

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

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NITIN MENON, DEC 26 2024

Inspired by the ancient Silk Road of the Han dynasty, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' in September 2013 in Kazakhstan.[1] It aimed at creating a logistical corridor with roads, railways, and aerial links along the historic trade route linking China with Europe via Central Asia. A month later, during a visit to Indonesia, Xi unveiled a complementary maritime venture called the '21st-century Maritime Silk Road' to link China's eastern ports to Europe.[2] The combination of these two projects led to the One Belt One Road strategy, later rebranded as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015.[3] Over the past decade, the BRI has evolved into one of the most ambitious global infrastructure, trade, and connectivity projects ever undertaken, with China already investing an estimated \$1 trillion.[4] By December 2023, nearly 150 countries, representing two-thirds of the global population and more than half of the world's GDP, have either signed on to BRI projects or shown strong interest in joining.[5] The BRI has captured the attention of countless analysts and has been hailed as "one of the grandest and most ambitious schemes floated by any country in modern times that . . . will have a very substantial impact on the strategies and politics of the entire world".[6]

The inaugural international conference on the BRI in May 2017 was a resounding success, drawing participation from 29 heads of states and representatives from nearly 130 states.[7] However, the absence of India, a country that holds a strategic position at the intersection of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), was conspicuous.[8] Though unequal in scale, the concurrent rise of China and India is a critical force shaping 21st-century global politics.[9] Yet their bilateral relationship is characterized not by 'cooperation' but by 'conflict', 'competition,' and 'confrontation' over not only the disputed boundary but also their influence over the shared neighbourhood, as well as in the global order.[10] It is this context that leads to a critical question: *What are the underlying motivations driving China's Belt and Road Initiative, and why does India vehemently oppose the project and its implementation?*

To delve into these questions, this dissertation will first critically review existing literature to establish a foundational understanding of these dynamics. It will then clearly define the research objectives and outline a robust methodology. Following this, the analysis will apply key International Relations (IR) theories to the BRI, providing a theoretical framework to interpret its implications. A detailed case study on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will offer practical insights into the BRI's on-ground impact. Furthermore, the dissertation will explore India's reservations and opposition to the BRI, highlighting the strategic and geopolitical concerns at play. Finally, the study will synthesize its findings into a comprehensive conclusion, delivering a thoughtful reflection on the answers to the key questions explored throughout the study.

Literature Review

David Shambaugh stated that "no nation has had such an extensive, animated, and diverse discourse about its roles as a major rising power as China has".[11] A vast body of literature on the BRI, from the perspectives of Beijing, the existing Washington-led global order, and New Delhi, already exists and continues to grow. Firstly, this literature review aims to delve into the BRI's intertwined dimensions of geoeconomics and geopolitics, as the BRI serves as a prime example of Blackwill and Harris' definition of geoeconomics as "the use of economic instruments to promote

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results".[12] The subsequent section illuminates the existing body of work pertaining to India's perspective on the BRI, and finally underscores the limitation of the current literature.

Geo-Economic Motivations Behind BRI

Experts have speculated that China's reasons for launching the BRI include securing a stable energy supply, creating a new regional economic system, expanding its influence in neighbouring areas, addressing its economic slowdown after 2010, and reducing internal economic inequalities.[13]

David Brewster highlights that around 80% of China's oil imports are transported through the Indian Ocean, making the overland and maritime corridors under the BRI crucial for reducing vulnerabilities, such as the "Malacca Dilemma"—China's heavy reliance on the narrow and potentially volatile Strait of Malacca.[14] Thus, given China is the world's largest energy consumer, the primary goal of the BRI is said to be securing energy supply routes.[15]

Mingjiang Li says the BRI represents a grand strategy veering away from a traditional low-profile international stance to one that integrates China with Eurasia through a network of trade routes and infrastructure corridors, creating a new economic geography with China at its centre.[16] Li further suggested that creating a series of maritime corridors helps increase market access for China in the participant countries as well as develop ports in key locations in South Asian and South East Asian nations, transforming the Indian Ocean economy in Beijing's favour.[17]

A political-economic analysis of the BRI, especially during its initial phase, reveals it to be a crucial fix to mitigate China's challenge of industrial overcapacity.[18] Even before the 2007–09 global financial crisis, China's production capabilities in sectors such as steel, chemical industry, cement, and shipbuilding had already exceeded both domestic and global demand, resulting in industrial overproduction and underutilized infrastructure.[19] Yiping Huang emphasizes that China needed to adopt a novel economic approach to prevent falling into the "middle-income trap," as it could no longer rely solely on exports of labour-intensive goods.[20] Following the financial crisis, the global economy sank into recession, reducing demand for Chinese goods and exacerbating the overcapacity issue, which in turn heavily affected the domestic labour market.[21] The Chinese government envisioned the BRI as a solution to its overcapacity challenge. First, Chinese industries were encouraged to invest in overseas production facilities, enabling them to sustain growth and maintain profitability.[22] Second, Chinese-financed infrastructure and energy projects abroad would stimulate demand for surplus goods produced domestically, thus alleviating the pressure of overproduction.[23]

Another key focus of the BRI remains developing China's landlocked western provinces.[24] In 1999, the Chinese government introduced the Great Western Development Strategy (GWDS) to confront the widening economic gaps between landlocked western territories and affluent seaboard states.[25] However, the significant distance between China's underserved western regions and the eastern coast, along with inadequate infrastructure connecting the western provinces to neighbouring countries, posed a formidable challenge to the success of the GWDS.[26] To address this, the BRI aims to enhance connectivity, providing the western provinces with easier access to international markets.[27]

Geo-Political Motivations Behind BRI

On one front, numerous BRI member countries have praised the initiative, highlighting China's ambition to become a major global player by assuming international responsibilities and fulfilling global obligations.[28] On the other front, it has been met with significant scepticism from Western nations, particularly the United States (U.S.), as well as from China's neighbouring country, India, where commentators view it as a new form of colonialism, debt-trap diplomacy, or an imperialist project.[29]

Hideo Odashi argues that under Xi, China has grown more assertive, departing from Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum of "hide ability and wait for the time".[30] Odashi sees the BRI as China's response to the American 'Pivot to Asia' policy, with the BRI's long-term goal being supporting China's ambition of replacing the U.S. as the world's foremost

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

economic power.[31] Mark Beeson claims that the BRI can be seen as a modern-day Marshall Plan, but with distinct Chinese characteristics.[32] Moreover, as the U.S. model of economic leadership encounters challenges, particularly amid growing protectionism and unilateralism, Beeson insists that China is advancing the BRI as a new Sino-centric framework for global trade, positioning itself as the leader of globalization.[33] Additionally, China's expanding global economic footprint is viewed as a means for the renminbi to challenge, and potentially displace, the U.S. dollar as the world's dominant currency.[34]

Former U.S. National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster describes the BRI as a tool of economic clientelism, where China provides loans to countries shunned by other lenders.[35] Many Western scholars have argued that numerous nations participating in the BRI lack the technical expertise to properly assess the terms of infrastructure project contracts or the sustainability of their internal debt, leaving them ill-prepared to manage complex processes of litigation or arbitration that may arise.[36] Some scholars argue that the BRI provides limited economic benefits to developing nations, serving mainly as China's geopolitical tool to impose debt and undermine their sovereignty.[37] Prominently, the BRI facilitated a 2017 debt-equity swap between Sri Lanka and China Merchants Port Holding Company, which saw the Chinese state-owned enterprise acquire a 70% stake in the Hambantota port under a 99-year lease in exchange for \$1.12 billion Sri Lankan debt.[38]

Indian Viewpoint on the BRI

In the formative years of the BRI, some Indian analysts perceived the BRI as a golden opportunity to bolster regional connectivity. In 2014, Zorawar Singh highlighted that from a neoliberal interdependence perspective, India should be receptive to the BRI as a natural response to the unstoppable forces of globalization and the emergence of new economic powerhouses in Asia.[39] Other analysts echoed similar sentiments, highlighting how the BRI could help India tap into the extensive production and supply networks spanning ASEAN, China, Japan, and Korea.[40]

However, the dominant view over the past decade sees the BRI as a looming threat to India's security and influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Since 2016-17, Indian analysts have viewed their government's hostile response to the BRI—particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through areas claimed by India—as a sign of deep apprehension.[41] In the post-pandemic era, New Delhi's ministers and diplomats have raised concerns that BRI projects could lead to debt traps, corruption, political instability, and environmental issues, citing the initiative's lack of transparency, limited stakeholder consultation, and China's expanding military presence in the IOR.[42]

Limitations of the Literature

Despite the plethora of literature on BRI, the works rarely align themselves with any specific school of International Relations Theory (IRT) or provide well-defined theoretical constructs to support their claims and conclusions. This gap is particularly striking in commentary from India, a nation with a pivotal role in the IOR and one that perceives the BRI as a direct threat to its strategic interests. For instance, concepts such as 'relative distribution of power' are notably absent in works centered on how the BRI purportedly enhances China's power at the expense of the U.S. or India. Thakur has argued that academics from the Global South ignore IRT as they view it as a 'Western construct.' [43] Moreover, many scholars from the Global South and think tanks focus more on policy relevance rather than theoretical approaches.[44] This narrow view, however, may lead to an arbitrary selection of aspects and evidence to analyse, resulting in misinterpretation of patterns and, at times, flawed policy formulation.

Research Objective and Methodology

Research Questions

Alexander George argues that the divide between theory and policy arises from a fundamental difference in their cultures: while academics operate within a more flexible time frame, policymakers must often act swiftly, relying on incomplete information and intuitive judgment.[45] However, George emphasizes that "good theories provide relevant and useful conceptual frameworks" essential for understanding the broader requirements of strategy and the

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

logic behind effective policy decisions.[46] Therefore, using the lenses of mainstream International Relations theories, this dissertation seeks to first uncover China's motivations behind the BRI. Tim Dunne's advocacy for "integrative pluralism," which accepts the validity of diverse theoretical perspectives, serves as a guiding principle for this.[47] Thus, this work examines the BRI through the lenses of neorealism (both offensive and defensive) and neoliberalism (economic interdependence) to determine which theory best explains the initiative.

To unravel China's motivations, this work focuses on the following question:*How does the BRI help China expand its influence, balancing security pursuits with regional hegemony aspirations, while also creating economic ties that reshape the global economic landscape?* Subsequently, this dissertation connects the theoretical insights on China's BRI to a focused case study of the CPEC. Finally, it answers the question:*What drives India's hesitation to join the BRI and its underlying suspicions of the initiative?*

Methodology

To provide a comprehensive understanding of China's motivations behind the BRI, this dissertation employs a qualitative methodology to investigate key research inquiries. Applying the qualitative approach allows for more flexibility during research, as it enables adjustment to accommodate new developments and discoveries, especially given the dynamics of the ongoing BRI, which is not possible or as forgiving when utilizing quantitative analysis.[48]

Flick claimed that "qualitative research is interested in analyzing subjective meaning or the social production of issues, events, or practices by collecting non-standardized data and analyzing texts and images rather than number and statistics".[49] Accordingly, this research draws upon a comprehensive study of primary sources, including government reports, alongside a wealth of secondary sources from academic publications such as books, journal articles, as well as media reports.

As the case study approach allows for rigorous investigation of a single unit "with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units," an empirical analysis of CPEC is employed to deepen the discourse on the BRI *vis-à-vis* India.[50]

Theoretical Analysis

This section presents the theoretical framework necessary to conduct an analysis of China's underlying motivations for embarking on the BRI. In examining the BRI through the lenses of neorealism and neoliberalism, divergent interpretations of its motives and consequences emerge.

Neorealism or Structural Realism

Structural Realists state that "international systems are decentralized and anarchic" and each state is compelled to rely on itself, following a self-help system, in order to pursue what it perceives as its rational self-interest.[51] The conclusion of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR brought about a significant shift in the global balance of power.[52] Neorealists contend that China, marked by robust economic advancement and ambitious pursuits, emerged as a formidable contender to the then unipolar system dominated by the U.S.[53]

Defensive Neorealism

According to Kenneth Waltz, the pursuit of power maximization is not the primary goal for states; rather, he recommends that states must focus on maximizing their security through defensive strategies.[54] For China, the importance of the Indian Ocean as one of the world's key trade routes is evident, as it handles over 60% of global maritime commerce, including vital oil shipments that are crucial to sustaining China's economy.[55] Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell view China expanding its presence in the IOR, through leasing ports like Gwadar and Kyaukpyu under the BRI, as a natural outcome of its paramount concern of safeguarding its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) across the region.[56] This is particularly important as John Garver asserts that in the event of a conflict between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and India, it is plausible that India would consider shifting its focus from land-based confrontations, where it might encounter challenges, to Indian Ocean engagements, where it

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

possesses notable strategic advantages.[57]

Shiping Tang claims that China's BRI is a response to its security dilemma and China is only adopting "a defensive realism-rooted security strategy emphasising moderation, self-restraint, and security cooperation".[58] This perspective becomes clear when we recognize that the BRI was strategically crafted in response to President Obama's 'Pivot to Asia,' which China viewed as an attempt to undermine its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. [59] Moreover, by strategically investing in development across its neighbourhood, particularly in Central and South Asia, China aspires for regional and economic stability. [60] This approach not only enhances Beijing's economic resilience but also serves its strategic goal of securing its borders and minimizing the risk of conflicts in its periphery, effectively safeguarding its long-term interests.[61]

Charles Glaser posits that different states with security concerns should be able to recognise each other as security-seekers, strive to maintain the relative status quo, and avert potential complications that offensive realists forecast.[62] Reinforcing this idea, Beijing is focussing on defensively enhancing its maritime security in the Indian Ocean vis-à-vis India and bolsters its energy security by diversifying and securing key supply routes.[63] Thus, as a part of BRI, it has successfully established electronic intelligence-gathering facilities on a Myanmar island in the Bay of Bengal, while also creating energy pipelines between Kyaukpyu in the Bay of Bengal and Kunming in China's Yunnan province.[64]

Offensive Neorealism

Offensive neorealist John Mearsheimer, in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, argues that the most rational approach to ensuring state security "is to be the hegemon in the system," but since "no state is likely to achieve global hegemony, the world is condemned to perpetual great-power competition".[65] Given the unattainability of global hegemony, revisionist great powers often seek to establish themselves as regional hegemons while simultaneously working to prevent other powers from rising to a dominant status.[66]

Mearsheimer argues that latent power, such as population, technology, and economic strength, is only valuable if it can be turned into military power.[67] Brahma Chellaney claims that China's leaders have demonstrated remarkable proficiency in leveraging economic strategies to further their nation's geopolitical objectives.[68] State-owned Chinese companies are constructing strategic ports in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and other locations of geostrategic significance in the IOR as part of the BRI.[69] Some of these nations, overwhelmed by their indebtedness to China, are compelled to relinquish ownership stakes in projects financed by China or cede managerial control to Chinese state-owned enterprises.[70] While Chinese officials emphasize that China's intention is purely economic in nature, analysts express scepticism regarding the potential militarization of these coastal territories, drawing parallels with the situation in the South China Sea islands.[71] Evidently, the many port calls made by a Chinese submarine to Sri Lanka suggest that Colombo or Hambantota may serve as key nodes for providing logistical support to the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and potentially the People's Liberation Army Air Force.[72] Moreover, the Chinese Djibouti Support Base, which officially opened in August 2017, has been a subject of speculation and denial by Chinese authorities for many years.[73] Despite China's official designation of the base as a logistics facility, evidence from satellite imagery and unofficial reports suggests that the base may possess military infrastructure beyond the scope of a typical logistics facility.[74] A 2019 defence white paper, entitled China's National Defence in the New Era, asserting that the protection of China's overseas interests is one of the fundamental goals of China's national defence seems to resemble the start of a deliberate strategy to achieve regional hegemony.[75] From the vantage point of increasing Chinese ownership of strategic ports in the IOR, it appears that the BRI is furthering China's calculated objective to diminish the influence of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region and India in the South Asian region, with the goal of establishing itself as the primary regional power on the continent.[76]

Neoliberalism

Immanuel Kant, in *Perpetual Peace*, posited that the mutual self-interest fostered by trade compels states to actively pursue peace in order to safeguard their economic interests.[77] Consequently, trading states seek to prevent war through mediation to preserve trade, forming the foundation of the liberal theory of economic interdependence.[78]

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

Economic Interdependence

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye argue that interdependence, particularly economic interconnectedness, has been the reality for more than three decades in our globalised world.[79] The authors highlight complex interdependence, where globalization, free trade, and rapid communication technologies have tightly bound nations and changed states' behavioural patterns, stressing that severing these ties and abandoning a rules-based order would cause profound and irreversible harm to states' interests.[80]

China, since the 1980s, has predominantly chosen to be a "trading state," as articulated by Richard Rosecrance, as opposed to a "territorial state," and has concentrated on advancing prosperity through commercial activities, even becoming a World Trade Organization (WTO) member in 2001.[81] In the context of neoliberalism, the BRI is viewed as an extension of China's earlier China Goes Global policy, which sought to further integrate its economy by encouraging overseas investments from state-led enterprises.[82] The BRI was introduced to offer a more structured and comprehensive strategy compared to the piecemeal and fragmented China Goes Global policy.[83] This new phase of China's economic liberalization was also imperative due to the decrease in Chinese exports and industrial processing trade with developed nations after the 2008 financial recession, underscoring a requirement for China to identify an alternative foundation for its advancement and further economic integration.[84] Notably, the surpassing of inbound by outbound Chinese direct investment post-2013 is no coincidence.[85] By focusing on infrastructure projects abroad and channelling foreign direct investment (FDI) through the BRI, China has strategically addressed its industrial overcapacity by exporting capital goods to developing nations, while simultaneously creating long-term economic interdependence for future gains.[86]

Moreover, Beijing sees the BRI as a vital platform for advancing up the value chain by exporting higher-end Chinese goods to emerging markets in Asia, Africa, and beyond, where they are more welcomed than in North America and Europe.[87] China's leadership aims to secure a position at the higher end of the global value chain, as exemplified by its ambitious campaign to market Chinese high-speed railway technology, with former Premier Li Keqiang personally promoting these projects in countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia.[88] Interestingly, Chinese telecommunications giants like Huawei and ZTE are pivotal in shifting the BRI's focus from hard infrastructure to digital infrastructure, expanding Chinese information and communication technology platforms across the Asia-Pacific and reinforcing China's global influence while shaping new norms for intellectual property rights in technology standards.[89]

Weidong Liu highlights the benefits of economic interdependence, portraying the BRI as 'inclusive globalization' and emphasizing its focus on developing crucial infrastructure in emerging economies across Asia and Africa.[90] He argues that by prioritizing regions with underdeveloped infrastructure, the BRI seeks to bridge economic disparities, allowing these countries to benefit from the global economy—an opportunity they were largely denied during Western-led globalization.[91]

However, Christopher McNally asserts that the Chinese state has effectively incorporated and amalgamated its economy into the global trade and investment framework, without itself conforming to neoliberal notions of globalization.[92] Despite China being a member of WTO and benefiting significantly from the free and fair trade system the organization seeks to establish, there hasn't been a wholesale acceptance from China of neoliberal norms of economic interdependence.[93] There is a growing argument that China, as a rising power, no longer passively accepts international rules, but rather operates on a spectrum between rule-making and rule-breaking.[94] Since the 2010s, China has faced accusations from its major trading partners of failing to adhere to the liberal principles of fair competition outlined by the (WTO).[95] Likewise, the BRI diverges from the established rule-based principle of economic integration, which emphasizes the necessity of a unified and institutional adoption of conventional Free Trade Agreements and regulatory frameworks.[96] William Callahan encapsulates the grand strategy of the BRI as the strategic use of economic influence to construct a Sino-centric "community of shared destiny" in Asia and the use of this positioning to emerge as a normative power, wielding influence in setting the rules for global governance, rather than following the existing West-led liberal order.[97] Moreover, as the Chinese renminbi rises, nations around the world may find themselves recalibrating their economic alliances, increasingly reliant on China's financial power, which could undermine the liberal economic order and reshape the global

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

economy in China's favour.[98] Thus, the liberal perspective encounters challenges in offering comprehensive explanations for the BRI.

Case Study

A small-n case study strategy based on the comprehensive empirical examination of a singular or a limited number of phenomena enables the elucidation of characteristics of a broader category of similar phenomena, through the construction and assessment of theoretical explanations.[99] In this study, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was chosen because of its relevance to the research questions and its representation of broader trends associated with the BRI. The CPEC is notable for its importance to the BRI, often described by the PRC as its "flagship project," a status underscored by its inclusion in China's 13th five-year development plan.[100] The CPEC offers a compelling case for analysis through multiple theoretical frameworks, each providing valuable insights and contemporary examples. Moreover, it exemplifies the issues that the BRI presents for India. CPEC has become a focal point of contention for India, as it is perceived to infringe upon India's territorial sovereignty.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

The 1962 war between China and India, followed by the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, laid the foundation for what has, over the past six decades, evolved into a robust and enduring strategic China-Pakistan partnership.[101] Their "all-weather friendship" has exhibited a high level of resilience and has "run closer than most formal alliances," propelled by shared territorial disputes with India.[102]

As of 2023, India's GDP stood at \$3.5 trillion, significantly overshadowing Pakistan's \$338.37 billion.[103] Since its establishment, Pakistan has strategized to counter its regional rival, India. The Long-Term Plan for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, formally signed in 2017, outlined the ambitious vision for CPEC's development, financing, and investment mechanisms.[104] Spanning 3,000 kilometres, CPEC forms a crucial network of regional connectivity, linking Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province to the strategic Gwadar port in Pakistan's Balochistan, while extending through the Khunjerab Pass to Karachi and other southern coastal hubs.[105] The initiative aims to establish energy and logistics hubs, boost trade and commerce, expand industrial capacity, and solidify the economic partnership between China and Pakistan, enabling it to counterbalance India's growing economic and military influence in the region.[106]

Defensive Realism

Waltz famously asserts that "only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquillity, profit, and power".[107] This insight is particularly relevant for China's energy security, as approximately 80% of its oil imports pass through the Malacca Strait, the busiest chokepoint in the Indian Ocean.[108] The CPEC has the potential to safeguard China's vital energy supply routes by creating a strategic land connection to the Indian Ocean, offering a secure and viable alternative to the vulnerable Malacca Strait, which could be easily blockaded by India or the U.S. In this context, Gwadar offers a defensive response to China's energy security dilemma, providing China with a much shorter route to the IOR, cutting down the 12,900 km journey from the Persian Gulf through Malacca to China's eastern seaboard.[109] For Pakistan, the significance of Gwadar's location at the intersection of the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz cannot be overstated; its development serves as a pivotal gateway for energy, oil, and trade flows into Pakistan, while also providing the Pakistan Navy with strategic depth along its coastline.[110]

Robert Jervis argues that states tend to act in defence than offense to avoid the high costs of war, which causes them to restrain aggression.[111] With this perspective, Eryan Ramadhani argues that interpreting China's actions in the IOR as offensive is problematic for several reasons, including China's limited naval capability in 'far-seas' and the lack of any real security threat to India.[112] Isaac Kardon insists that there have been neither any PLA deployments to Gwadar nor a single observed PLAN port call.[113] Peter Dutton claims that despite China recently deploying submarines to the IOR as a tactical step; the Indian Ocean remains a remote and secondary theatre for China.[114] Despite engaging in joint naval exercises and anti-piracy operations, China's presence in the region falls short of matching the dominant roles played by the U.S. and Indian navies.[115] From a defensive realism perspective,

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

China's activities are more about safeguarding its interests and ensuring regional stability rather than presenting an immediate military challenge to India.

CPEC is a crucial tool in China's relentless fight against separatism, terrorism, and religious fundamentalism—challenges whose eradication is central to both China's domestic stability and its foreign policy ambitions.[116] CPEC and the broader BRI provide strong incentives for Chinese state-owned and private enterprises, as well as foreign investors, to enhance connectivity with the underdeveloped and landlocked Xinjiang, a border province known for Uyghur separatism and militancy.[117] Given Xinjiang's history as a security concern for China, CPEC's strategic investments aim not only to promote economic growth but also to strengthen security and stability in the area.[118] China has expressed concerns over Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), based in Pakistan, for maintaining long-standing ties with insurgent groups active in Xinjiang, such as the al-Qaeda-affiliated Turkistan Islamic Party, and providing them with training in areas under its control in northwest Pakistan.[119] The CPEC serves as a critical lever to compel Pakistan to take decisive action against terrorism and extremism within its borders, which threatens China's security in the Sino-Pak border region.[120] Thus, CPEC aligns with Beijing's proactive security strategy, where fostering sustainable economic prosperity in both the Xinjiang region and Pakistan helps to curb terrorism that threatens China's economic interests, territorial integrity, and national security.[121] Likewise, by fostering economic growth, job creation, and infrastructural development, CPEC offers a pathway to long-term stability and reduced insurgency in one of Pakistan's most volatile regions, Balochistan.[122]

Offensive Realism

Eric Labs encapsulates offensive realist strategy as the pursuit of maximizing security by ensuring superior relative power compared to rivals, in order to guarantee survival and dominance in a region.[123] Oriana Mastro argues that China, through CPEC, is actively bolstering its sources of national power and extending its influence far beyond its borders, deep into South Asia.[124] Moreover, by making Pakistan economically dependent on Beijing through massive infrastructure investments, China is using Pakistan as an offshore balancer, transforming it into a durable and pivotal counterweight to India's influence in the region.[125] This growing alliance is intended to shift the balance of power in China's favour, posing an imminent risk to India's strategic interests and regional stability.

Alfred Mahan fervently argued that a state's power is inseparably linked to its control of the seas.[126] Tied to this, a 2004 study by Booz Allen Hamilton introduced the concept of a Chinese "string of pearls" in the Indian Ocean region, suggesting that China could capitalize on its existing commercial and security ties with Indian Ocean nations to establish a web of military outposts across the region.[127] This is casting a looming threat over the SLOCs and jeopardising freedom of navigation for countries like India.[128] The 2019 Annual Report to the U.S. Congress raised eyebrows by suggesting that Pakistan could become the site of a new Chinese military base, following the inauguration of China's first military base in Djibouti in 2016.[129] This unsettling prospect arises from the deepening alliance between the two nations and Pakistan's strategically crucial position in the IOR. Gwadar, with its deep-water port capable of handling large ships carrying heavy cargo, has been highlighted as a potential hub for Chinese troops and resources, possibly even serving as a clandestine ammunition depot.[130] However, it currently lacks sufficient berths and rail unloading facilities to serve as a military base, and the inland rail network connecting the port is still limited.[131] The construction plans for the BRI may aim to address these limitations of Gwadar in the future. Additionally, many analysts have noted the possibility of the construction of a new naval base and airfield at Jiwnani, approximately 60 kilometres west of Gwadar.[132] In this light, the offensive realism dictum that "wealth can rather easily be translated into military might"[133] is ominously unfolding as China rapidly expands its naval power, with the 2023 SIPRI report highlighting that China's military expenditure has increased for 28 consecutive years.[134] Mearsheimer argues that "little scholarly evidence supports the claim that high levels of defense spending necessarily hurt a great power economy".[135] Thus, China is leveraging the BRI to expand its dominance in the Indian Ocean, driven by a calculated goal where the anticipated gains far outweigh the potential costs.

Labs observes that in the quest for dominance, states frequently challenge or undermine the sovereignty of others, especially in contested regions, with a focus on strategic waterways and border areas.[136] While China claims the CPEC to be purely an economic project with no major implications for any third party in the region, it passes through Gilgit-Baltistan of Kashmir region which has been a contested territory between India and Pakistan for more than

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

seven decades.[137] By deliberately routing this strategic corridor through the contested region, China is not only disregarding India's territorial claims but is actively undermining its sovereignty. The Indian side has taken serious note of the joint patrols in the disputed territory by armed soldiers from the PLA's frontier defence regiment and Pakistan's border police force.[138] Furthermore, to India's dismay, the CPEC significantly benefits Pakistan in this territorial dispute, as Pakistan has long sought to elevate the Kashmir issue on the international stage by involving external parties.[139] By contrast, China consistently opposes India's infrastructure development within its own territory, including its vocal objection to the Dhola-Sadiya bridge, which strengthens connectivity between regions of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh—a state that China unilaterally claims as part of southern Tibet.[140] Such objections underscore China's broader strategy of undermining India's sovereign development efforts while aggressively advancing its own strategic projects in contested regions.

Economic Interdependence

According to Complex Interdependence theory, military force plays a limited role and is no longer viewed as the most effective tool of foreign policy.[141] In the case of CPEC, the Sino-Pakistan relationship exemplifies this shift, as it is firmly rooted in principles of peaceful coexistence, aligned strategic interests, and a common sense of purpose.[142]

In 2014, the then Chinese premier Li Keqiang made the point that China has “a lot of surplus equipment for making steel, cement and pleat glass for the Chinese market” and BRI aims to “move this excess production capacity through direct foreign investment to countries who need to build their infrastructure”.[143] The CPEC presents a valuable opportunity for China to absorb its vast and persistent surplus of industrial capacities, which its increasingly overleveraged economy can no longer support.[144] Many international observers contend that incorporating Chinese firms into the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) under CPEC provides China with the strategic advantage of outsourcing industrial production and alleviates China's industrial surplus.[145] Beyond infrastructure, the success of CPEC serves as a conduit for promoting the adoption of Chinese technological and engineering standards elsewhere, aligning with China's broader ambition to transition into an innovation-driven economy and a global leader in research and development.[146]

For Pakistan, the CPEC is not merely a transportation corridor; it is envisioned as a \$65 billion lifeline aimed at tackling Pakistan's deep-rooted economic challenges, including sluggish growth, high unemployment (exceeding 6%), and severe balance of payments crises.[147] The scale of China's CPEC investment is equivalent to the total FDI inflows Pakistan has attracted since 1970, demonstrating the initiative's transformative potential.[148] SEZs like the Rashakai Economic Zone in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Dhabeji SEZ in Sindh are widely regarded as transformative for Pakistan, expected to create thousands of jobs and capitalize on its growing working-age population.[149] These zones promise to be a catalyst for industrial growth, positioning Pakistan as a regional manufacturing hub.

Frequent blackouts and chronic energy shortages have severely impacted both Pakistan's domestic and industrial sectors and have been a major drag on Pakistan's GDP growth.[150] As a result, the country's exports plummeted from \$25 billion in 2012-13 to \$20 billion in 2017-18.[151] Experts argue that if power supply had kept pace with manufacturing demand, exports could have soared to \$35 billion during the same period.[152] Recognizing the gravity of the situation, CPEC has prioritized addressing Pakistan's energy crisis as a key focus, allocating an impressive \$33 billion to develop critical energy infrastructure, including solar, wind, coal, and hydropower projects aimed at generating 16,400 MW of electricity.[153]

India Against the BRI

India's opposition to the BRI stems from its long-standing strategic rivalry with China, rooted in over six decades of border disputes and heightened by China's embodiment of Stephen Walt's concept of aggregate and proximate threat.[154] China's vast resources—including its massive economy, advanced military, industrial strength, and technological prowess—make it a powerful adversary in terms of aggregate power.[155] But what truly intensifies the threat to India is China's proximity, allowing it to project its power directly into India's neighbourhood with alarming immediacy.[156]

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

Sino-India relations are driven by competing regional power interests, deepened by mutual distrust of each other's intentions.[157] For instance, in 2005, Beijing sought to block New Delhi from joining the East Asia Summit, while India excluded China from the India-led Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.[158] This rivalry extends to forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and SAARC, where both nations initially tried to prevent the other from gaining observer status in what each considered its own regional forum.[159]

India understands that Xi Jinping is leveraging the BRI to propel a Sinocentric international order and his ambitious vision seeks to establish a "zone of super-ordinate influence in Asia" and attain "partial hegemony in swathes of the developing world".[160] In contrast, the current Indian government aspires for it to transcend into a normative power and become "a state with the influence to define what behaviour is normal and desirable in international relations".[161] In this context, India fears the possibility of China shaping the regional and global order in its image—an image depicted as authoritarian and coercive.[162] Contrastingly, India strongly prefers to capitalize on existing liberal-order institutions like the WTO, while advocating for necessary reforms to align them with its long-term ambitions based on "open and rules-based economic policies".[163]

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) December 2021 publication of the White Paper 'Democracy that Works' marked a significant redefinition of "democracy in Chinese terms".[164] China proudly identified itself as a democracy with "distinctive Chinese characteristics" or as "a people's democratic dictatorship".[165] The paper emphasized the goal of state-led prosperity for all under state's domination, including within the framework of the BRI, and revealed the CCP's firm belief that liberal democratic values pose a direct threat to its interests.[166] The White Paper makes it clear why China, while disavowing any intent to export its political ideology through the BRI, actively nourishes autocracies like its own and supports leaders who abandon democratic principles and uphold authoritarian regimes.[167] The persecution of Muslim minorities and the 2018 and 2020 coups d'état in Myanmar, India's eastern neighbour, have allegedly been significantly influenced by China and are directly connected to the BRI.[168]

To India's west, the two phases of CPEC—Phase 1 (2013–2018) and Phase 2 (2018–present)—reveal two distinct and alarming trends. During Phase 1, under the Pakistan Muslim League (N) government, the military played a relatively low-profile role in decision-making and project implementation.[169] However, with the shift to Phase 2 in 2018, during Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government and beyond, the military assumed a far more prominent and decisive role as the primary interlocutor in the Sino-Pakistani partnership.[170] The creation of the CPEC Authority in 2019, led by retired army general Asim Saleem Bajwa, further weakened Pakistan's already fragile democratic decision-making process and consolidated army's role.[171] Additionally, the Pak-China Relations Steering Committee was created to streamline the implementation of CPEC, consisting of 15 members, including government representatives and, unsurprisingly, a majority from the armed forces and intelligence agencies.[172] This growing military influence has transformed CPEC from a purely economic project into a strategic undertaking with profound security implications for India.

Since the launch of the BRI, China's stance on Kashmir has taken a decidedly antagonistic turn.[173] In 2014, the Chinese Foreign Ministry referred to Gilgit-Baltistan—a Kashmir region that Delhi considers under Islamabad's illegal occupation—as a "part of Pakistan".[174] Notably, following the August 2019 constitutional changes made by the Indian Parliament to the federal status of Jammu and Kashmir, China swiftly took diplomatic action in support of Pakistan, leading to the unprecedented step of precipitating a United Nations Security Council meeting on Kashmir—the first such meeting in five decades.[175] With the inception of CPEC and China's growing alignment with Pakistan's narrative on Kashmir, India fears that the bilateral framework for resolving India-Pakistan disputes, established by the 1972 Shimla Agreement, is now being compromised.[176]

Despite the BRI's promises of prosperity, India views the past decade as a testament to unfulfilled aspirations.[177] Despite Pakistan's newly constructed power plants under the CPEC, the country struggles to utilize the generated electricity due to its de-industrialized economy.[178] Adding to these challenges, Pakistan's poverty rate is projected to rise to a troubling 37.2 percent.[179] However, the most alarming outcome is the \$30 billion debt owed to China, primarily accumulated through CPEC projects, which has further entrenched Pakistan's financial dependence on Beijing.[180] Meanwhile, Maldives, a key node in China's String of Pearls strategy, now stands on the verge of

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

default, with Fitch downgrading the nation's credit rating from CCC+ (some risk of default) to CC (default likely) in August 2024.[181] Burdened by \$1.3 billion in Chinese debt—nearly a quarter of its GDP—the Maldives teeters on the edge of financial collapse, trapped in an unrelenting cycle of interest payments.[182]

India believes that the BRI has enabled China to transform economic dependency in the region, often characterized as 'debt traps,' into a strategic geopolitical advantage and coerce countries into making decisions that undermine the security interests of Beijing's rivals, notably India.[183] The unusual docking of a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarine at Colombo port, Sri Lanka, in September 2014, portended the Chinese military presence in the IOR.[184] This bold move was strategically designed to extend China's military reach into the IOR, directly challenging India's dominance as the nation with the largest resident naval force in the region.[185] India's naval strength is driven by the need to safeguard its 7,500 km coastline, 1,200 islands, and a 2.4 million square kilometre Exclusive Economic Zone, along with the responsibility of protecting Indian Ocean routes that handle "90% of its trade by volume and 90% of its oil imports".[186]

Between June and August 2017, the IOR witnessed a surge in PLAN activity, as four missile-armed flotillas, comprising surface warships capable of offensive operations, entered the region.[187] While this concentrated naval force could have posed an immediate threat to IOR shipping, sustaining such operations would have been challenging without in-theatre basing.[188] However, in the event of a Sino-India war, the network of port infrastructure amassed by China could be weaponized as forward maritime bases, allowing the PLAN to dominate critical SLOCs and choke off vital supply routes.[189]

Zhang Jie, a researcher at the state-run Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, argues that Gwadar should serve as a crucial supply hub for the Chinese fleet, significantly bolstering the operational capacity of the PLAN in the IOR.[190] She strongly emphasizes that Gwadar alone cannot fully meet China's strategic objectives in the region, and that Beijing must establish multiple 'strategic fulcrums' to mutually reinforce one another.[191] Against this backdrop, it can be concluded that New Delhi's growing apprehension about the BRI stems from China's efforts to expand access to key regional ports as well as its escalating naval capabilities.

In response, India has actively seized every opportunity to counter China's regional influence and undermine Chinese efforts to reshape the regional order.[192] The common thread in India's counter-BRI strategy—spanning initiatives like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor with Japan, the revitalized Quad with the US, Japan, and Australia, and stronger political and economic ties with ASEAN—reflects a clear commitment to bolstering a liberal order in the Indo-Pacific, focused on curbing China's expanding presence and influence in the region.[193]

Conclusion

This study sought to demonstrate that the genesis of the BRI, both as a geoeconomic and geopolitical project, can be more effectively understood through a comprehensive theoretical analysis. Given the complexity of the realities IR theory aims to explain, and the limitations of our epistemological capacities, Dunne's approach of theoretical pluralism is crucial. To thoroughly address the first question, China's motivations were analysed by integrating both neorealist and neoliberal perspectives. The issue with relying solely on one theory is not that it is incorrect, but that it provides an incomplete picture. Many analysts tend to overemphasize the power and security aspects of the BRI while overlooking its critical economic agenda. In reality, these objectives are not conflicting but rather deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

While strategic considerations are intertwined with the BRI, they appear to follow economic interests rather than drive them. The BRI primarily enables China to expand its global economic reach by systematically internationalizing its state-owned enterprises, addressing industrial overcapacity, efficiently utilizing its vast foreign exchange reserves, and building strong bilateral economic partnerships. Despite its ambitious scope, the strategic aspects of the BRI cannot be fully characterized as a hegemonic project designed to undermine the existing global order or create an inescapable security dilemma for other nations. Instead, the author argues that the BRI currently aligns more with a defensive realist goal of enhancing China's security, rather than striving for outright hegemony.

A Decade of Belt and Road Initiative: China's Motivations and India's Suspicions

Written by Nitin Menon

As the BRI enters its second decade, it has become clear that China's resilient authoritarian model under the CCP has challenged the long-standing belief that democracy and economic development are inherently linked. China's efforts to reshape global power structures, strengthen its security, and expand its sphere of influence have had a profound impact on the powers in the Indo-Pacific region. With an unmistakable ambition to become the dominant global power, China's most troubling trait has been its disregard for the rules-based international order.

In addressing the second question, India views the BRI as a perpetual threat to its territorial integrity, particularly due to the CPEC and China's increasing interference in Kashmir. Former Indian Foreign Secretary, Nirupama Rao, emphasized the strategic importance of India's location, stating, "India and the Indian Ocean are inseparable. In the midst of the third largest ocean in the world, India's location is in many ways her destiny".^[194] Within this context, India's endorsement of the BRI would be seen as a concession to China's dominance, not only in its immediate neighbourhood but also across the Indian Ocean Region, effectively surrendering to Beijing's expanding regional dominance. Moreover, such an endorsement would imply India's acceptance of China's opaque lending practices, as well as the lack of transparency and inclusivity in the BRI's decision-making and project execution, which contradict India's core values in international diplomacy.

In conclusion, the core of the BRI revolves around the essential concept of national interest, which Morgenthau aptly describes as the "guiding star, one standard for thought, one rule for action" in foreign policy.^[195] China's ambitions with the BRI and India's strong opposition to it ultimately stem from their respective national interests, driven by contrasting visions of what each nation perceives as vital to its security and global standing. The BRI encapsulates China's aspirations for greater global influence, while India's resistance reflects its commitment to safeguarding its sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

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