

# An Assessment of China's Power Expansion in Asia Through the Lens of the Belt and Road Initiative

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## Abstract

In the age of globalization, interdependence and trade cooperation between nations is at an all-time peak. The Belt and Road Initiative by China is one of the most significant projects undertaken by a nation toward infrastructural development in the world and sees growth in about 70 countries and organizations. While the project's scope strictly emphasizes strategic infrastructural development for global purposes, separating China's foreign policy and diplomatic ambitions from this project is challenging. In the presented report, the case of the Belt and Road Initiative has been examined comprehensively, with a high degree of attention on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects for the impact of China's rise in Asia and implications for the geopolitical balance of the region. Using a comprehensive literature survey, this study finds that while China indeed achieves the objective of economic growth through the project, it is also a cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy in the region. This threatens the security and sovereignty of other nearby nations already facing adversarial relations with China, including Tibet, Taiwan, and India. China's oppression and disregard for their sovereignty will likely increase for these nations as the Chinese government gets more diplomatic leverage in its international relations through the Belt and Road Initiative.

*Keywords: Asia, Belt and Road Initiative, BRI and CPEC, China foreign policy, Chinese diplomacy, superpower.*

## 1. Introduction

On a global scale, China is a major superpower in the world economy, politics, military power, and diplomatic relations. Rich in terms of its massive land area, the largest population in the world, and natural resources, China has much power that grants it the ability to define and influence international relations interestingly to best suit its own needs, objectives, and propaganda. After World War II, the rise of the United States was on a similar pattern as well; however, in the case of the United States, the country became more potent than any other empire in the history of humankind, was a democracy, and supported human rights in most cases (Hendrickson, 1995). Today, China is second in rank to the United States only in terms of power and influence, with the power of China rising rapidly. However, the rise of Chinese power is perceived as a more prominent threat as China has a communist government surrounded by many secretcies and a track record of human rights violations in the region (Wang et al., 2015). Hence, China's growing power can be seen as a threat to the sustainability of democracy and human rights in Asia, as China can become a powerful force with no checks and bounds (Gryzwacz, 2020; Weiss, 2019). China's most important economic projects are the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. This report makes an

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investigation into the BRI and CPEC project of China to identify the implications that it has on the geopolitical relations in the region.

### 1.1. Research background

China's key power source has always consisted of being the largest population in the world. As per the National Bureau of Statistics of China, as of January 2022. However, the recent growth in its rise has been primarily driven by the ability of China to effectively use its labor access as an economic accelerator (Greenhalgh, 2010). China has emerged as one of the largest economies in the world, positioning the country as a leader among many vital industries such as information communication, semiconductor, services, and manufacturing. Hence, the country's growing power can detract from its opposition and criticism by leveraging its economic and trade power (Mancheri, 2015; vom Hau et al., 2012). In light of these concerns raised by Mancheri (2015) and vom Hau et al. (2012), a continuous growth pattern in trade and economic aspects of China, there is a rising threat to the political stability of Asia along with a threat to the sovereignty of many democratic nations in Asia.

One of China's most ambitious and long-term projects in recent decades is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI was a project proposed by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in 2013 as part of a foreign policy initiative by the country (Huang, 2016). The project aims to invest in more than 70 nations and international organizations for global infrastructure development (Wang et al., 2020). While the critical component of the BRI project is promoting trade and economic growth in favor of China through social infrastructural developments worldwide, a notable aspect of the BRI project is diplomatic and geopolitical power (Huang, 2016). Smith (2021) described the approach by China in BRI as a “Major Country Diplomacy” approach to help China naturally assume a more significant role of leadership and power play in the region and global affairs. Hence, it is impossible to view the BRI project as only an economic step by China and separate it from the geopolitical implications of the same. Within the overall framework of BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the more ambitious projects that gives China access to the South Asian market in a more prominent manner than ever before, with direct implications for China-India and China-Pakistan relations.

### 1.2. Research aims and objectives

This research study aims to make a detailed assessment of China's foreign policy through BRI and CPEC and its implications on the sovereignty of neighboring nations. Towards the goal of achieving these targets, this research study has the following objectives to meet:

- To identify the economic and diplomatic interests of the BRI and CPEC project
- To recognize the likely outcomes that the rise of China in the geopolitical structure of Asia would yield in Asian politics
- To evaluate the impact of China's global dominance on the sovereignty and independence status of nations that China currently oppresses in some manner
- To identify how the transactional economic diplomacy of China after the CPEC and BRI projects will transform the geopolitical balance in South-East Asia.

### **1.3. Problem statement**

The Belt and Road Initiative and the CPEC project are strategic power expansion actions by China that can create a significant threat to democracy in Asia amidst Chinese supremacy.

### **1.4. Research hypotheses**

The proposed research study will attempt to identify the validity of the following research hypotheses:

- i. China's Belt and Road initiative aims to establish Asia as the world's trade center, with China as the leader.
- ii. The CPEC Project within the Belt and Road Initiative helps China push its dominance in South Asia.
- iii. Through CPEC, China aims to limit India's options for trade growth in South Asia.
- iv. The Belt and Road Project by China threatens the existing trade dominance of western powers.

### **1.5. Significance of the research**

In the capitalistic structure of the world, economic growth and cooperation for economic development are being pursued by seemingly every nation in the world. However, with economic power comes leverage enjoyed by some of the most powerful nations in the world. In this case, China is already one of the most powerful nations in the world and has a high level of influence and diplomatic power that the country exercises extensively. The prominent issue is how China uses its trade and economic power extensively to silence its critics and pursue oppression in the region against smaller countries in Asia. This study will demonstrate through a detailed literature review that existing literature has focused primarily on the economic and trade aspects of BRI and CPEC projects while giving little attention to changes in the geopolitical climate of Asia. This research study provides deep insight into an aspect of the BRI and CEPC projects that are often overlooked compared to the economic attributes of these projects, i.e., the likelihood of China using economic leverage further to undermine the sovereignty of other nations in the region.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The recent rise of China and its influence in the geopolitics of the world has been a part of the political discourse on a global scale. With the significance of China's growing power having global implications, the economic and political rise has been a prominent subject of research among scholars and researchers. This chapter presents an extensive assessment of the literature published on various aspects of Chinese diplomacy, political stance in world politics, the foreign policy of China, and the political oppression by China in other Asian territories. This chapter aims to evaluate the vast literature available to develop better insights into China's foreign policy and how the CPEC and BRI projects might add to the geopolitical balance in Asia.

## 2.2. Chinese foreign policy and transactional diplomacy

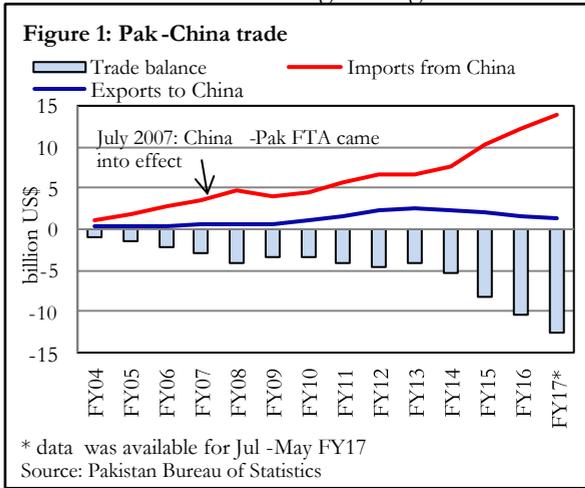
China has a strong focus on the foreign policy of the country in order to protect its interests and prevent the influence of western capitalism in the communist economy of China. Smith (2021) made a detailed assessment of China's official political concept of foreign policy that believes that Chinese characteristics should dominate China's diplomatic relations by having more control of political relations. According to the findings of Smith, China is using its economic power and trade relations to legitimize the power of China from a global perspective, which would allow China to compete with western ideologies and have an elevated status (Smith, 2021). China's focus on using its economic power and trade capacity to facilitate diplomatic relations is not a new phenomenon, as China has relied on its economic power to maintain a favorable diplomatic position with western powers for a long time. Zhang (2014) reviews the diplomatic relationship between China and the European Union and suggests that this relationship can be best described as economic diplomacy as there is a high emphasis on preserving economic relations by keeping safe diplomatic relations. Sun and Zoubir (2015) evaluated the diplomatic relations of China with Arab countries during the Arab revolution in the late 2010s. According to their research, China believed in transactional diplomacy and focused on a "business-first" approach to its foreign policy when it concerned

Arab nations. Hence, China's underlying attribute was to protect its economic diplomacy in the Arab region (Sun and Zoubir, 2015). Overall, the foreign policy and international relations of China are highly dominated by China's desire to seek out expansion to the economic interests and use this economic power to engage in favorable diplomatic policies. In this manner, China uses its economic power as a crucial part of its international relations, expecting to convert its economic power into a geopolitical instrument. Therefore, it becomes essential to study the international relations of China and the implications of Chinese economic power in international relations with China.

## 2.3. China's international relations and the economic world order

In recent decades, globalization has promoted cooperation and collaboration in trade across all markets. Seeking benefits from globalization, China has taken a significant part in global trade (Figure 1), which has allowed China to rise economically with a very high rate of growth compared to any other developed nation. However, the steep rise of China in economic terms and political terms has meant that the United States and China are adversaries. This is a significant conflict as China and the United States attempt to hold the title of the most powerful nation in the world. In addition to this, the US and China also have stark differences in ideological views as well. Grosse, Gamso, and Nelson (2021) suggest that the conflict between the US and China from a trade viewpoint cannot sustain for a long time as both nations have much to gain from participating and cooperating on trade factors. However, a more significant risk factor for investors and global businesses is China's rapid policy shifts compared to the United States, which poses a risk for international business ventures (Grosse et al., 2021). Therefore, even though China has a high political motivation in its rise to power, there is evidence suggesting that the economic interests of China get priority in some cases. With an established insight into the political motivations of China in enhancing its economic power, it is essential to assess what the political motivations of China are. A key attribute of China's political ambitions can

become apparent from a review of China’s geopolitical activities in SouthEast Asia international relations with its neighboring nations.



**2.4. China’s anti-democracy sentiment and threat**

to nearby economies China, as a communist nation, has had adversarial relations with many other countries in the region that took a hard anti-communist stance in the past. In addition, China has a long history of adverse relations with nearby nations, including Japan, India, and many others. In recent years, there has also been a continuous pattern of China attempting to undermine the democracy of many of its neighboring countries in a prominent manner. Rawnsley (2012) evaluates the case of the China-Taiwan conflict in which, while Taiwan considers itself a fully sovereign nation and a democracy, China considers Taiwan a part of its territory. Driven by the soft power approach and international diplomacy of China, the acceptance of Taiwan as a free nation on a global scale has not yet been achieved. Because of a rise in power of China on a global scale, even global powers like the United States and the United Kingdom do not recognize the independent status of Taiwan, fearing retaliation and weakening diplomatic relations with China (Rawnsley, 2012). Hence, there is evidence present for China using its transactional economic diplomacy and geopolitical influence to hurt democracy in other markets.

Another notable region in Asia is witnessing the oppression and violation of the sovereignty of Tibet. The issue of Tibet and its sovereignty is extremely complex because the entire Tibet region has many different geographical parts with no consensus about the ownership or sovereignty of the area. Powers (2004) argues that the sufferings of Tibet at the hands of China are a geopolitical powerplay and an effort by China to maintain a clear dominance in Asia for strategically essential areas adjacent to India. This country has poor diplomatic relations with China. In addition, China uses history as propaganda to describe Tibet as an integral region of China, even if it means using revisionist history (Powers, 2004). Roche (2019) points out the Chinese oppression of Tibet as a long-term strategy of China to erase the rich Tibetan history and minority languages, which are now getting replaced by Chinese languages and ideologies.

With this poor track record of China using its influence to oppress nearby countries and undermine the human rights of people on a broad scale in the region, any further attempts

by China to expand its economic and geopolitical power pose a potential threat of giving the country further abilities to threaten the sovereignty of other nations in the region. With one of China's most ambitious economic projects, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), assessing it from a different perspective is necessary, and many researchers have indeed contributed to the literature on this issue.

## **2.5. Belt and Road Initiative by China**

In recent decades, the Belt and Road Initiative by China has been one of the most significant economic and diplomatic actions by China that span dozens of countries. Inspired by the scale and prominence of this initiative, many researchers have focused on many vital attributes and aspects of this project, including its influence on Chinese foreign policy. Chan and Song (2020) use a discursive approach to assess China's foreign policy in alignment with the BRI initiative. According to their research, while the main aspect of the BRI project is primarily a trade and economic infrastructure, the underlying objective of China is clearly to put China in an advantageous position in terms of the geopolitical aspects of global diplomacy. From this perspective, the Belt and Road Initiative is deliberately designed to be at the core of the foreign policy of China (Chan & Song, 2020). Hence, the key focus of China has constantly been integrating the country's economic power into foreign policy. Parepa (2020) argues that the Belt and Road Initiative is a continuation of Chinese foreign policy rather than a new approach to foreign policy. However, their research does argue that while there is a possibility of higher cooperation in the region, there are also some risks of the Belt and Road Initiative leading to the destabilization of the region (Parepa, 2020). Therefore, the Belt and Road Initiative is arguably an effort to raise the powerful influence of China through economic welfare. However, the same can result in regional power struggles and hostility.

The objective of China to push its political and diplomatic power to new heights is the desired outcome by the Chinese government, which can help the Chinese government gain the upper hand and a powerful position in the territorial disputes that are omnipresent across Asia. Kong (2015) argues that the Belt and Road Initiative and the various ongoing land-based infrastructure projects like the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road will see development in these disputes. In addition, the Belt and Road Initiative will also establish a common interest for China and the disputed nations, giving China an advantage in conflict management and dispute resolution (Kong, 2015). Overall, the Belt and Road Initiative has an objective directly linked to putting China in a state of control over the territorial disputes in Asia.

## **2.6. Literature gap**

A review of the existing literature has revealed ample evidence of China's history of undermining the sovereignty and democracy of smaller nations in its proximity with little opposition from major foreign powers. The cross-country trade projects of China have been studied significantly in the existing literature, but most of these studies emphasize the financial and trade aspects of these projects (Sun & Zoubir, 2015; Zhang, 2014). Even in cases where researchers have focused their studies on identifying the geopolitical implications of the BRI and CPEC projects, a prime focus has been on the US-China relationship and the recent trade war between these two superpowers (Cavanna,

2019; Tarapore, 2019). However, with it established that the success of the BRI and CPEC projects would undeniably give more diplomatic power to China, little focus has been put on the threat to democracy in Asia. China has been actively oppressing nearby small countries, including Tibet, Taiwan, Myanmar, and Hong Kong, along with many allegations of human rights violations within China. Hence, a growing rise of power in China in the region will incentivize other superpowers not to oppose China's actions. This gap in the literature review is very prominent, and this research study will address this literature gap.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

In any research study, it is important to have a direction that strategically achieves the research objectives. For this purpose, having a suitable research methodology is essential. A research methodology refers to the specifics of the method used by researcher(s) to collect and use the evidence to meet the set research objectives. This chapter provides an overview of the various decisions made about the specific research method, along with a justification of the choices made within the context of this study.

#### **3.2. Methodology**

This research study focuses on the political and diplomatic aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), two of China's most prominent trade infrastructure projects. With the success of these economic projects, China's diplomatic and economic power will undoubtedly increase along with the negotiation power of China against other countries that will also benefit from the infrastructural development as part of the BRI and CPEC projects. Hence, the rise of China from a geopolitical perspective is very likely, which poses a potential threat to the democratic aspects of nearby countries, some of which are already facing oppression at the hands of China with little international resistance (Cohen, 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020; Peterson & Milward, 2020). Based on the focus of this research study, the selected research methodology is qualitative research. It has been selected as it provides an opportunity to evaluate the case of China and its economic rise in the region with the various salient and nuanced attributes of control in the geopolitical scene of Asia. In a qualitative methodology, the data that will be collected will be in the form of open-ended and communicative data that is not statistical.

#### **3.3. Research onion framework**

Conducting a research study is a complicated process that requires strategic planning and timely decision-making about the type of research methods to adopt during the study process. The research method is not limited to just the data collection method; instead, it is a sequence of many individual decisions that must consistently produce reliable and credible results. To define the research method comprehensively, Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill proposed a framework known as the research onion framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As shown in the figure below, the research onion framework consists of many individual decisions regarding different aspects of a research process.

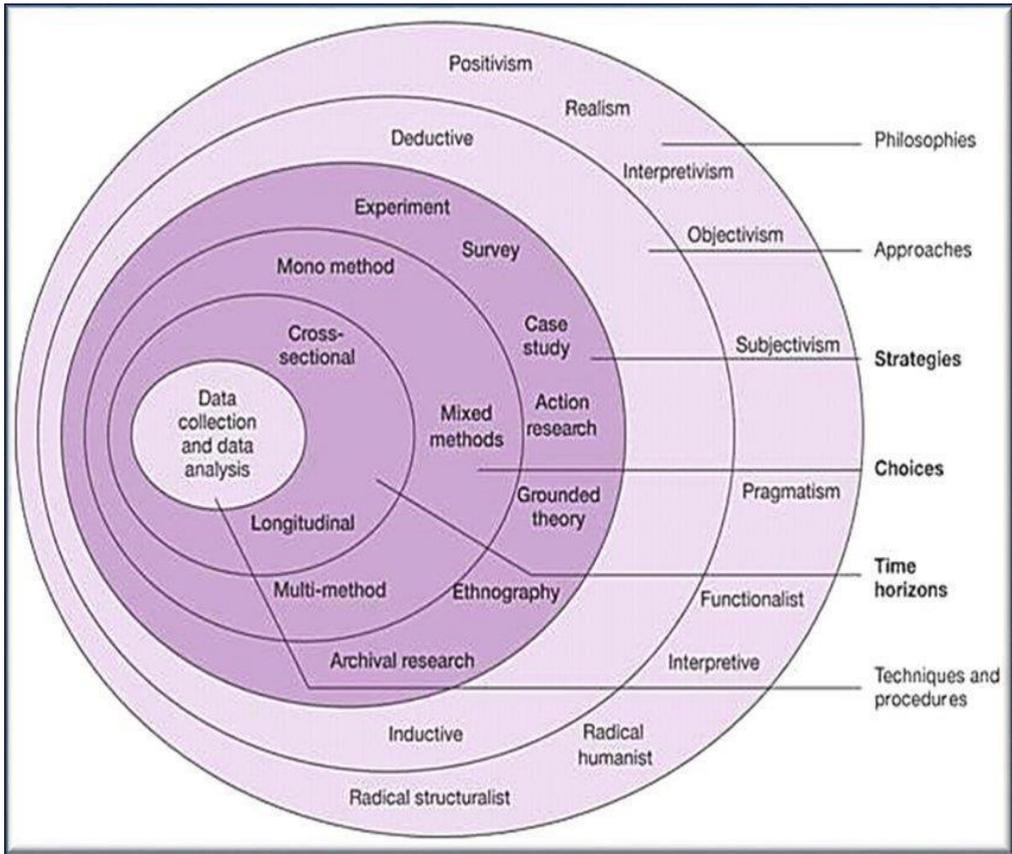


Figure 1 - Research onion framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2017)

This research study emphasizes the CPEC and BRI projects of China from the perspective of power struggle, geopolitical issues, and the rise of China as the power to threaten democracy in Asia, and the research methodology is explained using the research onion model in this section.

### 3.3.1. Research philosophy

A research philosophy refers to the fundamental principles that the researcher adopts about the worldview in a research study. Essentially, research philosophy represents how the world exists and how it can be explained in the research study, i.e., what kind of information can be trusted for authenticity and how it can be obtained. The most commonly used research philosophies are positivism, interpretivism, and realism. In positivism, the assumption is that the knowledge about a research issue exists independent of the subject (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In the case of interpretivism, the assumption is that a phenomenon is viewed by different entities in different manners based on their own biases and perceptions (Willis, 2007). Furthermore, realism research philosophy uses a near-scientific approach to knowledge generation (Payne & Payne, 2004). The underlying assumption in realism philosophy is that reality and knowledge exist in complete independence from the human mind.

The research approach adopted is realism for the case study of China and its economic infrastructure projects. This is the philosophy selected because the events and the outcomes of the rise of China in power and geopolitical authority can be recognized independently of people's opinions using scientific methods.

### **3.3.2. Research Approach**

After selecting a suitable research philosophy, the next step in the research onion is to select a suitable method of the research approach. Two kinds of research approaches can be selected for this purpose: inductive and deductive. In the case of an inductive research approach, the researcher starts with no set hypothesis at the start of the study but instead uses research findings to create a new theory. In contrast to this, in the case of the deductive research approach, the study starts with a specific hypothesis, and observations are made during the research process to test the study's validity. In this research study on China and its geopolitical power play, some specific hypotheses have been set for the project. Based on this attribute, the research approach adopted is the deductive research approach.

### **3.3.3. Research Strategy**

In the research onion framework, research strategy refers to choosing a specific strategy to gather the evidence. Depending on the context of a research study, many different options are available as research strategies for a research project, including surveys, interviews, case study analysis, experiments, and secondary sources. In this project, the research strategy adopted is a literature survey. Because of the subject of the research study, existing literature can provide critical insights into the operations of China, the track record of China in the oppression of other countries, and potential motives in gaining geopolitical power.

### **3.3.4. Research Choice**

Research studies have a broad scope per the resources available and the study's objectives. Hence, more than a single data collection method is sometimes required. Within the research onion framework, research choice refers to the choice of conducting research using the type of method across mono-method, mixed-method, and multi-method systems. As per the name, the mono and multi-method research choices represent single or multiple data collection methods, respectively. In this research study, a mono-method research method will be used in alignment with the research methodology.

### **3.3.5. Research Time Horizon**

The research time horizon refers to the time duration of a research process, i.e., whether a study will represent the issue in a snapshot or over a more extended period. While evidence might be collected for different periods in this project, the research time horizon is cross-sectional. This means that the study will establish the threat to democracy in Asia from the rise of China through the success of the BRI and CPEC projects. In the ever-changing structure of international relations, diplomatic relations, and changing structure of international alliances, the findings may need to be more accurate for a different period.

### 3.3.6. Research Technique and Procedure

The final stage of the research onion model of a research study is to define the method of data collection and analysis. In alignment with the research methodology and the research choice, the research study will rely on secondary data collection in the qualitative form. This qualitative data collected from reputed peer-reviewed journals will then be analyzed using a narrative review of the literature.

### 3.4. limitations

The project has been designed carefully to identify the actual geopolitical influence and impact of the Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC ,it covers an extensive and highly complex infrastructural project that is planned to span dozens of markets, a scale that could have been more feasible within the scope of this research study. Hence, the research process has focused primarily on the geopolitical aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative and the CPEC project to a large extent. In this manner, there is a large part of the Belt and Road initiative has yet to be covered under this study. In addition, there is a limitation in that the research study has only relied on secondary sources, and no primary data collection took place. This was a limiting factor in conducting this research process, as findings had to rely solely on data that was already present in the existing literature.

### 3.5. Data collection

The purpose of this chapter is to gather relevant data using the data collection method of a literature survey to find evidence to evaluate the validity of the research hypotheses. In this chapter, the existing literature is assessed on the issue of Chinese diplomacy and foreign policy in order to evaluate how the BRI and CPEC projects might impact the geopolitical attributes of Asia. The role of this chapter is to collect the data necessary to evaluate the validity of the research hypotheses. Only reliable articles from reputed journals have been selected for maximum credibility and effectiveness of the data collection process.

### 3.6. Ethical Considerations

In performing the data collection process, one of the most substantial risks to the accuracy of research comes from the researcher's personal biases (Politzer-Ahles, 2020). In some cases, these biases can be self-evident, whereas, in others, these biases may exist subconsciously (Politzer-Ahles, 2020). In order to adhere to the highest level of ethical principles in conducting this research study, efforts are made to reduce and remove potential sources of personal bias. For instance, the data collection method to find sources for the literature survey was picked based on an unbiased approach mentioned in the subsequent subsection of the report in order to avoid confirmation bias.

### 3.7. Literature Survey

The BRI and CPEC projects are extraordinarily futuristic and large in scale, which has attracted the attention of scholars from all over the world to examine different aspects of development. The data collection method selected here is the literature survey method. For this purpose, relative keywords were used on Google Scholar to find research studies from reputed sources. Some of the keywords used in the search included “Belt and Road

initiative security risks,” “concerns with Belt and Road Initiative,” “Belt and Road Initiative geopolitical impact,” and “threat to India from CPEC,” among other variants. The search results were manually selected or rejected based on relevance through the paper's title and then by reading the paper's abstract.

One of the critical attributes relating to the Belt and Road Initiative has been the possible use of the project under Chinese foreign policy. In their research, Chan and Song (2020) argue that BRI is a fundamental development in the Chinese foreign policy approach. It cannot be separated as a liberal effort toward trade only. They further argue that the Belt and Road Initiative is a valuable tool for the Chinese government that will provide more soft power leverage to China. The success of BRI will inevitably lead to China's policy decisions emphasizing asserting its political ideology using soft power assets (Chan & Song, 2020). Therefore, a strong argument can be made that the BRI and CPEC projects are crucial in strengthening China's international relations.

As the power balance between different nations changes, so does the dynamic of geopolitical balance in a region. Hussain et al. (2021b) evaluated the change in geopolitics from CPEC from the perspective of Iran and Afghanistan. Their study suggests that the CPEC project is a carefully planned collaboration between China and to counter the Indo-US nexus in Asia. In addition, these researchers also argue that the CPEC project can destabilize Pakistan's security and the rest of the region (Hussain et al., 2021b).

In their research, Grosse et al. (2021) present a different side of the BRI projects by suggesting that China is comparable in power to the United States and has a vested interest in getting more powerful economically. According to their research, the BRI projects are a way for China to rival and maintain strong economic relations with the rest of the world through open business corridors in an approach that is a zerosum game, i.e., any country that is not aligned with China on trade is likely to partner with the United States (Grosse et al., 2021). Shafiq et al. (2020) suggest that the BRI project is an important global development project for China and will provide massive economic and trade benefits. Due to the project's scope, access to different resources will increase for China while also making China more resilient against frequent economic meltdowns (Shafiq et al., 2020). A similar path towards developing China as a reliable superpower in global politics is explained by Javaid (2016), who suggests that the projects under BRI will lead to higher integration of regional economies, a rise in local trades, and improved infrastructure through land and sea. As a result, China will become more capable of importing its needs and avoiding energy shortages through improved infrastructure in the Middle East countries and their oil & gas reserves (Javaid, 2016). In their research, Hanjra et al. (2017) point out the benefit of CPEC for the Chinese economy as it can exponentially improve the port efficiency of the Chinese trade and export industry. Hence, a vital component of the BRI and CPEC project relying on China's economic growth alongside the region is based on factual reasoning. The desire of China to become a significant economic superpower and overthrow the United States as the largest economy in the world requires going out of Asia for its economic and geopolitical affiliations. Montoya et al. (2019) examine this factor concerning the Belt and Road Initiative for Mexico and Brazil. Historically, both countries consider the United States a favorable trade partner due to proximity and market size. Montoya et al. (2019) argue that despite the growth in Chinese investment and trade partnerships in Mexico and Brazil, America remains a significant

influence in the region. However, the same can be disrupted through further development and investment in the local economy.

Nuruzzaman (2020) also argues that the power of the United States has been eroding in recent two decades. With projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, it is necessary to re-examine if China will replace the United States in global influence and control.

One of the main projects under BRI is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. However, because of the proximity to India and the adversarial relations of both of these countries with India, there are concerns regarding security implications. Hussain and Hussain (2017) argue that because of the IndiaUS alliance, the CPEC project gives China a strategic location advantage, not just in land area but also in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf (Iqbal, 2017). Hence, the corridor gives the Chinese government infrastructural and strategic naval strength to compete against the US-India alliance. Hussain et al. (2021a) examined the case of the CPEC project explicitly from the perspective of the Indian government and respective concerns. They conclude that the development of China-Pak collaboration for infrastructure will create a hurdle for the intent of India to have a good trade linkage with Afghanistan and may create blockage for Indian trading ships in the Strait of Hormuz (Hussain et al., 2021a). Therefore, India has security and trade concerns relating to the success of the CPEC project due to the geographical positioning of this project.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This section of the paper provides a detailed discussion of the data collected from the previous chapter. In the discussion, a narrative thread is created to explain the essential findings regarding the impact of the BRI and CPEC project on the study's hypotheses. In this chapter, all of the critical findings of the research study are integrated into one to evaluate the true impact of BRI and CPEC projects from the Asian and global perspectives.

### **4.2. CPEC and BRI towards establishing China's status as a superpower**

For many decades, China has been rising in terms of its economic and political power on a global scale. Even with the Chinese economy and military power rivalling that of American power, the acceptance and recognition of it as one of the premier superpowers in the world is relatively low. To a large extent, the discussion of global superpowers and the global economy focuses primarily on western countries, with Asia as a third-world territory. The CPEC and BRI projects by the Chinese government is an ambitious project that not only tackles the issue of putting China in the position of one of the most powerful nations in the world but also helps bring more emphasis to the Asian market. As argued by Javaid (2016), the CPEC project will provide many strategic benefits to China in Asian and global trade by shortening the trade routes with major destinations. According to her, the success of BRI and CPEC projects will inevitably bring Asia to the global economy's center, with China as the clear leader of the market (Javaid, 2016). With this much power of economic integration and better access to energy resources of the Middle East, development of renewable energy plants, and engagement in mutually-beneficial relationships with many governments and organizations, the Chinese

government is effectively ensuring that the country gains more diplomatic power, control, and influence in global politics and economy. Therefore, it is identified that the first hypothesis of the research is accurate, and the BRI and CPEC projects are leading toward establishing China as a leading superpower in the world.

### **4.3 BRI, CPEC, and Threat to Democracy**

The track record of China in the region has been under criticism for a long time, and the country has a general image of being an aggressive nation. In recent decades, there have been significant claims about how China disregards the sovereignty of many other nations in its close vicinity and uses its extensive military and economic power to threaten control over these territories. Some of these nations that have faced issues regarding their sovereignty in recent years include Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and India. Across all of these countries or territories, China has an ongoing dispute over sovereignty. For instance, in the case of Taiwan, an independent nation with its government and military, China regards it as its territory and prevents other nations from having diplomatic relations with Taiwan in an official capacity. China achieves this by refusing to cooperate with or even engage in diplomatic relations with any country that recognizes the independence of Taiwan (Horton, 2019). Naturally, China's ability to refuse a nation's global sovereignty comes from the nation's economic, geopolitical, and militaristic power. In this regard, future developments that provide higher geopolitical power to China would worsen the degradation of sovereignty in the region.

The Belt and Road Initiative and the CPEC project are undeniably leading to a growing amount of power for China on a global scale. Butt and Butt (2015) argue in their paper that for many regional actors,

CPEC will be like an 'awful dream' as the project can threaten the economic and political interests of many other countries in the region. From this perspective, it can be argued that the CPEC project gives China a high strategic strength in the region across all aspects of its operations, from economic to geopolitical factors. With both BRI and CPEC projects, the Chinese government is using an opportunity to increase its economic power while also making other nations rely more on its infrastructure and trade capacities. In the long term, China gains geopolitical leverage as these nations that mutually benefit from these projects are less likely to speak out against the Chinese government in its oppression of other democratic nations in the region. In their research, Ishaq et al. (2017) also state that the success of CPEC is likely to fuel the political tensions and controversies in Asia, along with a concern from India that a coalition between Pakistan and China threatens Indian sovereignty. Therefore, it is identified that there is indeed a threat to democracy and national sovereignty in Asia for China's adversaries, driven by the potential success of both BRI and CPEC projects.

### **4.4. Security threat to India from CPEC**

China certainly designs the Belt and Road Initiative and the CPEC component of it to grant it access to the South Asian territories for trade and geopolitical control. Among other Asian countries, one of the biggest challenges for China is India, which is similar to China in many respects in terms of the economy, growth rate, and scale. Like China, India is also a large country with access to cheap labor, a massive market, nuclear power

capabilities, and a high growth rate of the economy. While the two countries are effectively neighbors, both have historically adversarial relations. With a war between the two countries in 1971, India and China face high border tension with frequent disputes even today. India is a primary concern for China from an international relations perspective as well because India has friendlier relations with western powers like the United States, which is arguably the most significant competitor of China. Hence, it is natural for China to seek ways to limit India's power growth and ensure its supremacy in the continent. This approach helps China's trade capabilities and provides the nation with a higher capacity for geopolitical strength.

For the CPEC project, China has joined forces with Pakistan, with whom it has shared friendly relations for decades. To a great extent, Pakistan relies on Chinese economic support, military supplies, and diplomatic backing to rise further on the global scale (Khan, 2019). While Pakistan has very positive relations with China, the same is not valid in the case of India. Pakistan, a neighboring nation to India, has been in frequent violent clashes with India since the two countries' independence. In this manner, the CPEC project that oversees the development of major infrastructural projects across Pakistan and to better connects Pakistan with Chinese territories can be seen as an attempt by China to limit the influence of India in the region in terms of trade while also creating political pressure.



Figure 2 -Phase 2 of CPEC ML-1 Overhaul between Multan and Hyderabad

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan\\_Railways#/media/File:Pakistan\\_Railways\\_Network\\_Map.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan_Railways#/media/File:Pakistan_Railways_Network_Map.png)

As shown in Figure 2, the infrastructure development that the CPEC project includes has significant 458 implications for India. These developments are creating large highways and other infrastructures to help 459 Pakistan develop and take an increased role in the global economy. As both Pakistan and India share a

460 significant degree of climate and natural resources similarities, a higher level of participation of Pakistan 461 in the global economy can effectively come at the cost of India's contribution. In addition, the same

462 infrastructure in Pakistan that covers the Indo-Pak border across its length and can be accessed by China 463 during any future conflict also poses a security risk for India. With the expansion to Pakistan, China also 464 has theoretical access to the ports of Pakistan, a potential security risk for India as any support from western 465 nations can be intercepted by the Chinese government (Ahmad et al., 2020). Rahman et al. (2021) also share 466 a similar concern that the CPEC project is in the backyard of India and gives more than necessary control 467 over the Indian Ocean naval security aspects of India. Overall, a clear threat imposed on India from the 468 CPEC project surpasses just economic concerns rather than challenges the country's territorial integrity.

#### **4.5. Reduced influence of western powers**

In the global political economy, Asia has often been seen as a continent of third-world countries and a weaker economy than its western counterpart. While Asian nations were undergoing a growth pattern to meet the same development standards as the industrialized western world, the influence and control of western powerhouses like the United States of America have been influential. With recent economic developments and the adoption of advanced technologies, the gap in power, economic potential, and innovation have been declining between the western and eastern economies. With the BRI project, the Asian market, most notably China, will develop an extremely viable and long-term sustainable economic corridor within the continent, reducing the need to rely on western buyers or suppliers. As a result of the BRI project, better infrastructure in Asia would provide incentives and make it easy for trade to occur within Asia. Rolland (2017) argues in their journal article that with the success of the BRI project, China is creating an environment in Asia that can break the myth of western superiority and lower the overall influence of western nations in the region. This is exceedingly beneficial for China which competes with the United States, to have more control and power in global politics. Overall, the CPEC and BRI projects will alleviate the status of China in the global economy while simultaneously lowering the western influence in the region.

#### **4.6. Explaining BRI and CPEC using international relations theories**

The case of China initiating a highly ambitious project in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative is one of the most significant cross-country development projects by any nation. As the BRI project's scope goes much beyond China's national borders. Implications are high on the country's foreign policy and how it uses its international relations. Hence, it becomes vital to assess China's BRI and CPEC projects using conventional international relations theories.

As per the IR theory of liberalism, a strategic tactic like this by the Chinese government to invest in infrastructure across different countries is not driven by power politics; instead, it is derived from a desire for international cooperation and gaining mutual benefits. Based on this theory, China is using its BRI and CPEC projects to grow cooperation with other nations and engage in interdependence. To some extent, this is also true and aligns with how China has focused primarily on trade-related infrastructure in the project with a keen

eye on the sustainability of economic growth. As minimal elements of the BRI and CPEC projects explicitly focus on military cooperation or political affiliation, the liberalism theory does explain some aspects of these projects and the Chinese ideology behind the projects. However, Mearsheimer (2014) reflects on China's rise from ancient times to the contemporary period and suggests that, in most cases, the Chinese community has risen using unpeaceful means. Hence, explaining the BRI and CPEC projects by China using liberalism does not align with the conventional strategy used by the country.

According to the constructivism theory of international relations, a country's international relations are inherently defined by two key factors: the community's social beliefs and the people's identity. As per this theory, the CPEC and BRI projects are inherently designed to serve the key goals that are prevalent and highly sought-after by the Chinese community. A possible interpretation of the Belt and Road initiative using this theory would be that through these projects, the national government and people are attempting to unify the ancient glory days of the Chinese empire by unifying Asian identity. Callahan (2016) uses constructivism to explain the BRI project and argues in his paper that the BRI project is an attempt by the Chinese government to develop a regional order under the control of the Chinese government, effectively leading to an "Asia dream" of the Chinese society. However, it is essential to note that the possibility of China creating a unified Asia is very limited in the modern era, and the unification would likely be symbolic only. Realism theory in international relations suggests that multiple dimensions are continuously active in international politics. In this manner, realism in IR emphasizes the idea that there is a crucial role of power, national interest, and state in defining and exercising international relations. Within the context of the BRI and CPEC projects, realism would suggest that with these developments, China is threatening the sovereignty of other nations and engaging in the national interest. In the modern context, the BRI and CPEC projects are very complex, and the scope of it is too large to suggest that only one factor is responsible for such devotion by the Chinese government toward infrastructural development across the world. Instead, the realism theory of IR provides an apt understanding of these projects by the Chinese government by suggesting that the phenomenon is inherently multi-dimensional. With the BRI project, China is putting itself at the center of a global scale of infrastructural development; therefore, it serves the national interests of China. In addition, by using the BRI developments to gain allies in other countries and leverage the country's trade capacities, it is apparent that the Chinese state is seeking diplomatic power and geopolitical control in the region. Therefore, the realism theory provides the most accurate evaluation of the BRI project.

## **5. Conclusion & Scope of future studies**

### **5.1. Conclusion**

From the perspective of the global economy, the Belt and Road Initiative is a genuine effort by the Chinese government to engage in a good-faith approach toward increasing the trade capacity and economic cooperation with other countries. However, the ambitions and objectives of the country must be distinct from the recent diplomatic actions of China. The BRI and CPEC projects are inherently and fundamentally infrastructure-related projects that will undoubtedly provide more economic power to the

country and provide a pathway for economic cooperation with other nations. In this manner, the BRI project is a sustainable and long-term economic victory for China.

The economic success of the BRI project also has to be viewed from other impacts of the developments. In addition to the trade capacity increment, China will also receive significant capabilities in diplomatic power and influence across the region. The critical issue that it presents is related to geopolitical imbalance and security issues for other countries that already have adversarial relations with China. For countries like Taiwan, Tibet, and India, this is a significant security concern that threatens their sovereignty. An increase in China's diplomatic power will make it more likely for the country to engage in oppression and disregard for its democracy. With this project, from a realist perspective, China also gains the ability to undermine India in international relations and security, ensuring that India does not overtake China in economic progression.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a highly ambitious project designed to provide economic, geopolitical, and security influence in the region. It is also recognized that the BRI and CPEC projects are inherently driven to strengthen Asia and encourage trade between Asian nations due to better infrastructural facilities. As a result, China also achieves the objective of reducing western influence in the Asian continent and allowing the Chinese government to obtain more leverage. Therefore, the CPEC and BRI projects can be seen as strategic decisions by the Chinese government to put China at the center of the Asian economy.

## 5.2. Scope of Future Studies

Due to the sheer scope of the BRI and CPEC projects, some limitations were inevitable in conducting this research study. While the presented study provided a comprehensive overview of the impact of BRI and CPEC on the geopolitics of Asia and possible threat to the sovereignty of other nations, a potential new line of research has emerged that should be explored further in future research. India, the second-largest country in the world in terms of population, behind only China, has a very similar labor force advantage as China is a rapidly emerging economy. In addition, China and Pakistan, two allied countries, have adversarial relations with India. Hence, future research should conduct a narrow and indepth assessment of the impact of BRI and CPEC on India. These impacts will likely cover the trade relations of India, the India-US alliance, and the geopolitical power of India in the region.

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