launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Platform (IPEF) in 2022, which promotes high-standard trade, supply chain sustainability, and clean energy cooperation [27]. However, IPEF's emphasis on setting economic standards rather than investment makes it less attractive than China's Belt and Road Initiative, which offers specific infrastructure projects.

South Asian countries are adopting a strategy of "hedging" in the US-China rivalry. This approach allows countries to engage with two major powers simultaneously, reaping economic and security benefits, and reducing the risk of becoming overly involved in conflicts between major powers [28]. While Sri Lanka has welcomed Chinese investment through infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, it is also seeking support from the US and India to counterbalance Beijing's influence. Bangladesh has also used its strategic geographic location as a leverage to attract investment from China and the US, while maintaining a neutral stance on regional security issues. ASEAN's approach provides a useful comparison in this regard. ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam have adopted a "light" or "moderate" hedging strategy, seeking to gain economic and security benefits from engaging with the United States and China, but refraining from forming an outright alliance with either power [29]. Smaller states in South Asia are also facing similar pressures, but their diplomatic options are relatively limited. Nepal is trying to avoid becoming overly dependent on Beijing by balancing Chinese investments in hydropower and transport infrastructure with assistance from India and the United States. The Maldives is also showing how small states can adopt a delicate strategic approach, seeking to balance the influence of China and India.

The rivalry between the US and China has profound implications for stability in South Asia, creating both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, it has fostered cooperation in the region on non-traditional security issues, such as climate change, maritime security, and public health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Quad's vaccine diplomacy initiatives and focus on combating climate change have demonstrated a commitment to working together to address common regional challenges. Such cooperation can enhance regional cohesion and resilience. On the other hand, it risks polarizing the region by forcing countries in South Asia to choose between two powers or subjecting them to economic and security pressures. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warned in 2019 that US-China tensions could lead to the emergence of "rival blocs" and undermine ASEAN's central role [30]. China's assertive actions in the South China Sea and border disputes with India are increasing tensions in the region. The US response

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to this situation by increasing its military presence in the Indo-Pacific and supporting the Quad alliances, while aiming to contain China, risks exacerbating the conflict. A 2024 report by the Carnegie Endowment warned that a major US-China military conflict over Taiwan could create a new "Cold War" scenario and destabilize the entire Indo-Pacific, including South Asia [31].

CONCLUSION: In conclusion, China's strategy in South Asia is complex but coherent. It is shaping the region's economic infrastructure while expanding its sphere of political influence. China's future strategy in South Asia has the potential to profoundly change the geopolitical landscape of the region, serving its long-term geostrategic goals. This strategy is being implemented not only through economic projects, but also through political and military means. China sees South Asia as one of the key directions for its foreign policy and economic interests, and is trying to strengthen its influence there. This is clearly manifested in the infrastructure projects, ports and roads implemented through the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. China's long-term geostrategic goals are to provide security guarantees, control regional trade routes, access to energy resources and achieve geoeconomic superiority. China is gaining direct access to the Indian Ocean, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor with Pakistan and ports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal. This will allow it to expand its strategic freedom of movement and influence on global sea routes. However, the growing economic and infrastructural dependence of South Asian countries on China is threatening their political sovereignty. Through loans, investments, and infrastructure projects, China is enslaving the countries of the region. As a result, concerns are being raised in some countries about "debt trap diplomacy." At the same time, while these countries are gaining short-term economic benefits from close ties with China, long-term sovereignty issues remain open. South Asia is an important area for China to strengthen its image as a global superpower. South Asia, with its strategic location in the region, the presence of a major geopolitical rival like India, and as a crossroads of global sea routes, is becoming a bastion for China's global ambitions. China is seeking to position itself in the region not only as an economic partner, but also as a guarantor of security and political stability.

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