"China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transformed South Asia from a regional space into a theatre of great power competition." Analyse the strategic implications of the BRI for India's security and regional influence in South Asia.



MAINS MASTERY 2026 · GS PAPER II · QUESTION 20 · STUDENT EDITION

China's BRI and India's South Asian Strategy

THE QUESTION, AS SET IN UPSC CSE MAINS 2026

"China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transformed South Asia from a regional space into a theatre of great power competition." Analyse the strategic implications of the BRI for India's security and regional influence in South Asia.

Directive: Analyse | 15 marks | 250 words | International relations: BRI and South Asia

1 **PYQ Deep Decode**
Demand, hidden demand and structure

2 **PYQ Intelligence**
2013 to 2026: China and South Asia

3 **Additional information**
Regional cases and strategic effects

4 **Pitfalls and variations**
Six corrections and changed demands

5 **The model answer**
252 words, four analytical parts

6 **Other ways to write it**
Alternative strategic outlines

7 **Quick recall**
Sixteen verified BRI facts

8 **Write it yourself**
Seven checks and primary sources

Guranchal Ma'am, Founder, UPSC Gurus · upscgurus.in

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1 PYQ Deep Decode

Read the question as a strategic argument: what the BRI has changed in South Asia, what those changes mean for India's security and regional influence, and how South Asian states themselves shape the outcome.

1.1 The demand

The question asks you to **analyse the claim** that China's Belt and Road Initiative has transformed South Asia into a theatre of great-power competition, and then trace its **strategic implications for India's security and regional influence**. "Analyse" requires showing **how the BRI changes the regional strategic environment**, through infrastructure, financing, diplomatic access and connectivity, and explaining the consequences for each Indian interest. The answer must establish **mechanisms and outcomes**, not merely catalogue Chinese projects. The opening claim also needs qualification: the BRI has intensified competition, but South Asia had strategic rivalries before 2013, and not every Chinese-financed asset constitutes a military threat.

Words in the question	What they ask you to do	What goes wrong if you miss them
China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	Identify the land and maritime connectivity initiative, proposed in 2013, and its regional instruments: CPEC, ports, roads, energy, finance and diplomatic partnerships.	Listing Chinese investments without distinguishing BRI projects, other bilateral investments and proposed projects.
has transformed South Asia	Test the extent of change: China has become a more important infrastructure and financing partner, but historical India-Pakistan rivalry and wider power competition predate the BRI.	Accepting that the BRI created all regional competition.
a theatre of great power competition	Trace how competing economic, diplomatic, maritime and security interests intersect, involving China, India and external partners such as the United States and Japan.	Reducing the region to a two-country military confrontation.
Analyse the strategic implications	Explain causal links: investment may create access; access may affect leverage; infrastructure may have dual-use potential; financing may reshape diplomatic choices. Separate actual effects from prospective risks.	Giving a project list or a generic advantages-disadvantages answer.
India's security	Assess CPEC's sovereignty implications, the China-Pakistan strategic nexus, possible maritime access, surveillance concerns and vulnerabilities arising from external control of critical infrastructure.	Treating every Chinese-funded port as an operational naval base.
regional influence in South Asia	Assess India's relationships with neighbours, development-financing credibility, diplomatic access and the competition to shape connectivity networks. Examine India's responses.	Discussing military containment while neglecting development and diplomacy.

THE DEMAND IN ONE LINE

Establish how the BRI intensifies great-power competition in South Asia, then trace its distinct consequences for India's territorial and maritime security, neighbourhood diplomacy and regional connectivity, while testing how far those consequences depend on the choices of South Asian states.

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1.2 The hidden demand

Are South Asian countries merely arenas of China-India competition, or do their own choices and strategic interests determine how the BRI affects India's position? This is the qualification that separates a strategic analysis from a geopolitical project catalogue. Nepal seeks alternative transit routes; Sri Lanka seeks investment and debt sustainability; Maldives seeks infrastructure, tourism and fiscal relief; Bangladesh pursues economic connectivity with multiple partners. These countries **negotiate, diversify, defer, reject or redesign projects** according to their own domestic and foreign-policy priorities. In Nepal's **4 December 2024 BRI Cooperation Framework**, financing for specific projects requires separate negotiation, and cooperation with other countries is expressly permitted. Therefore, **Chinese investment does not mechanically produce Chinese strategic control**, just as India's geographical proximity does not automatically guarantee political influence.

Distinguish the observed development from the strategic interpretation. The middle column is the evidence; the last column is the assessment.

Observed development	What it establishes	What must still be tested
CPEC crosses territory claimed by India.	A direct sovereignty objection and deeper China-Pakistan connectivity.	Which operational capabilities and vulnerabilities actually result from the corridor?
Hambantota's 2017 concession lasts 99 years.	Long-duration Chinese commercial involvement in a strategically situated port.	Does port access translate into military rights? A commercial concession alone does not establish a Chinese naval base.
Nepal's 2024 BRI framework identifies projects for negotiation.	China offers another source of connectivity and financing.	Which projects will be financed, completed and chosen over alternatives?
India's 2025 engagements with Sri Lanka and Maldives.	India retains significant development and diplomatic capacity.	Whether implementation and local trust sustain that influence.

WEAK

China is surrounding India through ports and debt traps. All South Asian neighbours are becoming dependent on China, so India's regional influence is declining.

STRONG

CPEC raises a direct sovereignty concern, while Chinese participation in Indian Ocean ports creates potential dual-use and diplomatic risks. Yet Sri Lanka's 2017 Hambantota concession does not itself establish a naval base, and Nepal's 2024 BRI framework preserves project-level negotiations and cooperation with other partners. The strategic outcome depends on access arrangements, financing and host-country decisions.

1.3 The structure

The question has **three explicit requirements in order**: explain the regional transformation, assess security implications, and assess implications for India's regional influence. The hidden demand becomes the **small final part**. The shares refer to the body between the introduction and conclusion and are a teaching guide, not a UPSC rule.

"China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transformed South Asia from a regional space into a theatre of great power competition." Analyse the strategic implications of the BRI for India's security and regional influence in South Asia.

Introduction	1. BRI and great-power competition about three-tenths	2. India's security about three-tenths	3. India's regional influence about three-tenths	4. Neighbourhood agency about one-tenth	Conclusion

Part 1 China's BRI and the transformation of South Asia into a theatre of great-power competition about three-tenths

Economic and strategic reach	Land corridors, energy and transport projects, maritime infrastructure and long-term financing. CPEC is the flagship example.
Changing influence	Infrastructure funding increases China's economic presence and diplomatic engagement in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Maldives.
Competition and its extent	India, China and other partners compete over financing, standards, port access and regional partnerships; old rivalries remain important.

Part 2 Strategic implications for India's security in South Asia about three-tenths

Territory and borders	CPEC through Pakistan-occupied Indian-claimed territory; China-Pakistan strategic coordination; wider border implications.
Maritime and connectivity security	Gwadar and Hambantota; possible dual-use facilities, surveillance access and pressure near important sea lanes.
Strategic dependencies	Critical infrastructure contracts, debt-service obligations, operational rights and technology dependence may constrain policy choices.

Part 3 Strategic implications for India's regional influence in South Asia about three-tenths

Bilateral relationships	Neighbours gain alternatives to Indian funding, transit and diplomatic engagement.
Economic and diplomatic influence	Competition over the visibility, speed, quality and sustainability of development assistance.
Regional connectivity	Competing trade corridors, ports, grids, border links and standards.
India's responses	Neighbourhood First, BBIN, BIMSTEC, energy integration, development assistance and maritime cooperation.

Part 4 Agency of South Asian states in shaping the regional strategic balance about one-tenth

Independent priorities	Trade access, financing needs, sovereignty, domestic politics and public opinion.
Strategic choice	Accept, renegotiate, diversify or postpone projects; avoid exclusive alignment where possible.
Judgement	The BRI alters incentives, but host states determine much of the actual strategic outcome.

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1.4 How to present it

Four numbered parts with analytical headings fit the demand best. Open Part 1 with a short causal chain showing how connectivity can generate strategic leverage. Use **headed points** for security and influence, each joining a concrete case to its Indian implication. Reserve the final short part for host-country agency. The model answer should not be dominated by a country-by-country inventory, because the examiner wants **strategic implications**, not an atlas of projects.

Form	Fit here	Reason
Causal chain, headed points, brief judgement	**Best**	Makes the mechanism visible, separates security from influence, and leaves room for qualification.
Security-versus-influence table	Good	Direct comparison, but may compress the regional transformation and neighbourhood agency.
Country-by-country catalogue	Limited	Useful for background study, but tends to repeat project descriptions instead of analysing consequences.
Unqualified encirclement narrative	Weak	Conflates commercial infrastructure, potential military access and actual military deployment.

1.5 The introduction and the conclusion

The introduction serves the whole question. State that the BRI has brought Chinese infrastructure finance and connectivity networks into South Asia, intensifying strategic competition and creating simultaneous opportunities and risks for India's security and regional influence. Do not begin with a project list or a dictionary definition.

The conclusion settles the demand. The BRI alters the regional balance but does not predetermine it. India must defend sovereignty and maritime interests while becoming the preferred, reliable development partner, respecting neighbouring states' independent choices.

2 PYQ Intelligence 2013 to 2026

How the BRI became part of South Asia's strategic environment, what UPSC has repeatedly tested about China and neighbourhood relations, and what should be prepared next.

2.1 Why the subject was topical in 2026

The question follows a long period of expanding Chinese infrastructure engagement in South Asia and increasingly visible Indian, American and other responses. The key developments include CPEC, Sri Lanka's port concessions, Nepal's revised BRI framework and new India-led connectivity agreements. By the time of the **August 2026 GS examination**, the relevant issue was no longer simply whether China had invested in the region, but **whether economic access had altered strategic choices and India's relative influence**. UPSC does not disclose why it selects a question, so these are **context, not asserted causes**. All developments listed predate the examination.

When	What happened	Why it matters for this question
September to October 2013	President Xi Jinping proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, subsequently known together as the **BRI**. China issued its official Vision and Actions document on **28 March 2015**.	Connectivity becomes a major instrument of China's international economic engagement.

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When	What happened	Why it matters for this question
April 2015	During Xi Jinping's Pakistan visit, China and Pakistan agreed to advance **CPEC**, centred on Gwadar, transport, energy and industrial cooperation. China's embassy in Pakistan identifies CPEC as a major BRI project.	China's economic programme intersects directly with Pakistan's strategic partnership and India's territorial concerns.
October 2016	Xi Jinping visits **Bangladesh**; the two countries elevate relations to a Strategic Partnership of Cooperation and deepen infrastructure engagement. China's embassy identifies Bangladesh as an early South Asian BRI partner.	Chinese financing creates another development option for a major Indian neighbour.
12 to 13 May 2017	Nepal signs an initial **BRI memorandum** with China on 12 May. On 13 May, India's Ministry of External Affairs publicly explains its non-participation in China's Belt and Road Forum, citing sovereignty, transparency, environmental safeguards and responsible financing.	India articulates a principled objection while China expands regional participation.
December 2017	Sri Lanka and China Merchants Port Holdings conclude the **99-year Hambantota port concession**. The IMF records a US$1.1 billion payment in return for an 85% share in the company developing and operating the port.	Long-term commercial port control raises questions of strategic access. The transaction is not proof of a Chinese naval base or a simple debt-for-equity seizure.
August 2018	The **China-Maldives Friendship Bridge** is inaugurated, connecting the Malé area with the airport island and Hulhumalé.	Highly visible infrastructure can strengthen China's development profile in a strategically located island state.
April 2022	Sri Lanka suspends external debt servicing amid a severe economic crisis. India provides close to **US$4 billion** in assistance during 2022, according to the Ministry of External Affairs. IMF assessments identify multiple causes of the crisis, including fiscal vulnerabilities and external shocks.	A country's economic crisis can increase the importance of several external partners; it cannot be attributed exclusively to the BRI.
8 November 2023	The US International Development Finance Corporation announces **US$553 million** in financing for Colombo's West Container Terminal, a project involving Indian private-sector participation.	External competition includes alternative infrastructure financing, not only naval deployments.
10 to 11 January 2024	During President Mohamed Muizzu's China visit, the Maldives and China exchange **20 agreements** and elevate their partnership. The Maldivian President's Office publishes the cooperation documents.	Domestic political transitions can change the diplomatic space available to China and India.
4 December 2024	**Nepal and China sign a Framework for Belt and Road Cooperation.** The framework identifies potential projects, including road and cross-border railway proposals, but specifies separate negotiations for individual project financing and allows cooperation with other countries.	The clearest example of host-state agency: a framework is neither automatic project financing nor an exclusive strategic alignment.

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When	What happened	Why it matters for this question
5 April 2025	India and Sri Lanka announce agreements covering **power-grid interconnection** and, with the UAE, cooperation on developing **Trincomalee as an energy hub**.	India responds through integrated energy and economic partnerships rather than treating the neighbourhood solely as a security perimeter.
25 to 26 July 2025	India announces a new **₹4,850 crore Line of Credit** for Maldives, reduced repayment obligations on Indian credit lines, and the launch of free-trade agreement negotiations.	Demonstrates continuing Indian influence and the importance of financially credible, locally valued alternatives.
26 May 2026	The **Quad Foreign Ministers meet in New Delhi**, with official Indian documentation on Indo-Pacific cooperation and maritime and economic security.	Shows the wider partnership setting for India's maritime strategy, although the Quad is not a South Asian BRI-specific mechanism.

2.2 The skill UPSC keeps testing

UPSC's questions trace a clear analytical progression: maritime access and encirclement concerns (2013), the China-Pakistan corridor (2014), regional institutions (2016), China's economic leverage (2017), India's rejection of CPEC (2018), assistance to neighbours in crisis (2022), maritime competition around Maldives (2024), and maritime security partnerships (2026). The present question integrates these into a **regional strategic assessment**. The questions below are reproduced verbatim, with their original question numbers.

Year	The question as UPSC set it	What it asked of you	What changed in 2026
2013 GS II, Q19	What do you understand by 'The String of Pearls' ? How does it impact India ? Briefly outline the steps taken by India to counter this.	Maritime access, perceived strategic encirclement and Indian responses.	From a strategic concept to tested port concessions, corridors and host-country choices.
2014 GS III, Q20	China and Pakistan have entered into an agreement for development of an economic corridor. What threat does this pose for India's security? Critically examine.	Security risks from the proposed China-Pakistan corridor.	CPEC is examined within a much wider South Asian BRI network.
2016 GS II, Q19	"Increasing cross-border terrorist attacks in India and growing interference in the internal affairs of several member-states by Pakistan are not conducive for the future of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation)." Explain with suitable examples.	Security rivalry and the weakening of regional cooperation.	Connectivity competition occurs against a pre-existing background of institutional fragmentation.
2017 GS II, Q9	"China is using its economic relations and positive trade surplus as tools to develop potential military power status in Asia." In the light of this statement, discuss its impact on India as her neighbour.	Relationship between economic resources, military power and Indian interests.	Trace actual mechanisms linking infrastructure investment to strategic leverage.
2018 GS III, Q9	The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is viewed as a cardinal subset of China's larger 'One Belt One Road' initiative. Give a brief description of CPEC and enumerate the reasons why India has distanced itself from the same.	CPEC's components and India's sovereignty-based objections.	Move beyond India's rejection to regional consequences for security and influence.

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Year	The question as UPSC set it	What it asked of you	What changed in 2026
2022 GS II, Q9	'India is an age-old friend of Sri Lanka.' Discuss India's role in the recent crisis in Sri Lanka in the light of the preceding statement.	Development partnership and crisis assistance as diplomacy.	Consider how India retains influence when neighbours have several external partners.
2024 GS II, Q20	Discuss the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of Maldives for India with a focus on global trade and energy flows. Further also discuss how this relationship affects India's maritime security and regional stability amidst international competition ?	Sea-lane security, bilateral relationships and competitive influence.	Extend the maritime question to South Asia's land, port and financial networks.
2026 GS II, Q9	"IPMDA (Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness) bridges the gap between India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision and the Quad's collective Indo-Pacific strategy." Make a critical assessment of the statement focusing on IPMDA.	How maritime awareness partnerships serve regional security.	Connect maritime responses to the wider BRI challenge, without conflating the Quad and South Asia.

The progression: geopolitical concept (2013) → corridor security (2014, 2018) → economic leverage (2017) → neighbourhood assistance (2022) → maritime competition (2024, 2026) → **integrated regional assessment (2026, Q20)**.

CARRY THIS METHOD TO ANY INFRASTRUCTURE-AND-STRATEGY QUESTION

1. **Identify** the project's economic purpose and its location.
2. **Trace** the mechanism through which finance, infrastructure or access might become geopolitical influence.
3. **Separate** a proven security effect from a potential dual-use risk.
4. **Compare** the effects on territorial security, maritime security and diplomatic influence.
5. **Test** the host government's interests and alternatives before concluding that influence has shifted.

2.3 What to prepare next

INSTITUTIONS, CORRIDORS AND POLICIES

BRI and CPEC	BRI's land and maritime components; CPEC's Gwadar and transport-energy links; India's sovereignty objection.
Neighbourhood First	Development partnerships, cross-border infrastructure and diplomatic responsiveness.
BBIN and BIMSTEC	Sub-regional road, transport and energy cooperation; their separate membership and mandates.
SAGAR and MAHASAGAR	India's maritime security and cooperation vision, and its subsequent wider regional articulation.
IMEC and Chabahar	Connectivity initiatives beyond South Asia; their geography and differing degrees of completion.

CONCEPTS AND DISTINCTIONS

Economic statecraft	Use of markets, finance and infrastructure to advance foreign-policy interests.
Dual-use infrastructure	A civilian facility with potential military or intelligence applications; potential is not proven use.
Strategic autonomy	Capacity to diversify relationships and choose policies without exclusive external alignment.
Debt sustainability	Ability to service debt under plausible fiscal and economic conditions; test with project terms and national debt structure.
Security dilemma	One state's apparently defensive measures may be perceived as threatening by another.
Minilateralism	Cooperation among a smaller set of partners on specific issues, such as maritime security or connectivity.

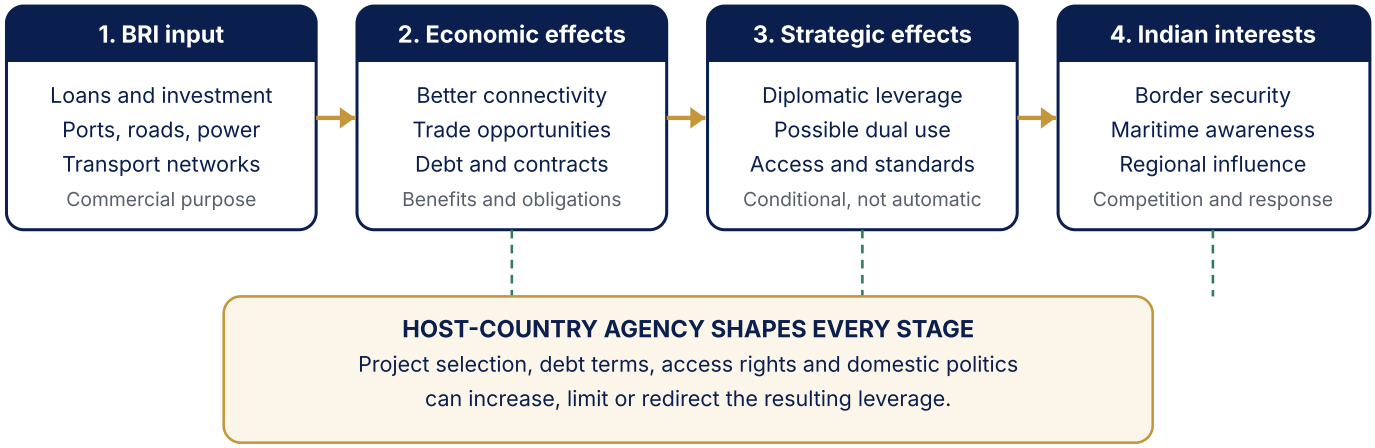
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3 Additional information

Everything needed to answer the question well. Tier 1 establishes the BRI's strategic mechanisms, country evidence and Indian responses. Tier 2 places them within wider debates on economic statecraft, regional order and the autonomy of smaller states.

TIER 1 · ESSENTIAL: THE BRI, ITS STRATEGIC EFFECTS AND INDIA'S OPTIONS

How infrastructure can become strategic influence



A teaching model, not an automatic causal law or an official assessment of the BRI. A commercial contract creates strategic leverage only through identifiable financing terms, access arrangements, policy dependence or other mechanisms.

Where the BRI changes the strategic landscape

Country or project	Verified evidence and status	Strategic significance for India, with qualification
PART 1: BRI REACH AND THE GROWTH OF COMPETITION		
CPEC and Gwadar, Pakistan	China and Pakistan elevated cooperation under CPEC in **April 2015**. It includes infrastructure and energy components and connects western China towards the Arabian Sea. The Chinese government calls it a flagship BRI corridor. Certain corridor routes pass through territory India claims and Pakistan administers.	**Direct sovereignty concern**, reinforced China-Pakistan strategic cooperation and a potential long-term logistics advantage. The significance is broader than Gwadar alone: it combines frontier connectivity, energy and commercial networks. Individual projects have different implementation statuses.
Hambantota, Sri Lanka	The port, financed originally through Chinese loans, began commercial operations in **2012**. In **December 2017**, China Merchants Port Holdings obtained an **85% share** in the port development and operating company under a **99-year concession**, for approximately US$1.1 billion, according to the IMF.	Chinese commercial involvement in a port near major Indian Ocean sea lanes creates a **potential access and dual-use concern**. A concession is not itself a sovereign transfer, an established military base, or evidence that China seized the port after default.

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Country or project	Verified evidence and status	Strategic significance for India, with qualification
Colombo Port City, Sri Lanka	An extensive Chinese-backed urban and financial development project, identified alongside Hambantota in IMF analysis of Chinese investment under the BRI.	Can create durable economic connections and influence through investment and associated commercial activity. **Port City is not the same as a naval facility**, and its strategic implications differ from those of a shipping terminal.
Bangladesh	China's infrastructure and industrial cooperation expanded around the **October 2016** presidential visit. Chinese official statements identify Bangladesh as a BRI partner, including transport and connectivity projects.	Provides Dhaka with alternative investment and technology sources and raises the stakes for India's cross-border trade and connectivity diplomacy. Bangladesh's separate relationships with India and China must not be treated as mutually exclusive.
Nepal	An initial BRI MoU was signed on **12 May 2017**; the **4 December 2024** Cooperation Framework lists prospective projects including the Tokha-Chhahare Tunnel, Hilsa-Simikot Road and the Nepali section of a proposed China-Nepal cross-border railway. Specific financing is to be separately negotiated.	Possible future diversification of Nepal's transit and connectivity options, reducing exclusive dependence on southern routes. **A listed project is not a completed corridor**; Himalayan engineering costs and Nepal's negotiations shape feasibility.
Maldives	China supported the **China-Maldives Friendship Bridge**, inaugurated in August 2018. In **January 2024**, the two governments exchanged 20 agreements during President Muizzu's China visit.	Visible development cooperation in an island state important to Indian Ocean communications creates political competition and demands continued Indian engagement. Chinese-Maldivian diplomatic relations do not establish an exclusive security alignment.
The wider Indian Ocean	China's official **2017 Vision for Maritime Cooperation** presents the Maritime Silk Road as a framework for port, shipping and ocean-economy cooperation. Maritime projects also extend outside South Asia, including towards Southeast Asia, Africa and the Gulf.	Potential influence over trade nodes, logistics and maritime infrastructure cannot be assessed from South Asia alone. Yet **ownership, operational access, commercial docking and military basing are legally and strategically different**.
PART 2: INDIA'S TERRITORIAL AND MARITIME SECURITY		
CPEC and sovereignty	India's Ministry of External Affairs stated on **13 May 2017** that connectivity projects must respect sovereignty and territorial integrity. A subsequent parliamentary response reiterates that CPEC passes through Indian-claimed areas under Pakistan's control.	India's objection is **territorial and legal**, not simply fear of Chinese commercial competition. India's position on sovereignty is distinct from questions of profitability or project effectiveness.
China-Pakistan coordination	CPEC operates within an established bilateral strategic relationship that predates the initiative, while adding infrastructure, energy and commercial links.	May support China's and Pakistan's logistical and diplomatic coordination. It does not prove that every CPEC road or power plant has a military function, or that all India-China border tensions result from the BRI.

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Country or project	Verified evidence and status	Strategic significance for India, with qualification
Dual-use maritime risk	Commercial ports can provide fuel, repairs, supplies or information services depending on their physical capabilities, law and access agreements. The **February 2024** arrival of the Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 03 in Maldives attracted maritime surveillance concerns reported by Reuters.	Raises the need for maritime domain awareness, scrutiny of sensitive port calls and cooperation with coastal states. **Scientific activity, information collection, naval access and military basing must be distinguished**; allegations require supporting evidence.
Strategic dependencies	Infrastructure contracts can involve long concessions, foreign-currency debt, technology platforms, operational control and related maintenance obligations. The World Bank's **2019 Belt and Road Economics** study stresses transparency, debt sustainability and environmental and social safeguards.	External influence may grow when a host state lacks financing or operating alternatives. The effect is **conditional** on contract design, the national debt profile, regulatory authority and the project's performance.
PART 3: INDIA'S REGIONAL INFLUENCE AND RESPONSES		
Indian response in Sri Lanka	India extended close to **US$4 billion** in support during the 2022 crisis. On **5 April 2025**, India and Sri Lanka announced an HVDC power-interconnection MoU and, with the UAE, an MoU for Trincomalee energy-hub cooperation.	Emergency help and shared energy infrastructure demonstrate that **geographical proximity, reliability and economic integration** remain assets even where China has major investments.
Indian response in Maldives	During the July 2025 visit, India announced a **₹4,850 crore** new Line of Credit, reduced debt repayments on Indian credit lines, and began free-trade agreement negotiations.	India can compete through concessional financing, debt relief, development projects and security cooperation while respecting Maldivian national priorities.
Indian regional connectivity	The **BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement** was signed in June 2015, although implementation remains uneven. India's 2024 Bangladesh briefing records the **Akhaura-Agartala rail link** inauguration of 1 November 2023 and multiple restored cross-border rail connections.	Land, rail, river and energy networks create mutual economic dependence and can strengthen India's regional role. Agreements and completed links must be distinguished from full operational integration.
Other external partners	On **8 November 2023**, the US DFC announced **US$553 million** in financing for Colombo's West Container Terminal; it involves Indian business participation.	The South Asian competitive landscape includes private investors and external development financiers, not merely China and India. Financing announcements should not be presented as already completed disbursements.

Security and influence are different analytical channels

BRI-related development	Potential security implication	Potential regional-influence implication
Corridor crossing disputed territory	Sovereignty objection; possible reinforcement of China-Pakistan coordination.	China becomes a more prominent strategic and economic partner of Pakistan.
Port concession	Possible logistics or surveillance exposure, depending on operating rights and actual use.	China develops a sustained commercial and institutional relationship with a coastal state.

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BRI-related development	Potential security implication	Potential regional-influence implication
Cross-border road or railway	Possible future strategic mobility, depending on route and capacity.	Alternative trade and transit partners may strengthen a neighbour's bargaining position.
Infrastructure loans and grants	Potential vulnerability if critical assets or services depend on an external provider.	Development visibility, creditor relationships and project-delivery credibility can influence diplomacy.
Alternative Indian infrastructure	Improves redundancy, resilient transport and maritime cooperation.	Offers neighbours more choice and supports India's status as a dependable partner.

This table is an analytical framework, not a finding that each possible effect has materialised. Its purpose is to prevent security risks and diplomatic effects being merged without evidence.

India's strategic response: what each instrument addresses

Instrument	Verified basis and scope	What it can achieve, and its limits
Principled non-participation in BRI	MEA spokesperson's statement, **13 May 2017**: sovereignty, good governance, transparency, financial responsibility, environmental standards and local capacity.	Defends India's territorial position and sets principles for connectivity. **Non-participation alone does not offer neighbours replacement infrastructure**.
Neighbourhood First	India's foreign-policy emphasis on close and development-oriented relations with immediate neighbours, reflected in its bilateral projects and assistance.	Builds trust when backed by timely delivery, fair access, sensitivity to local politics and credible project finance.
BBIN	Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal transport-cooperation initiative; motor vehicles agreement signed in **June 2015**.	Can lower regional logistics costs and reduce fragmentation, subject to national approvals, implementation and infrastructure readiness.
BIMSTEC	Seven-member Bay of Bengal regional organisation linking South and Southeast Asia; distinct from SAARC and the BRI.	Platform for connectivity and economic-security cooperation. Implementation depends on members' funding, agreements and political commitment.
SAGAR and MAHASAGAR	India's Indian Ocean cooperation approach, built around maritime security, shared development, capacity-building and regional partnerships.	Supports a cooperative rather than exclusively military response to maritime competition.
Maritime domain awareness	Information-sharing and maritime monitoring through Indian capabilities and partnerships; the Quad's IPMDA broadens Indo-Pacific maritime awareness.	Better detection and cooperation may reduce uncertainty, but **IPMDA is not a South Asia-only or anti-BRI mechanism**.
Project-level Indian partnerships	Sri Lanka's April 2025 power and energy agreements; Maldives' July 2025 financing outcomes; India-Bangladesh rail and waterways links.	Produces tangible development and economic interdependence. The central test is whether projects are completed and meet local needs.
Partners outside South Asia	India's **Chabahar** port operating contract of 13 May 2024 and its participation in the proposed **IMEC** corridor.	Diversifies India's connectivity options. Neither is a substitute for direct South Asian neighbourhood diplomacy, and proposed corridors must not be labelled fully operational.

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Why the security concern is real but not unlimited. CPEC crosses territory claimed by India, so sovereignty is a direct objection. Commercial port access elsewhere raises different, conditional risks. Whether a port provides military advantage depends on infrastructure, contract rights, host-government consent and actual activity.

Why influence cannot be measured by investment alone. A country may welcome Chinese financing and still prefer India for emergency assistance, trade, medical services, electricity or security cooperation. Projects can improve welfare without producing exclusive diplomatic loyalty.

TIER 2 · EXTENDED UNDERSTANDING: THE WHOLE STRATEGIC PICTURE

Why BRI projects can benefit host countries

1. **Infrastructure gaps:** roads, electricity, ports and logistics can reduce genuine barriers to trade and development.
2. **Alternative finance:** multiple lenders can expand bargaining options for governments with limited domestic capital.
3. **Market integration:** lower transport costs can connect firms to suppliers, customers and ports.
4. **Technology and employment:** construction may create capacity and jobs, depending on procurement, local content and skills transfer.
5. **Strategic diversification:** a new partner can reduce excessive reliance on any single external state.

Where risks arise

1. **Debt stress:** expensive or underperforming projects may increase fiscal vulnerability.
2. **Contract opacity:** unclear concession and access terms make scrutiny difficult.
3. **Unequal bargaining:** small states can face negotiating disadvantages with major financiers.
4. **Domestic contestation:** land, environmental, employment and electoral concerns can delay or reverse commitments.
5. **Security externalities:** some transport and maritime assets may have dual-use potential.

Four distinctions that improve analytical accuracy

Distinction	Correct understanding	Application to this question
BRI agreement versus completed project	An MoU or framework sets intentions; implementation requires feasibility, financing, approvals and construction.	Nepal's December 2024 framework lists potential projects, not fully financed or completed railways.
Chinese lending versus debt-trap causation	Debt risk is real but national debt crises have multiple creditors, financing instruments and macroeconomic causes.	The IMF documents Sri Lanka's fiscal weaknesses, external shocks and international sovereign bond liabilities. Hambantota's concession should not be reduced to an automatic seizure after default.
Commercial port versus military base	Commercial control, occasional port calls, military access rights and permanent basing are different categories.	Hambantota can be examined as a potential dual-use risk without claiming that a Chinese naval base is established there.
Economic engagement versus strategic alignment	A state may cooperate with competing powers in different sectors and retain independent foreign-policy preferences.	Nepal's framework explicitly preserves other partnerships; India continues major cooperation with Maldives and Sri Lanka despite Chinese investment.

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The changing regional order

The BRI is best understood as an instrument of **economic statecraft**: it can link transport, capital and commercial standards with diplomatic relationships. But its geopolitical effect is mediated by the host state's institutions and strategic calculations. India's relative position is shaped by several advantages, including **geographical proximity, large trade links, cultural connections, electricity interdependence, disaster response and maritime cooperation**. These are not guarantees of influence. Where border procedures are cumbersome, projects are delayed or domestic political sensitivities are ignored, external alternatives become more attractive.

Likewise, the role of external powers cannot be compressed into a simple China-India confrontation. The United States, Japan, multilateral development banks and commercial investors provide alternative financing and infrastructure support. Sri Lanka's Colombo West Container Terminal is a concrete example of this wider competitive setting. The resulting order is **competitive but not necessarily exclusively bipolar**.

What India's neighbourhood strategy must get right

Delivery	Prioritise completed, dependable infrastructure over announcements; publish progress and resolve bottlenecks jointly with host governments.
Financing	Offer transparent terms, concessional support where appropriate, practical repayment arrangements and projects with demonstrable economic value.
Economic integration	Expand market access, border trade, power interconnections, logistics, digital payments and regional transport networks.
Maritime security	Strengthen surveillance, coastal capacity-building, search and rescue, information exchange and trust-based security partnerships.
Political sensitivity	Avoid assuming that historical or cultural closeness entitles India to exclusive influence over smaller states.
Institutional cooperation	Use bilateral, BBIN, BIMSTEC and other appropriate mechanisms according to geography and function, without treating all frameworks as interchangeable.

Two debates worth knowing

Does BRI infrastructure amount to strategic encirclement?

One argument emphasises CPEC, Chinese-backed ports and possible dual-use logistics as cumulative challenges to Indian security. The opposing argument notes that civilian investment does not automatically generate military rights, that ports differ in ownership and function, and that host states retain legal and political authority. The balanced assessment is **risk-based rather than alarmist**: distinguish territorial violations, actual access arrangements and prospective military utility.

Are smaller South Asian countries only pieces in a great-power contest?

One view holds that their dependence on external capital makes them vulnerable to pressure from major powers. Another stresses their ability to diversify financing, negotiate concessions and use outside competition to advance domestic priorities. Nepal's 2024 framework and Sri Lanka's relationships with different partners illustrate the latter. The balanced assessment is that **asymmetries of power are real, but agency is not absent**. The best Indian response increases neighbours' choices rather than demanding exclusive loyalty.

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4 Pitfalls and variations

Six common errors, the claims that must not enter an answer, and how the structure should change when the examiner changes the directive or scope.

4.1 Six pitfalls, each with its correction

Projects without strategic analysis

~~CPEC in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, bridges in Maldives, railways in Nepal.~~

For each example, write the mechanism and consequence: sovereignty, potential access, alternative transit or changed diplomatic bargaining.

Accepting transformation as absolute

~~The BRI has turned a previously peaceful South Asia into a great-power battlefield.~~

India-Pakistan rivalry and external competition existed earlier; the BRI intensifies and changes their economic and connectivity dimensions.

Conflating economic assets with military bases

~~China has established naval bases at every major Chinese-financed port.~~

Distinguish commercial concessions, port calls, dual-use potential, access agreements and permanent military deployment.

Security crowds out influence

~~The entire answer discusses Chinese naval strategy and the China-Pakistan nexus.~~

Give roughly equal attention to India's security and regional influence; include financing, diplomacy, trade, energy and India's development response.

Erasing smaller-state agency

~~Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives must choose either China or India.~~

Explain the incentives for diversification and the role of project negotiations, domestic politics, debt sustainability and independent strategic interests.

Weak or exaggerated remedies

~~India should block Chinese projects everywhere and counter the BRI through the Quad.~~

Defend sovereignty, monitor security risks, strengthen reliable neighbourhood connectivity and use appropriate regional and maritime partnerships. The Quad is not a direct replacement for neighbourhood development policy.

4.2 Never write these

- "CPEC passes through India's internationally uncontested territory."
  India claims the affected territory and objects to Pakistan's occupation; the territorial dispute is central to its position.
- "India is a participating member of the BRI."
  India has not joined the BRI and publicly explained its objections in May 2017.
- "Sri Lanka surrendered Hambantota port to China after defaulting on its loans."
  The commercial concession was concluded in 2017, before Sri Lanka's 2022 sovereign debt default; the IMF records a negotiated concession transaction.
- "Hambantota is a confirmed Chinese naval base."
  A commercial concession and the potential for dual use do not establish permanent Chinese military basing.
- "Nepal's BRI railway was completed in December 2024."
  The signed framework identified prospective projects and required subsequent project-specific negotiation and financing.
- "Every Chinese project in South Asia is a BRI project."
  Labels and agreements differ. Verify a project's official status before assigning it to the initiative.
- "China caused Sri Lanka's entire 2022 economic crisis."
  IMF analysis identifies multiple causes, including domestic fiscal policies, foreign-exchange vulnerabilities and external shocks.

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- "BRI participation compels neighbours to support China against India."
  Economic participation does not establish a uniform voting pattern, an alliance treaty or the absence of strategic autonomy.
- "The Quad is a South Asian regional organisation designed exclusively to counter BRI projects."
  It is an Indo-Pacific partnership with a broader agenda and membership.

4.3 If the question changes

If it asks	The structure becomes	What must change
Critically examine whether BRI is a debt-trap strategy	BRI financing model; benefits; debt risks; Sri Lanka case and alternative explanations; host-country agency; judgement	Debt sustainability, contracts and evidence take priority over military-security claims.
Assess **CPEC's security implications** for India	CPEC components; territorial concerns; China-Pakistan nexus; operational and diplomatic risks; India's options	Focus on Pakistan and disputed territory, rather than the entire South Asian region.
Analyse **India-China competition in the Indian Ocean**	Sea-lane significance; commercial ports; dual-use risks; maritime partnerships; coastal-state agency	Ports, surveillance, access rights and maritime domain awareness dominate.
Examine **BRI and sovereignty of smaller states**	Benefits of external capital; financial and strategic asymmetries; legal control; agency; case comparisons	Host governments become the main subjects, rather than India alone.
Suggest how India can **strengthen Neighbourhood First**	Existing strengths; delivery gaps; trade and connectivity; financing; political trust; maritime cooperation	Solutions dominate and BRI appears chiefly as background competition.
Compare **BRI, IMEC and other connectivity initiatives**	Geographic scope; objectives; members; funding; implementation status; benefits; risks	A comparative table becomes useful; do not equate proposed projects with operational corridors.
Discuss the BRI for **10 marks, 150 words**	One-line transformation; two security effects; two influence effects; one agency qualification; judgement	Use fewer examples but preserve both explicit Indian interests and the hidden demand.

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5

The model answer

One model answer, written to the UPSC Gurus house range of 250 to 253 words (**252 words exactly**, counting every whitespace-separated token in the answer sheet, including section numerals, headings and point labels; UPSC's printed limit is 250 words). The answer uses four numbered parts with analytical headings: the BRI's transformation of regional competition, implications for India's security, implications for India's regional influence, and the smaller final qualification on South Asian agency. The introduction addresses the whole question; the conclusion delivers a balanced strategic judgement.

Model answer ### Four analytical parts and a qualified judgement **252 words**

The BRI has deepened China's infrastructure and financing presence across South Asia, making connectivity a source of strategic competition. For India, the consequences concern security and diplomatic influence, but remain conditional.

1. BRI and great-power competition

- **Economic reach:** CPEC, Sri Lankan ports and Nepal's proposed corridors connect Chinese capital with regional trade and logistics.
- **Political leverage:** Long-term contracts and financing expand China's diplomatic relationships, while Indian and partner projects offer competing options.
- **Extent:** BRI intensifies older rivalries rather than creating them; civilian investments do not automatically confer military access.

2. India's security

- **Sovereignty:** CPEC traverses Pakistan-administered territory claimed by India, directly challenging territorial integrity.
- **Maritime exposure:** Gwadar and Hambantota raise potential logistics and surveillance concerns near sea lanes; Hambantota's 2017 commercial concession is not proof of a naval base.
- **Vulnerability:** Debt stress, operating rights and technological dependence could create leverage, depending on contracts and host-state consent.

3. India's regional influence

- **Neighbours:** Chinese finance gives Sri Lanka, Nepal and Maldives alternatives, increasing bargaining power and contesting India's advantages.
- **Connectivity:** Competing ports and corridors alter regional trade incentives, demanding faster Indian project delivery.
- **Responses:** Neighbourhood First, BBIN links, power-grid cooperation with Sri Lanka and India's 2025 Maldives credit line can strengthen transparent partnerships, alongside maritime domain awareness.

4. South Asian agency

Nepal's 2024 BRI framework requires separate project negotiations; neighbours balance financiers according to national interests, not automatic allegiance.

Ultimately, India must safeguard sovereignty while competing through dependable connectivity, integration and respectful diplomacy. The BRI reshapes choices, but South Asian governments determine their consequences.

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DEMAND
Analyse how the BRI intensifies great-power competition in South Asia and trace its distinct implications for India's security and regional influence

HIDDEN DEMAND
South Asian states are strategic actors whose financing choices, national interests and negotiations shape the BRI's actual geopolitical consequences

STRUCTURE
About three-tenths on regional transformation, three-tenths on security, three-tenths on influence and one-tenth on South Asian agency

BALANCE
Introduction 31 words, conclusion 25 words; 252 words in all

Why it works: The introduction connects the BRI's regional transformation to both Indian interests. Part 1 establishes three mechanisms of competition while qualifying the claim that the BRI created it. Part 2 distinguishes the direct sovereignty objection to CPEC from conditional maritime and economic vulnerabilities, avoiding exaggerated military claims. Part 3 traces consequences for India's diplomatic and economic influence and identifies concrete responses, including the 2015 BBIN initiative, April 2025 Sri Lanka power-interconnection agreement and July 2025 Maldives credit line. Part 4 answers the hidden demand through Nepal's project-specific negotiations and the agency of smaller states. The conclusion gives a balanced judgement rather than merely restating the risks. The answer is **252 whitespace-separated words**, including all headings, section numerals and point labels.

6 Other ways to write it

The model answer above remains the recommended answer. These alternative outlines show how the same demand can be addressed without losing the distinction between security, regional influence and neighbourhood agency.

Approach	How it is built	When it works
Security-influence matrix	Begin with three mechanisms of BRI-led competition. Then use a two-column matrix: sovereignty, maritime access and critical dependencies under security; partnerships, financing and connectivity under influence. End with host-state choices.	When a compact comparison is easier to organise than headed paragraphs. The table must still show causal mechanisms, not just keywords.
Country-led analytical answer	Use Pakistan for territorial security; Sri Lanka for port access and finance; Nepal for transit alternatives; Maldives for maritime diplomacy. Follow with India's responses and South Asian agency.	When country examples are well remembered. Each example must establish a strategic implication; do not turn the answer into a list of projects.
Economic statecraft approach	Trace infrastructure finance, commercial access, diplomatic leverage and possible strategic dependence. Then test these against China's actual access rights, India's capabilities and local political decisions.	When emphasising the distinction between economic influence and military control.

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Approach	How it is built	When it works
Historical continuity approach	Open by qualifying the word "transformed": India-Pakistan rivalry and wider competition predate 2013. Explain the new economic and connectivity instruments introduced by the BRI; assess security and influence separately.	When the opening quotation itself requires critical evaluation. Particularly useful for avoiding an exaggerated claim about the BRI's novelty.
India's response-led approach	State the regional transformation briefly. Match CPEC to sovereignty, maritime infrastructure to awareness and coastal cooperation, and economic influence to Neighbourhood First, BBIN and development partnerships. End with smaller-state agency.	When the emphasis is on implications for India, not the BRI's general history. Responses remain subordinate to analysis because the directive is "Analyse", not "Suggest".
For 10 marks, 150 words	One-line transformation; two security effects; two influence effects and India's responses; one agency qualification; a balanced conclusion.	When the answer must be compressed. Preserve the distinction between actual threats and prospective risks.

7 Quick recall and Prelims crossover

Sixteen verified facts for rapid revision. Keep the distinction between an agreement, a financial commitment, a completed project and an operational security facility.

1. **BRI origins:** Xi Jinping proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road in **2013**.
2. **Vision and Actions:** issued on **28 March 2015** by China's NDRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, with State Council authorisation.
3. **CPEC:** advanced during Xi Jinping's **April 2015** Pakistan visit; a major BRI corridor linking western China towards Gwadar.
4. **India's BRI position:** MEA statement of **13 May 2017** emphasised sovereignty, transparency, responsible financing and environmental safeguards.
5. **Nepal's initial BRI MoU:** signed on **12 May 2017**.
6. **Nepal-China BRI Cooperation Framework:** signed on **4 December 2024**; potential projects require subsequent negotiations.
7. **Project financing in Nepal:** Article V(4) of the 2024 framework requires financing and development modalities to be **negotiated separately for each prioritised project**.
8. **Nepal's strategic agency:** Article VI(6) of the 2024 framework explicitly permits project cooperation with **other countries**.
9. **Hambantota concession:** concluded in **December 2017** for **99 years**, according to the IMF.
10. **Hambantota operating company:** China Merchants Port Holdings acquired an **85% share** for about **US$1.1 billion**, according to the IMF's 2018 report.
11. **Sri Lanka crisis assistance:** India provided close to **US$4 billion** in economic assistance during **2022**, according to MEA.
12. **Colombo West Container Terminal:** US DFC announced **US$553 million** in financing on **8 November 2023**.
13. **BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement:** signed at Thimphu on **15 June 2015** by Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal.
14. **India-Sri Lanka energy:** HVDC power-interconnection MoU and trilateral Trincomalee energy-hub MoU, **5 April 2025**.
15. **India-Maldives: ₹4,850 crore** Line of Credit announced during the **25 to 26 July 2025** state visit.
16. **BIMSTEC: 7 members**, five from South Asia and two from Southeast Asia; established on **6 June 1997**.

"China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transformed South Asia from a regional space into a theatre of great power competition." Analyse the strategic implications of the BRI for India's security and regional influence in South Asia.

THE ONE SENTENCE TO CARRY OUT OF THIS DOCUMENT

The BRI gives China additional economic and strategic options in South Asia, but India's influence ultimately depends on secure connectivity, reliable partnerships and respect for its neighbours' independent choices.

8 Write it yourself

Write the answer in 250 words without looking back, following the four parts in the question's order. Then check it against each line below.

	Check	Yes / No
1	Does the introduction connect the **BRI's transformation of regional competition** to both India's security and regional influence?	
2	Does Part 1 explain **how infrastructure and financing reshape competition**, while recognising that older rivalries predate the BRI?	
3	Does Part 2 cover **CPEC and sovereignty, maritime security and strategic vulnerabilities**, without equating commercial ports with military bases?	
4	Does Part 3 cover **bilateral relationships, economic and diplomatic influence, regional connectivity and India's strategic responses**, with specific examples?	
5	Is there a short final part explaining **South Asian states' independent choices**, supported by a concrete example such as Nepal's 2024 framework?	
6	Does the conclusion deliver a **balanced strategic judgement**, at approximately the introduction's length, rather than merely calling for cooperation?	
7	Is the answer **250 words or slightly over**, counting section numerals, headings and point labels, with none of the unsupported claims warned against in section 4.2?	

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