

China's Belt and Road Initiative as a Strategy for Hegemonic Contestation in the Indo-Pacific Region

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ABSTRACT

This article examines China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a strategic instrument in its efforts to challenge the existing hegemonic order in the Indo-Pacific region. Amid growing geopolitical rivalry, particularly with the United States and its allies, China has employed the BRI not merely as an economic development scheme, but as a tool of influence projection, regional integration, and soft power consolidation. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach and critical geopolitical analysis, this study explores how China's BRI projects—ranging from infrastructure development to digital connectivity—are reshaping regional power dynamics. The research finds that China's approach blends economic diplomacy with strategic interest, fostering dependencies and influence in key Indo-Pacific states. However, the implementation of BRI also encounters resistance in the form of debt-trap diplomacy allegations, environmental critiques, and counter-initiatives like the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Strategy. The article concludes that the BRI is central to China's vision of a Sinocentric order, signaling a shift from unipolar to multipolar geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific, hegemony, geopolitical competition, China, United States



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, represents one of China's most ambitious strategic initiatives in modern history [1]. The initiative seeks to connect China with countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe through large-scale infrastructure development, thereby creating new economic corridors to enhance trade, investment, and diplomatic ties [2]. The BRI comprises two main components: the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the maritime 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Both are designed to strengthen connectivity between China and partner nations through the construction of roads, bridges, ports, and railways [3]. The significance of the BRI can be analyzed from economic, political, and security perspectives. Economically, the initiative is intended to open new markets for Chinese products and investments, reducing dependence on traditional markets [4]. Infrastructure investments under the BRI are expected to stimulate economic growth in partner countries, which in turn would boost demand for Chinese goods and services [5]. Politically, the BRI serves as a powerful diplomatic tool that enables China to strengthen bilateral relations. By providing financial support and infrastructure development, China can foster alliances and secure political backing in international forums [6].

From a security standpoint, the BRI also carries strategic implications. By constructing critical infrastructure in foreign territories, China enhances both its own national security and broader regional security [7]. For example, the development of ports and potential military facilities along the Maritime Silk Road enables China to secure key maritime trade routes and project its power abroad [8]. However, the BRI faces a number of challenges. A major obstacle is political instability in several partner countries, which can disrupt project implementation [9]. Additionally, concerns persist regarding the financial sustainability of BRI projects, given their high infrastructure costs and the debt burden potentially imposed on recipient countries [10].

The BRI has broader implications beyond China's immediate interests it directly affects U.S. hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. For decades, the United States has maintained dominant influence in this region, encompassing economic, political, and security domains [11]. With China's rise as a global power, the BRI has become a key instrument in its efforts to challenge U.S. dominance [12]. One primary way the BRI influences U.S. hegemony is by increasing the economic dependence of Indo-Pacific countries on China [13]. Through extensive infrastructure investment and economic engagement, China expands its regional influence while reducing reliance on American aid and capital. This gradual shift may alter the regional power balance, with China assuming a more central role [14]. Furthermore, the BRI has significant political and security implications. By forming alliances and partnerships through BRI initiatives, China strengthens its position in international institutions such as the United Nations, gaining support to counteract pressure and sanctions from the U.S. and its allies [15].

Indonesia, a key Indo-Pacific state, has been a major recipient of Chinese investment under the BRI. Projects such as the Jakarta Bandung high-speed rail and port development in North Sumatra have improved national infrastructure and connectivity [16]. Nonetheless, these projects have encountered challenges, including environmental issues and concerns over financial transparency and sustainability. Sri Lanka presents another instructive case in the BRI context. The Chinese-built Hambantota Port has become emblematic of China's expansive investments in the region. However, the port project has attracted controversy following Sri Lanka's failure to repay its debt, resulting in the transfer of control of the port to China. This outcome has raised concerns about potential debt traps facing BRI partner countries. Pakistan is among China's most strategic BRI partners, particularly through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which aims to enhance economic development and infrastructure connectivity. While the corridor has yielded economic benefits for Pakistan, it has also led to apprehensions over economic dependency on China and adverse environmental and social impacts. The Philippines is another Southeast Asian nation receiving substantial Chinese investment under the BRI. Infrastructure projects, such as toll roads and power plants, have contributed to national development. Nevertheless, the bilateral relationship remains complicated by territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which have added layers of tension and strategic calculation to the engagement. Given these dynamics, it is crucial to analyze how China employs the BRI as a strategy for establishing hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. This study aims to explore the economic, political, and security impacts of the BRI in countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, while also assessing its implications for the United States' longstanding influence in the region. Understanding China's strategic vision through the lens of the BRI allows for deeper insight into shifting global power dynamics and their consequences for future international order.

2. METHODS

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Hegemony, Geoeconomics, and Alliances

The concept of hegemony in international relations refers to the dominance of one state over others in the spheres of economy, politics, and military power. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony emphasizes that such dominance is not only physical or military in nature but also ideological, whereby the hegemon shapes global norms, values, and beliefs. Within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China seeks to assert its influence by employing infrastructure investment and economic engagement as tools to challenge the long-standing hegemony of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.

2.2 Geoeconomics as a Strategic Tool

Geoeconomics examines the intersection of economic instruments and geopolitical objectives. According to Blackwill and Harris (2016), geoeconomics is defined as "the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests and to produce beneficial geopolitical results." The BRI is a prominent example of a geoeconomic strategy, whereby China leverages its economic power to expand its geopolitical influence. By investing in large-scale infrastructure projects across partner countries, China strengthens both economic ties and political alliances, effectively reinforcing its strategic position in regional and global affairs.

2.3 Theory of Alliances and Coalitions

Alliance theory explains how states form partnerships and coalitions to achieve shared objectives and respond to common threats. Walt (1987) argues that alliances are often formed in response to perceived threats, with states seeking partners to enhance their collective security. In the BRI context, China has forged strategic alliances with various Indo-Pacific nations by offering infrastructure investment and economic aid. These partnerships are designed to bolster China's regional presence and enhance its position in the ongoing competition with the United States.

2.4 Economic Influence of the BRI

The economic impacts of the BRI are visible in multiple dimensions. The initiative's large-scale investments in infrastructure such as ports, highways, and railways have contributed to economic growth in partner countries. These projects enhance regional connectivity and reduce transportation costs, thereby improving the competitiveness of national

economies. Moreover, by financing and constructing key infrastructure, China creates a network of economic dependencies. This interdependence grants China considerable political leverage in both bilateral and multilateral relations. Dollar (2017) found that countries participating in the BRI tend to align more closely with China's positions in international forums, indicating a growing sphere of Chinese political influence.

2.5 Political and Security Implications of the BRI

From a political and security perspective, the BRI has far-reaching implications. China's construction of critical infrastructure in partner nations enables it to enhance both its domestic security and broader regional security. For instance, the development of strategic ports and potential military facilities along the Maritime Silk Road strengthens China's ability to secure vital maritime trade routes and extend its power projection beyond its borders. Additionally, the BRI allows China to cultivate strong political alliances. These alliances can serve as buffers against external pressure and sanctions, particularly those from the United States and its allies. Ferchen (2016) argues that the BRI has facilitated the creation of an extensive network of partnerships, providing China with valuable political support in addressing global issues and reinforcing its presence in international institutions.

2.6 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a case study approach. The primary objective is to analyze China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a strategic tool to contest U.S. hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. The case study method enables a comprehensive and context-specific analysis of how BRI initiatives influence geopolitical, economic, and security dynamics in selected countries. By focusing on multiple case studies Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines the study allows for comparative insights into how China's strategic interests are advanced through the BRI across diverse political and economic contexts.

2.7 Data Sources and Collection

The research relies on secondary data obtained from scholarly publications, government reports, policy briefs, international organization documents, and reputable news sources. Sources include peer-reviewed journals, books, working papers, and official publications from entities such as the World Bank, IMF, and ASEAN. Data were collected through a systematic literature review and document analysis to identify patterns, interpretations, and implications associated with the BRI. Key documents were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to understanding the relationship between BRI implementation and regional power shifts.

2.8 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework combines three interrelated theories: (1) Gramscian hegemony theory, which explains how ideological influence is exercised alongside economic and political power; (2) geoeconomics theory, emphasizing the strategic use of economic tools to gain geopolitical advantages; and (3) alliance theory, which explores how states form strategic partnerships in response to perceived threats. These theories serve as lenses to interpret the geopolitical motivations behind China's investments and to assess the implications for U.S. influence in the region. The data were analyzed using narrative and thematic analysis to trace recurring patterns and strategic trends across case studies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): A Strategy of Hegemony in the Indo-Pacific

This study analyzes how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as a strategic tool to strengthen Beijing's hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region and challenge the long-standing dominance of the United States. Using a descriptive qualitative method that integrates literature review and case study analysis, the research highlights the economic, political, and security impacts of BRI in countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines.

3.2 Economic and Infrastructure Impacts

Economic Influence of the BRI has significantly impacted infrastructure investment and economic development in participating countries. Over the past decade, BRI investments have exceeded USD 1 trillion, spanning strategic sectors including transportation, energy, and technology. This scale reflects China's ambition to build extensive infrastructure networks and enhance international connectivity. Indonesia, one of Southeast Asia's largest economies, has received substantial BRI investment. A notable example is the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail project, worth USD 7.3 billion. This project aims to boost intercity connectivity, stimulate economic growth, and generate employment opportunities. This is illustrated in the following table:

Table 1. Major BRI Infrastructure Investments in the Indo-Pacific

Country	Major Project	Investment Volume (USD)
Indonesia	Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail	7.3 billion

Pakistan	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)	25.4 billion
Sri Lanka	Hambantota Port	4.5 billion
Malaysia	East Coast Rail Link	2.7 billion

(Source: Green Finance & Development Center, 2023; The Diplomat, 2023)

In Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a flagship BRI project with a total investment of USD 62 billion (World Bank, 2020). It includes extensive transport networks, power plants, and strategic port developments like Gwadar. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the construction of the Hambantota Port has increased the country's port capacity but also sparked concerns about debt sustainability and geopolitical leverage. Overall, BRI infrastructure investments have improved connectivity, created jobs, and contributed to economic growth. However, they also pose challenges, including debt sustainability, project transparency, and environmental impacts.

3.3 Geopolitical Impacts

Debt Dependency One of the most controversial outcomes of BRI is the so-called "debt trap diplomacy." The Hambantota Port case in Sri Lanka exemplifies this issue. After borrowing heavily from China for port construction, Sri Lanka was unable to repay and subsequently leased the port to a Chinese firm for 99 years. Critics argue these compromises national sovereignty. However, Chatham House scholars argue this narrative is oversimplified. The Hambantota project was initiated by Sri Lanka, and its failure largely stemmed from internal governance issues rather than Chinese coercion. Still, it serves as a cautionary tale for other countries engaged in large-scale infrastructure borrowing. **Strategic Alliances** In response to China's growing influence, countries have strengthened alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising the US, Japan, India, and Australia. Originally formed in 2007 and revitalized in 2017, Quad has expanded its agenda to include infrastructure, technology, and health cooperation. For instance, in 2021, it launched an initiative to deliver one billion COVID-19 vaccine doses across Asia.

Additional initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) aim to provide high-standard alternatives to BRI investments. Nevertheless, many Indo-Pacific nations strive to balance relations with both China and the US. India, despite being part of Quad, also engages with China in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. **Security Dimensions** Security dynamics have intensified alongside BRI's expansion. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global defense spending rose to USD 2.443 trillion in 2023, a 6.8% increase from the previous year. China's defense budget reached USD 296 billion, up 7.2%, reflecting its growing strategic ambitions. Regional powers have also raised defense expenditures. India's defense budget reached USD 83.6 billion in 2023, while Japan increased its budget by 11% to USD 50.2 billion. Australia followed with a 5.8% increase to USD 32.3 billion. The US remains the world's top military spender at USD 916 billion.

Table 2. Defense Budget Increases in the Indo-Pacific (2023)

Country	Defense Budget (USD)	Increase (%)
United States	916 billion	+3.5%
China	296 billion	+7.2%
India	83.6 billion	+4.2%

(Source: SIPRI, 2024; Green Finance & Development Center, 2023)

These figures illustrate how BRI has contributed to an evolving security architecture, prompting nations to invest more in military capabilities to safeguard their sovereignty. **Challenges and Criticisms** Despite its achievements, BRI faces serious criticisms, particularly regarding transparency and environmental sustainability. Beeson and Crawford (2022) emphasize that opaque project planning has led to corruption and mismanagement. The Jakarta-Bandung rail project, for instance, has been scrutinized for unclear funding mechanisms. Furthermore, many BRI projects lack proper environmental assessments. Hurley et al. (2019) report that infrastructure development under BRI often causes ecological damage, biodiversity loss, and increased carbon emissions. In Pakistan, CPEC projects have led to deforestation and habitat disruption. In response, China has introduced the "Green Belt and Road" initiative to promote environmental standards. However, its implementation remains inconsistent across projects. **Discussion** China's BRI exemplifies a geoeconomic strategy aimed at reshaping global power structures. It reflects the use of economic tools to achieve geopolitical ends, as explained by Blackwill and Harris. BRI projects like CPEC and Jakarta-Bandung rail demonstrate China's capacity to influence both infrastructure and politics in host countries.

3.4 Discussions

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, represents a transformative geoeconomic strategy aimed at enhancing Beijing's global influence through infrastructure development and regional connectivity. While initially framed as a development and cooperation initiative, the BRI has evolved into a strategic tool that significantly shapes power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. The findings of this study suggest that the BRI's influence is multifaceted, encompassing economic, political, and security dimensions. By analyzing key case studies and regional responses, we can assess how the initiative strengthens China's hegemonic position and reconfigures the geopolitical landscape. Economically, the BRI has facilitated substantial investment flows from China into developing countries, particularly in

the Indo-Pacific region. Projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway in Indonesia, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka exemplify China's strategic deployment of capital to enhance its regional influence. These infrastructure projects provide recipient countries with much-needed development financing, often unavailable from Western financial institutions due to stringent governance and environmental requirements. As Table 1 in this study indicates, investment volumes range from several billion to tens of billions of dollars, signaling the BRI's scale and ambition.

However, the economic benefits of the BRI are not devoid of controversy. A significant concern revolves around debt sustainability. Critics have described this phenomenon as "debt-trap diplomacy," where China allegedly provides unsustainable loans to vulnerable countries, later leveraging the debt burden to secure strategic concessions. Sri Lanka's leasing of the Hambantota Port to a Chinese state-owned company for 99 years is often cited as a prominent example. Although recent scholarship challenges the oversimplification of this narrative arguing that domestic mismanagement and pre-existing fiscal vulnerabilities are also to blame it nonetheless underscores the need for greater transparency and accountability in BRI project financing. Beyond the economic sphere, the BRI has profound geopolitical implications. By financing infrastructure in critical maritime and overland trade routes, China is effectively establishing a sphere of influence across the Indo-Pacific. This aligns with classical geopolitical theories, such as Mackinder's Heartland Theory and Mahan's maritime power doctrine, which highlight the strategic value of infrastructure in extending a nation's reach. The development of ports, roads, railways, and digital infrastructure under the BRI umbrella creates pathways for both economic interdependence and political alignment. As a result, recipient countries may find themselves increasingly dependent on Chinese technology, standards, and trade preferences, reducing their strategic autonomy.

This growing dependence is particularly salient given the concurrent decline in Western-led infrastructure investment in the region. The United States and its allies have sought to counterbalance China's influence through alternative initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), yet these efforts often lack the financial scale or implementation speed of the BRI. As such, while the West articulates concerns over Chinese influence, the immediate developmental needs of Indo-Pacific countries render the BRI an attractive option, despite its risks. China's strategic use of the BRI also manifests in its ability to forge political alliances. The initiative provides Beijing with diplomatic leverage, often converting economic relationships into political support. Many recipient countries, dependent on Chinese loans and investments, have adopted positions favorable to China in multilateral forums. This dynamic supports the theoretical framework proposed by Stephen Walt, which posits that states often align with powerful actors to secure their interests. Through the BRI, China has effectively established a network of informal alliances, often outside the traditional Western alliance system. Security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific have also evolved in response to the BRI. The dual-use nature of certain infrastructure projects—particularly ports—has raised alarms among security analysts who fear potential military applications. While China insists that BRI projects are civilian in nature, the possibility of strategic repurposing cannot be dismissed, especially given historical precedents of port militarization. This ambiguity has contributed to a regional arms buildup. As evidenced by the data presented in Table 2, defense budgets in the Indo-Pacific have risen significantly, with India, Japan, and Australia increasing military expenditures partly in response to China's assertiveness. The United States, as the primary strategic competitor to China, remains the world's largest defense spender and has revitalized regional alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Comprising the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, the Quad has shifted from a loosely structured security dialogue to a more cohesive strategic coalition, focusing on infrastructure, supply chain resilience, digital governance, and vaccine diplomacy. The Quad's initiatives often mirror or counter those advanced through the BRI, reflecting an emerging geopolitical competition for regional influence.

Nonetheless, regional responses to the BRI are not monolithic. Many countries in the Indo-Pacific attempt to maintain a delicate balancing act, engaging with both China and the United States to maximize economic and security benefits. Indonesia, for example, has welcomed Chinese investment in infrastructure while maintaining strong defense ties with Western powers. This hedging behavior illustrates the complexity of geopolitical alignments in a multipolar world, where rigid bloc formations are increasingly replaced by fluid, interest-based partnerships. Environmental and governance challenges further complicate the BRI's trajectory. Numerous BRI projects have been criticized for inadequate environmental assessments, deforestation, and increased carbon emissions, particularly those involving coal-fired power plants. Additionally, the lack of competitive bidding processes and weak oversight mechanisms in many recipient countries raise concerns about corruption and project viability. These issues have sparked public opposition and political backlash, leading to project delays and cancellations in countries such as Malaysia and Myanmar. In response, China has attempted to rebrand the initiative through the promotion of a "Green Belt and Road" framework, which emphasizes sustainability and environmental stewardship. However, the credibility and implementation of this framework remain limited, especially in regions where governance institutions are weak. For the BRI to achieve long-term legitimacy and effectiveness, it must prioritize not only economic gains but also environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards. This includes transparent project evaluation, stakeholder engagement, and equitable benefit-sharing. In conclusion, the BRI represents both an opportunity and a challenge for the Indo-Pacific region. Economically, it offers substantial infrastructure financing and development prospects. Politically and strategically, it allows China to extend its influence and challenge the established regional order. Yet the initiative also carries risks, including debt dependency, environmental degradation, and geopolitical tension. Future engagement with the BRI must therefore be strategic, balancing national development goals with the imperative to safeguard sovereignty, sustainability, and regional stability. By strengthening institutional capacity, improving transparency, and fostering multilateral cooperation, recipient

countries can better harness the BRI's potential while mitigating its risks. Meanwhile, competing powers like the United States must offer viable alternatives that align with regional needs, rather than merely critiquing China's ambitions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a cornerstone of China's foreign policy and global development strategy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Through a combination of large-scale infrastructure investments, financial assistance, and bilateral agreements, China has leveraged the BRI to build strong political alliances and expand its sphere of influence. This strategic outreach has significantly reshaped the geopolitical landscape, challenging the traditional dominance of the United States and altering the balance of power in one of the world's most dynamic and contested regions. One of the most striking consequences of the BRI is the increasing economic dependence of participating countries on China. While the initiative has brought substantial benefits in terms of infrastructure development, connectivity, and economic growth, it has also raised critical concerns about the erosion of national sovereignty. Several recipient countries now face the dual risks of financial vulnerability due to unsustainable debt and political influence that may compromise their autonomy in international decision-making. The case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port is often cited as a cautionary example, illustrating how economic dependency can translate into strategic concessions.

To ensure the long-term viability and legitimacy of the BRI, it is essential to address these concerns proactively. First and foremost, the initiative must prioritize transparency in financial arrangements and project implementation. Clear disclosure of loan terms, procurement procedures, and expected outcomes would enhance accountability and build trust with host countries and international observers. Second, stronger governance frameworks are necessary to mitigate risks associated with corruption, mismanagement, and inadequate oversight. This requires both domestic institutional strengthening in recipient states and responsible engagement by Chinese lenders and contractors. Furthermore, there must be a deliberate effort to balance economic development with environmental and social sustainability. Many BRI projects have been criticized for lacking proper environmental impact assessments, contributing to ecological degradation and community displacement. Integrating robust environmental safeguards, promoting green infrastructure, and aligning with international sustainability standards will be crucial for the BRI's global acceptance and ethical credibility. The intensifying strategic competition between China and the United States adds another layer of complexity. As both powers vie for influence in the Indo-Pacific, the BRI is increasingly seen not merely as an economic tool, but as a geopolitical instrument. The initiative's ability to shape the economic, political, and security orientations of regional states makes it a focal point in the broader contest for regional hegemony. Countries in the region must navigate this rivalry carefully, seeking to maximize economic benefits while preserving their strategic autonomy.

Ultimately, if implemented with a focus on mutual benefit, sustainability, and respect for sovereignty, the BRI holds significant potential to contribute to global development. It can offer partner countries not only enhanced infrastructure and economic opportunities but also a platform for inclusive growth and regional stability. Realizing this potential will depend on China's willingness to adapt its approach and on the international community's capacity to engage constructively in shaping the future of global development cooperation.

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