

# CHINA'S 'BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE' AND INDIA'S STRATEGIC CONCERNS IN SOUTH ASIA

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## **Abstract**

*China's flagship connectivity policy, the BRI or OBOR, is being developed by rejuvenating the concept of the 'Ancient Silk Road'. By connecting the economies of different regions, China aims to facilitate economic growth; additionally, the ultimate goal is to shift the centre of global economic activities to Asia from the Atlantic region. The scope of the BRI has been expanding over the years; now, two-thirds of countries have joined it, and investment values have surpassed USD 1 trillion, with expectations of its doubling by 2030. However, the health, digital, and sustainable climate have been added to its functional domain, along with ocean and land connectivity. In South Asia, India has raised specific concerns about the BRI's expansion, such as Debt Trap Diplomacy (DTP), which is viewed as a threat to its security interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), thereby potentially leading to strategic encirclement. In response to the BRI, India has also implemented a counter-policy in South Asia to secure its strategic interests. This article aims to describe the profile of the BRI and the challenges it faces in South Asia.*

## **Keywords:**

*India, China, USA, South Asia, BRI, etc.*

## **Article History:**

Received on 15 October, 2025

Accepted on 20 April, 2026

## Introduction

In the current century, China has emerged as one of the world's leading economic powers, alongside the United States of America (USA). According to the IMF (2024), China's GDP value is USD 18,273 billion, which is next to the USA's USD 29,167 billion. Therefore, China's policies also have its major impact on the global economy (CBBF, 2025). For such economic achievement, the 'Modernisation Economic Program' (1976) was responsible, which made a revolutionary transformation in the Chinese economy thereafter. Its outcome was reflected in the 1990s, during which China experienced a double-digit economic growth rate; however, due to certain structural economic factors, the growth rate could not be sustained in the following decade. This economic trajectory has helped China develop its global vision for the twenty-first century (Clover, Charles, et al., 2017). Currently, China's economy is experiencing a slowdown, so President Xi Jinping has dreamt of reviving the national economy through implementing the traditional concept of the 'Silk Road' prevalent during the Han dynasty. The modern version of the 'Silk Road' launched as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, and in 2015, the document titled 'The Belt and Road Initiatives: Progress, Contributions and Prospects (2015)' described the details of the policy. The BRI is not just a national economic policy; it also has a global vision to be achieved in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, China's global vision is outlined in the document '*A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*', which philosophically guides the BRI's policy aims and objectives. The BRI policy strategy focuses on investing in core infrastructural projects, such as roads, sea routes, healthcare, climate change mitigation, and digital connectivity, across the regions, specifically in the developing corners of the globe. Following the launch, the BRI's functional scope has expanded phenomenally, making it the world's most expensive connectivity programme in global history to date. Currently, nearly two-thirds of the world's nation-states have joined the vision policy, which has led to an investment amount exceeding USD 1 trillion. According to experts, the BRI has the potential to create tremendous economic opportunities across the developing countries as it prospers (Ruta, Michele, 2018). The BRI has contributed to shifting China's foreign policy behaviour, which tends to be compromised on political issues in pursuit of its envisioned economic objectives. This means that China does not want to mix both political and economic ties with a country that has specific conflicts. In South Asia, China has become

increasingly economically active, even in its rivalry with India, by taking a stance on political issues. No matter what, China's economic alignment with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives has been perceived by India as a strategy to encircle India in South Asia and the IOR. Hence, India's suspicion of China's hyperactivity in South Asia has led to strategic concerns. Similarly, the USA is also perceiving China's BRI as a threat to its interests in the Indo-Pacific region. India has taken specific policy steps in response to the strategic challenge posed by China's BRI in South Asia, such as influencing regional actors by building defence ties and collaborating with the US through the Indo-Pacific Forum and the Quad. This paper is divided into four major components: the scope of the BRI, the challenges the BRI faces in South Asia, India's counter-response to the BRI, and the US policy reaction to the BRI.

### **Research Objectives**

To study China's global vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To explore the nature and scope of the BRI.

To investigate the strategic challenges the BRI poses in Asia.

To study India's strategy against the BRI expansionism in South Asia.

### **Research Methodology:**

The research has employed a '*descriptive-analytical method*' to accomplish the study objectives.

### **Result And Discussion**

#### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century And China's 'Global Vision' And Policy**

In the twenty-first century, the global economic system has experienced a significant structural transformation, as China has emerged as a major economic competitor to the USA-led Bretton Woods arrangement. China's leadership in BRICS and BRI demonstrates a shift from the Bretton Woods arrangement that is underway. It reflects China's economic ascendancy; to understand it, one needs to navigate the country's economic history since the 1970s. A remarkable economic growth trajectory (double-digit) was observed in the 1990s. No doubt, such an economic transformation of China is phenomenal; thus, it could attain a GDP size comparable to that of the USA. For example, currently, China's purchasing power parity (PPP) is the highest and statistically, it needs to bridge a USD 10 trillion gap to surpass the USA's economy. Zhu Min, a

former deputy chief of the IMF, speculated, ‘China is expected to surpass the US economy by 2035’ (Xueying, Li, 2024). However, there are certain macro-economic concerns (debt crisis issues, which have reached 275 per cent of GDP) that surfaced in recent years, which substantially brought a recession in China, resulting in a growth rate range between 2-3 per cent during 2015-20, which may prolong the speculation. Again, in the post-COVID period, China experienced economic growth above 5 per cent in 2022.<sup>1</sup> There is a projection that China’s economic growth will decline below 5 per cent; obviously, that would make it impossible for China to overtake the US until 2060 (Sharma, Ruchir, 2022).

Despite a minor economic fluctuation, China has left a substantial economic footprint in the global financial order, which cannot be ignored. It has motivated the Chinese leadership to envision a global dream for the betterment of humanity in the current century. That reflected in the speech, which was delivered by President Xi Jinping at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (2013), where he raised a fundamental question concerning the global community: *Where is humanity headed?* Further, he stated that “*building a global community of shared future is the guiding philosophy to lead global humanity towards achieving political, economic, cultural, and ecological stability and prosperity*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2023). It showed the country’s eagerness to contribute to the protection of the shared home and create a better future for the global humanity, which is in a state of turmoil. It marked China’s willingness to play a greater role as a responsible player in the global order, alongside the USA. The phrase ‘shared future’ signified that the destinies of all people, all countries, and all individuals are interconnected; therefore, humanity must stand together in times of adversity and navigate towards finding greater harmony on the planet. Such philosophy has guided China in building an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and shared prosperity, turning people’s longing for a better life into reality. Again, the philosophy received a definite shape at the UNGA 70<sup>th</sup> Session (2015), when President Xi laid out a ***five-point proposal*** for achieving the betterment of humanity, such as (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2023):

- To partnerships in which countries treat each other as equals, engage in extensive consultation, and enhance mutual understanding (Equal Treatment);

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<sup>1</sup> To get the details of China’s economic trajectory, see the link: [GDP growth \(annual %\) - China | Data](#)

- To create a security environment featuring fairness, justice, joint efforts, and shared interests (Common Security);
- To promote open, innovative and inclusive development that benefits all (Win-Win cooperation);
- To increase inter-civilisation exchanges to promote harmony, inclusiveness, and respect for differences (Respect diversity);
- To build an ecosystem that puts Mother Nature and green development first (green and low-carbon development).

Furthermore, these five goals were focused on the United Nations Office in Geneva in 2017 (Xi Jinping, 2017). Later, in 2023, based on such progress, China released a White Paper titled “*A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions*”, which thoroughly mentioned the policy plan to realise the dream of a shared future (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2023). Its introductory lines depict, “*in the universe, there is only one Earth, the shared home of humanity ... the most pressing task is to find a guiding beacon for the sustainable development of human civilisation*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2023). Broadly, it has placed before policymakers a theoretical paradigm to resolve existential crises of humanity, and to strive for achieving ‘Sustainable development of humanity’. In summary, the philosophy of ‘a shared future’ has settled as a base pillar for China’s policymakers to pattern its policy accordingly in future. Recently launched policies, such as the BRI/OBOR (2013), the Global Development Initiative (2021), the Global Security Initiatives (2021), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (2023) are all on a line to achieve peace, justice, and trust, which will foster excellent synergy among all nations, meaning ‘shared future’.

### **Profile Of The Belt And Road Initiative**

Two key economic events in China, such as attaining the status of an ‘upper-middle-income’<sup>2</sup> economy and recent economic fluctuations, most likely prompted leadership to announce the grand strategic connectivity project, known as the BRI, in 2013 by reinvigorating the ‘Ancient

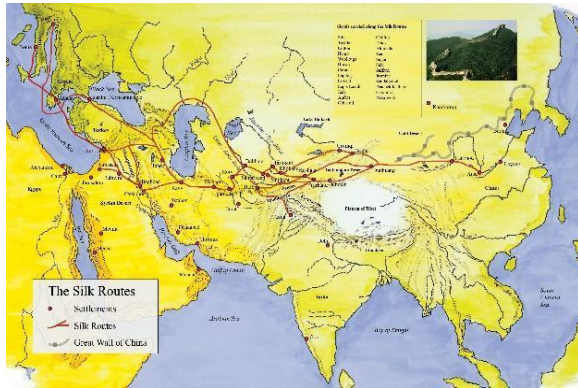
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<sup>2</sup> The current pace of China’s economic development has been a positive reflection of the ‘Modernisation Project’ launched in the late 1970s by then-President Deng Xiaoping. Therefore, China is being categorised as an ‘upper-middle-income country’ with a per capita income (PCI) of around USD 12,615 (World Bank, n.d.).

Silk Road'.<sup>3</sup> A valuable speculation is that China's domestic growth rate will be supported through investment opportunities, which will hike the Yuan's standard in the global market (Bharti and Kumari, 2024: 3-4). Two years afterwords of its pronouncement, officially "*Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (2015)*" document was released, which then outlined an entire policy framework to pursue (Ibrahim, S and A. Kizito, 2021: 71). The BRI portal ([Belt and Road Portal - BRI Official Website](#)) explicitly defines the long-terms policy aims "*to promote the trade, investment, and connectivity networks across regions ... set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks ... have a sustainable development*" (BRI Portal, n.d.). Furthermore, policy objectives which have enshrined, includes: a) Expanding trade routes and opening up new markets for Chinese goods; b) Enhancing global infrastructure and reducing transportation costs; c) Strengthening China's supply chains and ensuring resource security; d) Fostering diplomatic and economic partnerships with participating nations; e) Positioning China as a key leader in global development, etc., shows China's intention to become centre of all kind of economic activities (FDI China, 2025). Over the years, China has garnered global attention by investing in the construction of basic infrastructure facilities in participating countries through bilateral or multilateral agreements, promising 'win-win' cooperation. Of course, it has brought economic transformation in China, from the '*world's traditional manufacturing workshop*' to '*a highly professional economy*' (Burna-Asefi, Sophia, 2024). Notably, China's win-win promises have elicited positive responses from a large number of countries worldwide; however, a list of countries partnering in the BRI is not publicly available. According to the WB study, 71 countries are located along the defined geographical routes of the BRI corridors (Proma, A. 2023). Another source mentioned that over 150 countries, such as Africa (53), Central Asia (6), East Asia (3), Europe (29), Latin America and Caribbean (22), West Asia (9) - (excluding Palestine), Pacific (12), South Asia (6), Southeast Asia (10) are part of the BRI (GFDC, n.d.). It has been noted that its potential leverage is on developing economies in the global South, which encompass more than a third of the world's GDP and two-thirds of the world's population. In 2017, these economies received 35 per cent of global foreign direct investments and accounted for 40 per cent of global merchandise exports. Along the seven 'Economic Corridors', an amount

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<sup>3</sup> Historically, the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) applied the concept of 'Silk Road'. To know more see: [Silk Road | Facts, History, & Map | Britannica](#)



Map. 1 Ancient Silk Road

of USD 575 billion is under execution. Following its completion, BRI transport is expected to reduce travel times along economic corridors by 12 per cent, increase trade by 2.7 per cent to 9.7 per cent, increase income by up to 3.4 per cent, and lift 7.6 million people out of extreme poverty (World Bank Group, 2018). Definitely, it will help bridge the development gaps that prevail in

the current world order and lay a foundation for combating various calamities. Additionally, it is the world’s most economically expensive and diplomatically well-received endeavour in modern history, which thus truly ensures its global character, thereby capable of leaving an indelible mark on the global economy after the USA (Rolland, Nadege, 2017: p. ii).

To forge its ‘inter-’ and ‘intra-regional’ partnerships, the BRI has applied a ‘Joint Cooperation Framework (JCF)’, which involves five functioning priorities, such as: (BRI Portal, n.d.)

- a) **Policy Coordination:** Promotion of inter-governmental cooperation, multi-level intergovernmental macro policy exchange and communication mechanism
- b) **Facilities Connectivity:** Improve connectivity of infrastructure construction plans and technical standards systems.
- c) **Unimpeded Trade:** Reduction of investment and trade barriers, promotion of regional economic integration.
- d) **Financial Integration:** Coordination and cooperation in monetary policy and the setup of financing institutions.
- e) **People-to-people bonds:** Cultural and academic exchange, dialogue, and media cooperation.

The responsibility of regulating the JFC is owed to the “Office of the Leading Group on Promoting the Implementation of Belt and Road Initiatives” under the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). However, the New State International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDCA) of China is also playing a crucial role in developing a strategy plan for executing the initiative and policies related to foreign aid. According to the State

Council, SIDCA will be answerable to the State Council and “will better serve the country’s global strategy and build the BRI” (BRI, n.d.). Moreover, other Chinese governmental agencies have also been part of policy formulation and implementation, including the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and the Ministry of Culture (MoC). Almost all provinces in China, such as Hebei or Henan, have elaborated their own BRI implementation plans to complement the BRI blueprint. Multiple institutional mechanisms are available for funding purposes, such as: **a)Policy Banks:** Agricultural Development Bank of China (ADBC), China Development Bank (CDB), Export-Import Bank of China (CHEXIM); **b)State Owned Bank:** Agricultural Bank of China (ABC), Bank of China (BOC), China Construction Bank (CCB), Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC); **c) State Owned funds (Selection):** China Investment Corporation (CIC), Silk Road Fund (SRF); **d)International Financing Institutions:** Asian Development Bank (ADB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), New Development Bank (NDB). An estimate suggests that to fully functionalize the BRI project, USD 4 to 8 trillion will be required from diverse funding channels, including BRI bonds, private capital investment, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) investment. These funds will be crucial for the initiative's success (BRI, n.d.).<sup>4</sup> The involvement of numerous countries across the region, the implementation of a comprehensive planning structure, and the funding agencies truly demonstrate the extensive scope of the BRI, which is unique in the modern world and a primary reason for China's growing influence in global economic diplomacy.

The following sections will discuss in detail the nature and scope of the BRI:



<sup>4</sup> To have full insight go through this document: [Belt and Road Initiative - Documents](#)

## The Silk Road Economic Belt (Sreb)

The SREB (the Overland Routes) is a long-term land-based connectivity project focusing on the development of road, rail, and pipeline infrastructure to connect China with different regions across the globe. Beyond, the specific objective is to accelerate Asia's development by connecting it with the world's developed regions. To date, the SREB is considered the longest land-based corridor and, economically, the most dynamic in the world's history (BRI Portal, 2023; OBOREurope, n.d.). Due to its geographic diversity, it is divided into six major corridors. The term 'corridor' has been ubiquitous in IR literature developed during the Cold War era; the USA and the Soviet Union deployed the corridor approaches in global governance. In the 21st

Map 2. Belt and Road Initiative

century, China is increasingly employing the corridor approach in global politics. According to Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, the 'corridor approach' constitutes *First*, the territorialization and projection of state power across time and space; *Second*, the spread of civilization across time and space; *Third*, the extension, reproduction, and transformation of the state and its circulatory system across space through the construction of transnational railways, roads, bridges, ports, pipeline, and maritime routes (Burna-Asefi, Sophia, 2024). She claims that the success of China's corridor scheme would likely shift the centre of economic gravity of the world further eastward, i.e. Asia. So, it will have a detrimental effect on the U.S.A.'s global influence. President Xi thus has called the SREB a "*Chinese Dream*" – the dream of a new leading strategic role for China in international society (Economy, Elizabeth, 2018), through the development of a vast network of colossal infrastructure projects of roadways, railways, oil, and gas pipelines across the regions (Kumar, Sudeep, 2022).

The details of the six corridors are as follows:

### A) *New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC)*



Map 3. NELBEC

The NELBEC is an ambitious segment that was launched in the early 1990s; however, a new impetus was only given under the BRI. Its primary activity involves developing a rail

transportation network of nearly 10,800 km between China and Europe, which runs through China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, and Germany. However, the expectation is that it will boost economic activities in more than 30 countries along the routes. However, this modernisation of infrastructure will bring the

The Pacific and the Atlantic regions are closer together. At the state-to-state level, several steps have been initiated to simplify customs procedures in accordance with the principles of declaration, inspection, and clearance with countries along the routes. To date, transcontinental rail routes, such as the Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe Railway (reaching Germany's Duisburg via Poland), the Chengdu-Xinjiang-Europe Railway (reaching Poland), and the Yiwu-Xinjiang-Europe Railway (Reaching Madrid), have significant economic potential and have entered into service (Xinhua Silk Road, 2017). The Russian Trans-Siberian Railway is part of this corridor, branching north-west from Urumqi, traversing Astana in Kazakhstan, and linking up with the Russian rail network at Yekaterinburg, the most ambitious of them all. The route will bypass the Southern leg of the Trans-Siberian railway in northeast China and offer a more direct route through Xinjiang. It will also diversify China's shipping away from seaborne routes that bottleneck at the Strait of Malacca.

#### *B) China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC)*



*Map 4. CMREC*

Historically, the CMREC concept emerged as early as 2010. Later, on 11 September 2014, President Xi proposed the inclusion of CMREC as part of the BRI, which is also referred to as the 'Steppe Road' corridor. This multifaceted corridor has three major strategic pillars, which are pivotal to achieving objectives, such as *a) tariff and trade concessions, b) infrastructure expansion, and c) resource-sharing agreements.* Only

three countries, including China, Russia, and Mongolia, along the corridor, have established a comprehensive strategic partnership among themselves to facilitate collaboration. This shortest land corridor is strategically vital for China to fulfil the aim of shifting the centre of economic activity from Europe to Asia. The strategic ties and objectives between Moscow and Beijing

underscore their importance in achieving economic independence from Western markets while maintaining control over the critical East-West transit corridor (Kumar, Sudeep, 2022). Consequently, Moscow-Beijing's bilateral ties have reached an all-time high in economic relations, with USD 240 billion in 2023, marking a 26.3% year-on-year increase. China continues to increase its direct investments into the Russian economy, now involving 83 projects worth an estimated USD 200 billion. In this growing relationship, Mongolia's role is to serve as a geo-strategic 'buffer zone' for both parties. However, China's two major dream projects, such as the 'Steppe Road' and the 'Trans-Eurasian Railway', traverse from Mongolia; hence, China is extensively focusing on development in Mongolia. Its complete functionalization would make it easier for parties to trade natural resources such as gold, coal, iron, silver, copper, crude oil, and gas. Therefore, on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016, a tripartite agreement was signed in Tashkent to boost projects, which include improving transport connectivity through road, rail, and port construction, as well as cooperation in trade, investment, energy, agribusiness, communication technology, environment, and ecological protection (Jinbo, Wang, 2019).

Recently, the Tianjin-Ulaanbaatar-Ulan-Ude Central Route has been fully operationalised, which has helped China advance its economic objectives for the region. However, diplomatically, specific issues related to strategic competition have emerged between China and Russia. Mongolia has been victimised by regional strategic competition and China's 'Debt Trap Diplomacy' (Radchenko, Sergey, 2021). In 2017, Mongolia owed 37 per cent of its debt to China. It also increases thereafter by 2021 (Radchenko, Sergey, 2021). Rapidly increasing Chinese debt led to Mongolia's reluctance to sign any major investment deal with China. In addition, Mongolia's quest to diversify its trade and investment portfolio can be driven towards reducing its long-term overdependence on the Chinese economy. In this backdrop, Mongolia did not permit three Chinese banks (Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Export-Import Bank of China, and Bank of China) to operate and finance the infrastructure projects in Mongolia (Bazarsad, Indra, et al., 2021). Therefore, Mongolia has certainly started taking precautions to avoid China's debt-trap diplomacy and increasing trade deficit in China's favour. In contrast, Russia has traditionally been a net security provider to Mongolia, and its debt cancellation, free visa regime, and vaccine diplomacy have won the hearts and minds of the Mongolian people. However, Russia finds itself in a tight spot to match China's increasing economic footprint in Mongolia, a common concern for both Russia and Mongolia (Bazarsad, Indra, et al., 2021).

### *C) China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC)*

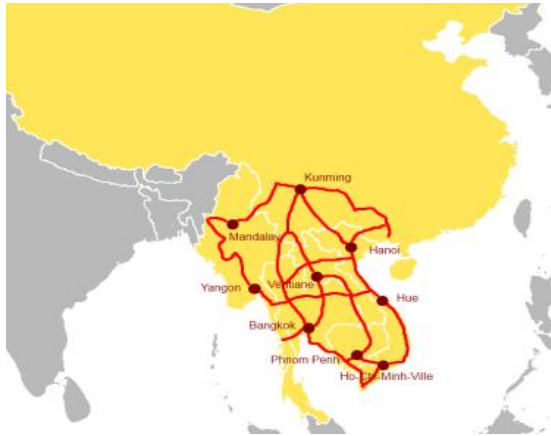


Map 5. CCWAEC

The CCWAEC is a strategically very pivotal corridor that aims to streamline cross-border trade and investment and facilitate the construction of numerous transport and energy infrastructure projects linking China with Central Asia and West Asia (the Arabian Peninsula). The corridor in a region generally follows the trajectory of the Ancient Silk Road. Due to its geographical scope, it is considered one of the

'main axes' of the new Silk Road; it starts from China's Xinjiang and traverses Central Asia before reaching the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Arabian Peninsula. It crosses five Central Asian Countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) and 17 West Asian countries (including Iran, Saudi Arab and Turkey) (GeoPolitical, Monitor, 2018). In light of the region facing several conflicting challenges despite having a wealth of rich natural resources, it presents an excellent opportunity for China to make significant infrastructural investments in various sectors within the region. Therefore, China has targeted the West Asian region for future investment to ensure energy security, countering the influence of the USA and India. Iran is a pivotal country for China due to its oil reserves; therefore, China focuses primarily on operationalising ports and train routes. Once it is operationalised, the distance between the two will be reduced by half by sea from the port of Shanghai. The economic impact of the corridor will be significant throughout the region (Connours, Emma, 2023). This corridor requires the construction of numerous transportation and energy infrastructures from West Asia to China. This corridor connects with other connectivity projects as well, such as: 1) Tashlente-Aktau connection (Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan); 2) Dushanbe-Kabul connection (Afghanistan); 3) Tehran-Bandar Abbas Connection (Iran); Turkey-Riyadh Connection (Saudi Arabia) (China.org.cn, 2019).

### *D) China – Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CIPEC)*



Map 6. CIPEC

This corridor aims to strengthen cooperation among states in the Greater Mekong sub-region by developing transport infrastructure. It has two starting points: the East Line begins in Nanning (Guangxi Province), and the Western Line begins in Kunming (Yunnan Province). The economic corridor finishes at Singapore. Between the starting and ending points, it passes through the Indochina Peninsula, covering the six ASEAN member countries: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Despite having territorial issues, China and ASEAN countries have expanded the scope of their cooperation. It is assumed to be critical to connect the Southern Chinese cities via land routes and the Maritime Silk Road with the Southeast Asian countries. This connectivity would unlock hidden economic potential among themselves (Gulyas, L. (n.d.); p. 1). The Lancang-Mekong International Waterway is based on the transboundary river of the Lancang-Mekong, which runs through six countries, and is considered a crucial project for its intended purpose. The issue of water distribution from these rivers has become a concern for stakeholders, as countries located downstream can be seriously affected by the construction of dams upstream. Moreover, drought situations are likely to be common in the downstream areas. The Water Resources Cooperation Centre in Beijing was established in 2017 (Junlin, Ren, et al., 2021, p. 685).

China's economic liberalisation policy, in terms of FTAs and SEZs with ASEAN countries, has taken shape to ensure the objective of enhancing trade and investment. Such initiatives have led to a reduction in the cost of trade and investment (lowering or foregoing taxes altogether); therefore, the volume between China and the Indochina Peninsula has increased from around USD 30 billion (2001) to USD 370 billion (2017). That amount is about 9.2 per cent of China's total foreign trade, with an average annual growth of 16.9 per cent. The best examples of infrastructural development have been operationalised as the China-Thailand Railway, the China-Laos Railway, the Malaysia-Singapore High-Speed Rail, and the Southern Malaysia Railway (construction has been underway since 2017). These are built as standard-gauge high-speed railways, which, when done, could drastically decrease transportation times in the Indo-

China Peninsula. In case of industrial facilities, need to mention the China-Malaysia “Two Countries Twin Park” (Qinzhou Industrial Park and Guandan Industrial Park), the Thailand-China Rayong Industrial Park, the Cambodia Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, and the Vietnam Longjiang Industrial Park. Examples of special cross-border economic cooperation zones include the China-Vietnam Cross-border Economic Cooperation Zone, the China-Thailand (Chongzuo) Industrial Park, and the China-Laos Mohan-Boten Cross-border Economic Cooperation Zone (Dai, Yewen, 2021, p. 171).

*E)The Bangladesh -China – India – Myanmar Economic Corridor (BICMEC)*



*Map 7. BICMEC*

In the late 1990s, the idea emerged from China’s Yunnan Province regarding possible sub-regional cooperation involving southwestern China, eastern India, and the entire region of Myanmar and Bangladesh. The first task was to define this ‘zone’ as a sub-region. The proponents of the idea argued that this zone possesses several key essential characteristics, based on which cooperation at the sub-regional level could be explored (Uberoi, P., 2013). Among other

features, this zone is seen as ‘the meeting point of the three markets of China, Southeast Asia and South Asia’ and thereby connecting ‘two markets of China and India and even the whole of Asia’. Second, despite the sub-region's poor infrastructure, its rich natural resources promise significant potential for large-scale development. Third, the sub-region is ‘isolated from global markets and is characterised by relative poverty’. Lastly, all four countries have actively participated in regional and sub-regional organisations to integrate into the global economy (Yome, K. 2017). The purpose of this corridor is to better connect China with the various economic centres of the Bay of Bengal, and to increase interregional trade by reducing non-tariff barriers. It also aims to strengthen transport infrastructure and decrease poverty in this region. This corridor would link Kunming to Kolkata via Mandalay and Dhaka. However, very little progress has been made on this corridor as India still refuses to join China’s initiative (Yome, K. 2017).

### *F)The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)*



Map 8. CPEC

The CPEC starts in Kashgar, Xinjiang (China’s largest province), and ends at the port of Gwadar in Balochistan (Pakistan). Due to India's criticism of this corridor, South Asia has become a focal point of geopolitical tensions in recent times. India has a historical conflict with both Pakistan and China over the demarcation of territorial boundaries. India's main opposition to the corridor is that it encircles the

country, thereby posing a threat to its national security from these two adversaries. Economically and strategically, it is important for both China and Pakistan, because it links China with the burgeoning markets in West Asia, Africa, and other parts of Asia (CPIC, n.d.). Therefore, China has primarily focused on investing in the construction of railways, highways, energy projects, optical fibre networks, an international airport, and establishing SEZs in different parts of Pakistan, though the Himalayan Zone. However, the aim is to boost Pakistan’s economy by investing in the country’s basic infrastructure and helping it compete on the global stage. The cumulative value of the ongoing projects along this corridor is estimated to be around USD 62 billion. From the perspective of future development, China may expect to significantly increase its valuation to include India in South Asia (Hashmi, Naghmana, 2025).

### **The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Sea Route)**

China’s Ancient Silk Road was limited to land connectivity, but its modern version has expanded further to encompass connectivity across ‘the Ocean’. Today, in the global order, ‘choke points’ and ‘strait routes’ have achieved a prominent position in serving the country's strategic and economic objectives. Thus, significant reliance on sea lines of communication has led to a phenomenal increase in trade partnerships among countries in the current century. Due to its ‘affordability’, according to UNCTAD, the ocean serves as a major highway for transporting more than 80 per cent of the volume of international trade commodities (United Nations, 2016). In complement, UN Secretary General António Guterres focused on fact, ‘Maritime Transport has emerged a backbone of global trade only because of the low cost of commodity exchange’

and further reiterated that ‘the jobs and livelihoods of billions of people in the developing world, and standards of living in the industrialised developed world, depend on ships and shipping’ (United Nations, 2016). To further promote the importance of maritime transport globally, the UN has started celebrating World Maritime Day annually. For 2016’s theme of the day was ‘Shipping: Indispensable to the World’, which acknowledged the importance of maritime shipping in the global economic order. Therefore, several international platforms and conventions have begun discussing the freedom to trade through the ocean as an indispensable factor in achieving the multiple goals enshrined in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) document. Hence, developing economies are now starting to emphasise the domain of ‘Maritime Cooperation’. China’s launch of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) under the BRI is crucial to be discussed in this context. It commits to bridging a vast sea connectivity (network) gap in the Global South by ensuring investment in the development of port infrastructure. Additionally, China wants to build its own ‘Blue Economy’ and seeks a strategic purpose to gain dominance over the USA in the ocean. Map No. 2 provides pictorial information on the extension of the MSR. It stretched from China’s (Guangzhou<sup>5</sup>, Quanzhou, Ningbo, Nanjing, Fuzhou, Yangzhou, Penglai, and Liujia) to Southeast Asia (Port of Brunei and port of Singapore), South Asia (Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port, Pakistan’s Gwadar Port), Gulf and Africa (port of Djibouti, Yemen’s Port of Aden, Israel’s Port of Haifa, Egypt’s Port Sokhna), and Europe (Greece’s Piraeus Port). China is financially investing in over 50 ports across the region, which has led to China emerging as one of the world’s largest seaport operators and constructors. Through such a connectivity network, China is ensuring affordable trade via the ocean to its partners. Experts argue that it would ensure China’s trade dominance over the South China Sea, Strait of Malacca, Indian Ocean, Gulf of Bengal, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf and the Red Sea (Mingxin, Ma & Jian, Liang, 2024: 1). This development has perceived by India as its encirclement in the South Asia, beyond the USA has considered it a threat to its global position. In 2017, the appendix to the MSR was the ‘Polar Silk Road (PSR)’, referring to the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which was first officially mentioned in the White Paper titled ‘China’s Arctic Policy’<sup>6</sup>. The blueprint has vowed to increase China’s active participation in Arctic affairs in the near future through the development of an ambitious PSR (Xiao, A. & D. Yifie, 2023).

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<sup>5</sup> To know more about these port cities, see: [Maritime Silk Road Route, History, Map, Tour 2025](#)

<sup>6</sup> [China's Arctic Policy - BELT AND ROAD PORTAL](#)

The MSR is destined to serve a range of core interests of China, which mainly includes the development of a more than \$1.2 trillion blue economy, along it will help in improving food and energy security, diversifying and securing sea lines of communication (SLOC), upholding territorial sovereignty, and shifting international discourse on major powers (Ghiassy, R. et. al., n.d.: 2). Mingxin Ma and Jian Liang's joint research argued that 'China's major focus will be on building strong port infrastructure in Southeast Asia and South Asia, while Europe will be a less focused area. The 'distance' is major factors that impacting on nature of port connectivity in this region. Hence, China's potential of port connectivity has been fully realised in Asia compared to distance Europe. This expansion of MSR is a sign of extending China's maritime strategic footprint across the region. Scholars have dared perceive that China's MSR is going to shape the global maritime order in a manner to serve its interests of high trade and investment capacity (Mingxin, Ma, Jian, Liang, 2024: 7).

On the eve of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the PSR has received widespread attention from Russia. Russia found that China is a friendly ally against the Western bloc and its sanctions to maintain its economic stability. In 2022, President Xi visited Russia, where multiple MoUs were signed, indicating an increase in China's presence in the Arctic region for development purposes. The Arctic was declared a potential area of cooperation between the two countries, and some considered the PSR to be the fulcrum of the Russo-Chinese cooperation. Again, in 2023, President Xi met with President Putin in Russia and vowed a commitment to a strong strategic partnership in the Arctic region. Nevertheless, the PSR suddenly disappeared from the official Chinese discourse, which raised a more serious strategic question about China's Arctic policy. Erdem Lamazhapov et al. have argued that Chinese officials have taken no significant policy steps to implement the PSR in Russia since the post-2023 period. It is primarily due to Russia's rising challenges resulting from the intensification of the Ukraine conflict. China's official called for the "Arctic to remain a place of peace, stability and constructive cooperation" (Erdem Lamazhapov et. al., 2023). This means that the Ukraine conflict has shed light on the development of the PSR.

### **The Digital Silk Road (DSR)**

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In the twenty-first century, the world is moving towards a new phase of integration with the help of ‘high-tech’ and ‘artificial intelligence (AI)’ that have forced Beijing to re-examine the functional domains of BRI. Thus, in 2015, China officially decided to extend the BRI to build ‘digital connectivity across the caricatured Silk Road route’, which was labelled as the Information Silk Road, and later branded as the DSR. Ajeje Lele and Kritika Roy have succinctly argued that the DSR is an outcome of China’s long-standing technological development process, which has consistently taken shape in different phases since 1949. *First*, focused on the development of technology based on heavy industry, lasted until 1959; *Second*, spanning up to the Cultural Revolution in 1976; *Third*, initiated by President Deng Xiaoping and carried forward by President Jiang Zemin, emphasised the establishment of independent science-based research hubs. These phases of technological development have transformed China into an *innovation-driven economy*. Outcome: China emerged as a global technological powerhouse, accounting for almost 40 per cent of global e-transactions, and e-commerce stands at 15 per cent. Moreover, China accounts for 32% of global ICT goods exports and 6% of ICT services exports (Lele & Roy, 2019). The DSR has become the world's most significant digital infrastructure undertaking, which assists recipient countries in developing telecommunication networks, artificial intelligence capabilities, cloud computing, e-commerce, mobile payment systems, surveillance technology, smart cities, and other high-tech areas (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The policy document claims that it has unfolded China’s foreign policy vision, intending to build a ‘China-centric digital connectivity network by facilitating the expansion of businesses of Chinese technology corporations and private investors across the route, thereby projecting China’s soft power and shaping the world’s political perceptions (Adee, S., 2019). The DSR comprises four interrelated, technologically focused components. *First*, to invest in digital infrastructure abroad, including next-generation cellular networks, fibre optic cables, and data centres. *Second*, to develop advanced technologies essential to global economic and military power, including satellite navigation systems, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. *Third*, to focus on economic interdependence, thereby promoting digital free trade zones and establishing regional logistics centres. *Fourth*, to establish its ideal international digital environment through digital diplomacy and multilateral governance (Blogger, Guest, 2019).

The DSR’s major and most recent projects include the “*Digital Transformation Partnership Action Plan*” (5G networks, Smart Cities, Cloud-based platforms, and artificial Intelligence) and

*“The Internet Plus Strategy”* (Cellular networks, fibre-optic cables, and data centres, Beidou navigation system, and e-commerce). Among this constellation of ventures and technologies, the relevance of e-commerce lies in its enhancement of both the Chinese economy and its digital strategy. Regarding progress and project relevance, Alibaba’s electronic World Trade Platform (e-WTP) represents the pivotal case for Beijing’s digital and market success.

China has established offices in BRI-associated countries to materialise the scheme and facilitate digital partnerships with finance or technology cooperation. China has adopted a strategy of flexibility to enhance digital interdependence or partnership by sidestepping conflicting political matters from the deal and focusing exclusively on business. Despite China's political conflicts with countries over the South China Sea, on the economic front, China has diplomatically integrated ASEAN countries into the BRI through multiple mechanisms and institutions, facilitating this integration (Zheng, W., 2024). Moreover, there is a heated academic debate on China’s competition on the global front against the USA and European countries in the development of digital sectors. Scholars have argued that China’s real intention behind the DSR is not to conduct technology-driven business with the world, but instead to establish its digital footprint across the region in opposition to the West. Means China is aiming to shift the centre of digital innovation from the West to the East, with Beijing at its centre. Now, the geopolitical landscape has opened up for intensive strategic competition between these two ‘Tech-Superpowers’, the USA and China (Blogger, Guest, 2019).

To counter the DSR, the USA has also implemented a policy by popularising a narrative that Chinese tech corporations pose an unacceptable risk to international security through the mishandling of countries' intelligence data, thus persuading allies to prohibit Chinese critical digital infrastructure. A limited success has been achieved in the US, because Australia, New Zealand, and Japan have been banned from entering Chinese digital corporations altogether. At the same time, the UK and Germany have appeared less willing to block Chinese involvement. Despite political pressure from the US, South Korea has signed DSR agreements with China (Xinhua, 2024). On the contrary, third-world countries (Global South), including Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and South-East Asia and parts of Eastern Europe, desperately need inexpensive, high-quality technology to expand wireless phone networks and broadband internet coverage thus appeared wholeheartedly willing to welcome China’s investment in digital infrastructure because of developmental necessity (Singer, D. et al. 2019). The world’s digital

infrastructure financing gap is projected to reach nearly USD 15 trillion by 2024 (Losavio, Joseph, 2019). In this situation, DSR-related investments would be crucial in filling that gap and sparking growth in the developing world. Chinese firms are bringing additional benefits to developing countries by establishing training centres and research and development programs to boost cooperation between scientists and engineers in these countries and their Chinese counterparts, and to transfer technical knowledge in areas such as smart cities, artificial intelligence, robotics and clean energy, among others (Apsitniran, Lamonphet, 2019). China has already signed agreements on DSR Cooperation with at least sixteen countries. However, the number of the accords and investments is likely to be much larger, because many of these agreements are available in the public domain (Feldstein, Steven, 2020: p. 1). Some estimates show that one-third of the countries participating in BRI have already signed agreements with China on DSR projects. These signed MoUs illustrate the international community's scope of interest in the DSR (RSIS, 2019). In Africa, for instance, China provides more ICT-related financing than all multilateral agencies and leading democracies across the continent (Arcesati, Rebecca, 2020).

Although the DSR has the potential to enhance digital connectivity in developing economies, concerns have been raised about the spread of 'Chinese Authoritarianism', which could pose a risk to curtailing democratic space for individuals and threaten sovereignty. It has been observed that Chinese tech firms have assisted recipient countries in developing surveillance capabilities that could be used against opposition groups (Blogger, Guest, 2019). Although some of these Chinese companies are nominally private, even the private firms have drawn global scrutiny for state links as they are required by Chinese cybersecurity legislation to store data on servers in China and submit to checks from authorities. Moreover, allowing Chinese firms to build countries' fifth-generation (5G) networks and other infrastructure, and to set technology standards that could become the norms in many countries, could risk espionage and coercion of other states' politics if Beijing used data breaches to blackmail political elites in those states (Blogger, Guest, 2018).

### **The Health Silk Road (HSR)**

The BRI's document (2015) identifies five principal areas of cooperation globally: policy coordination, facilitating connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and fostering

people-to-people bonds. The fifth principle reflects China's commitment to establishing a robust, global, and sustainable health network in BRI partner countries, as the health sector would explicitly help to forge closer *people-to-people* exchanges. Therefore, BRI's new sub-branch, the HSR (Jiankang Sichou Zhilu), was inaugurated, with the motto of '*health for all mankind*'. It was first made public in June 2016, when President Xi was addressing Uzbekistan's Supreme Assembly, then called for the joint development of a 'green, healthy, intelligent and peaceful Silk Road' and increased cooperation for the prevention of infectious disease and information sharing, medical assistance, and traditional medicine (Xinhua, 2016). In January 2017, during President Xi's visit to Geneva, the HSR was endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO), then led by Margaret Chan, a Hong Kong-born Chinese civil servant. Chinese official media greeted the WHO's signing of an MoU with the Chinese government as a 'pace' establishing the HSR (An Baijie, 2017).

The HSR is fully committed to strengthening international health cooperation regarding 'sharing of epidemic information, the exchange of prevention and treatment technologies and the training of medical professionals [which will] improve capability to address public health emergencies jointly' (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). This initiative has added the responsibility for China to provide medical assistance and emergency medical aid to countries, as well as to carry out practical cooperation in maternal and child health, disability rehabilitation, and the control of major infectious diseases, including AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. Thus, the BRI is not merely an infrastructure-building plan but will be the backbone of the new world order because it spreads in all significant human domains to achieve the goal of sustainable development (Rolland, Nadege, 2017: 2).

In October 2015, China's National Health Commission released a detailed three-year plan, which specified how health cooperation would be promoted under the BRI's banner. The plan explicitly stated China's medium-term goals: a) Development of a health network with the BRI countries; b) Increase China's soft power in regional and global health governance mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> It provided China with an opportunity to expand the influence of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Therefore, policymakers have emphasised the promotion of the TCM under the BRI

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<sup>7</sup> The key areas for cooperation include infectious disease prevention and control, public health emergencies, maternal and child health, traditional medicine, health system and policies, and capacity building and personnel training.

framework (2016-2020) and also extended it for the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025). TCM was also mentioned in the Action Plans on Belt and Road Standard Connectivity (2015-18) and China's Health Policy Agenda 2030, which aims to improve the overall health levels of the Chinese people. The document underpins the implicit aspiration to become a global health leader by 2030 (Rolland, Nadege, 2017: 4).

Beijing has since then been keen to raise the HSR's international profile by convening *the BRI High-level Meeting for Health Cooperation* in August 2017, just a few months after the first BRI Forum was held in May 2017. This meeting was attended by nearly three hundred participants, including senior health officials from 30 countries and representatives from international health organisations such as the WHO, the UN Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Global Fund, and Gavi, the Global Vaccine Alliance. In addition to foreign representatives, Chinese experts, health industry representatives, and government officials were also present, representing the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministries of Commerce, Industry, and Information Technology, as well as the Foreign Affairs and Central Military Commission's Health Bureau. They participated in four breakout sessions, indicating Beijing's priorities and agenda: vaccines, maternal and child health, scientific and technological innovation, and hospital cooperation (NHC, 2017). In which policymakers decided to focus on three main objectives. *First*, wanted foreign participants to sign the Beijing Communique, which outlines the principal axes of effort for the HSR, including: a) Improving coordination on central infectious disease monitoring, prevention, control and response; b) Increasing medical assistance and health aid in BRI countries; c) Enhancing training and capacity building for health professionals; Strengthening cooperation in medical R&D and the use of traditional medicine; d) Establishing a health-policy research network and a health-industry sustainable development alliance; and, e) Supporting the WHO's role in global health governance and its reform process (National Health Commission, 2017). *Second*, the organisers wanted to sign a bilateral health cooperation agreement on disease prevention and control through TCM. They did so during the conference, which included countries such as Germany, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Russia. *Third*, the establishment of China-led 'alliances' dedicated to international cooperation with BRI countries in specific public health sectors (NHC, 2017).

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a litmus test for Beijing to demonstrate its ability to promote global health cooperation under the BRI banner. At times, President Xi mentioned the

existence of HSR when he called to Italy's PM Giuseppe Conte in March 2020 and offered to deliver masks and medical equipment as the case numbers began to surge in Italy. In addition to China, 24 countries signed the 'Joint Statement of the High-Level video conference on Belt and Road International Cooperation within the BRI framework in deepening practical cooperation, combating the COVID-19 pandemic, and promoting economic recovery' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Then, President Xi consistently reiterated the HSR as an essential element of his commitment to the "community of shared future for mankind". During a speech at the 73rd World Health Assembly in May 2020, he referred to China's responsibility to ensure 'not just the life and health of its own citizens, but also global public health' as part of its vision for this shared future (Jinping Xi, 2020). The White paper on China's 'victory' over Covid-19, issued in June 2020, contains a chapter dedicated to '*building a Global Community of Health for All*' (PRC, 2020).

### **The Green Silk Road(GSR)**

In 2015, a jointly released document by China's National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce stated that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is a dream of China by promoting renewable energy projects, environmental sustainability, and climate-friendly policies globally (BRI Forum, 2017). The principal pillar of the GSR is the utilisation of connectivity to propagate green and low-carbon infrastructure, ensuring a positive impact on the surrounding ecology and enabling effective operational management. Its primary emphasis is on conserving biodiversity while achieving economic prosperity through trade and investment (Yayan, H., 2024). In 2023, the Green Silk Road Development Report was released, which summarised the GSR's achievements. This report has demonstrated that China's key measures and typical cases promote green development in partnering countries by focusing on the development of green infrastructure, green energy corridors, green transport, climate change adaptation, and green finance (Yayan, H., 2024). In the report, it has been observed that from 2015 to 2023, China has been actively practising the green infrastructure philosophy to enhance cooperation and information sharing. As part of this, the BRI International Green Development Coalition<sup>8</sup> was established in April 2019, marking the first international climate-sustainability organisation to

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<sup>8</sup>To know more about, see: [BRI International Green Development Coalition](#)

guide various projects. For example, the first GSR flagship project is the ‘Green Infrastructure Project: Mombasa-Nairobi Railway’ co-built by China and Kenya, connecting Kenya’s capital, Nairobi, with Mombasa, the largest port in East Africa. This is the first railway project built entirely in accordance with the GSR standards, which has seriously considered the sustainability of habitats and the migration paths of wild animals. Railway routes pass through the fourteen large wildlife crossings and seventy-nine bridges, with an average height exceeding 6.5 metres, ensuring that large animals, such as giraffes and zebras, can pass smoothly. Over 100 culverts have been installed to provide drinking water sources and animal migration channels, while also delineating ecological protection zones to safeguard the local mangrove wetland parks (GCA, 2024; Joudeh, Nina,& Day, Joel, 2025). The second project is ‘the Tema New Container Terminal project in Ghana’, situated on the west coast of Africa, off the Gulf of Guinea. As Ghana is an important breeding ground for turtles, Chinese enterprises have established a “Turtle Nursery Centre” to protect the turtles in the planned area and minimise the impact of construction on them (Xinhua, 2022).

However, for addressing climate change issues, China has signed 48 MoUs with 39 partnering countries and co-built several low-carbon demonstration zones. The first low-carbon industrial park is the low-carbon demonstration zone Saysettha- Vientiane (Laos), which assists in the form of solar street lights, new energy vehicles, and environmental monitoring equipment. The demonstration zone was officially launched in 2022, aiming to reduce approximately 1,243 tonnes of carbon emissions annually, equivalent to planting around 100,000 trees. The low-carbon demonstration zone is driving the development of Vientiane New City into a model for low-carbon and environmentally friendly cities in Laos and ASEAN countries. However, China is supporting partnering countries in developing green construction and actively building a green finance development platform, encouraging and guiding financial enterprises to expand green investments, and supporting the development of the Green Silk Road (Yayan, H., 2024).

Recently, the Green Investment Principles (GIP) have been advocated for transparency in environmental information from partnering countries, as well as the use of green financial tools, and seven other principles to enhance national transparency and attract potential investors. Currently, 46 financial institutions and firms from 17 countries are participating, with members managing or holding a total of USD 41 trillion in assets. They have established regional officers in Central Asia and Africa. Under the framework of the GSR, China has assumed a leading role

in connecting various countries, coordinating major financial institutions, and working collaboratively to achieve fruitful outcomes (Green BRI Centre, n.d.).

### **Emerging Strategic Challenges For The Bri In ‘The South Asia’**

Since the launch of the BRI, assessments have shown that the results in terms of infrastructure development worldwide are pretty impressive. Thus, China could shift its global image as a ‘major power’ alongside that of the USA (Wang, C., 2025). Promptly, the countries of the global South have received significant economic benefits from the BRI. Because, since the 1950s, the development of the Global South has been largely overlooked by the First World (the West), which controlled the Bretton-Woods system, which was structured on the neo-colonial patterns. Thus, in the current time, for the Global South bloc, the BRI has proven a beacon of development needs. The BRI has also focused on building a range of infrastructural projects, from transportation networks and energy facilities to digital infrastructure and cultural exchanges in the developing world, where there is unimagined, untapped economic potential. Perception has formulated that the BRI will reshape trade routes, transform investment flows, influence geopolitics, and usher in significant advancements in technology, thereby counteracting the USA’s dominance in the developing world (CBBF, 2025).

Additionally, a narrative of ‘Asia’s Rising’ has been established primarily due to the economic rise of China and India in the current century. Former UNSC President Kishore Mahubani succinctly described it as “*The Dawn of the Asian Century*” (Agrawal, N., & Bhardwaj, A., 2024). A report titled "Meeting Asia’s Infrastructure Needs" was released by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which stated that Asia requires substantial investment for development purposes due to substantially rising people’s demands. It is estimated that “rising infrastructural investment gaps in Asia and the Pacific region will be USD 22.6 trillion by 2030, or the region needs investment around USD 1.5 trillion per year, to tackle poverty and malnutrition, and other kinds of non-traditional security challenges” (Murugiah & Surin, 2017). In this context, India’s and China’s economic leadership roles are indeed crucial for Asia’s prosperity. Furthermore, a close examination of the BRI reveals that China’s policymakers have exclusively redirected the flow of investments in Asia. Out of six economic corridors, four corridors are specifically dedicated to invest in Asian economies, such as CCWAEC (USD 150 billion), CIPEC (USD 200 billion), BICMEC (USD 11 billion in Bangladesh, USD 4 billion in

Sri Lanka, USD 15 billion in Myanmar), and CPEC (USD 62 billion in Pakistan) (Belt and Road Initiative, n.d.). China's strategic plan is to derive greater economic benefits for Asian countries, particularly in terms of economic investment in infrastructure, trade, energy security, and connectivity (including roads, rail, and air). There is no doubt that such marvellous investment in Asia would likely transform the region's economic landscape. Despite this, globally, the BRI has been countered by the USA and in Asia by India due to certain strategic reservations, such as a) Debt Trap Diplomacy; b) Threat to India's security interests; c) U.S.A. Counter Strategy.

*a) Debt-Trap Diplomacy (Cheque Book Diplomacy):*

For the purpose of expanding the BRI, China has certainly moulded its foreign policy outlook by encompassing an attitude of *'political compromise for economic gain'*. In Asia, a political compromise is evident through the sidestepping of specific sovereignty issues. This peace diplomacy is not a *'political altruism'* but rather a *'political illusion'* purposefully advanced to gain an economic agenda. Small countries in Asia have easily fallen into China's diplomatic trap, either due to investment promises or a lack of counter-capabilities against China. China has planned a strategy to expand its 'strategic influence' in South Asia, albeit at the expense of providing fewer economic benefits to the countries, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives. India has raised specific strategic concerns about China's investment in these countries and labelled it 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy (DTD)' or 'Cheque-book Diplomacy'. India's main contention is that China's investment is not just economic but is gradually ensuring involvement in the policy-making process of the countries concerned. Publicly, Indian strategist Brahma Chellaney raised concerns in a self-authored article titled "China's Creditor Imperialism" (2017), in which he articulated that the DTD is China's new foreign policy tool closely linked to the BRI, which is particularly committed against India's security interests in the region (Chellaney, Brahma, 2017). His warning led the Indian intellectual class to recognise China's early economic incursion into its peripheral countries through the DTD. It is a policy through which China intentionally lends excessive loan amounts to low-income states for a specific period. If the country is unable to return it, then it forcefully claims ownership of its strategic assets for an extended period until the money is returned. In South Asia, China has lent money to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Myanmar, which are incapable of repaying such massive Chinese debt, thereby trapped in a national economic crisis. Thus, in return, these borrowing states relinquished some of their strategic assets to decrease their debt

burden towards China. Through the BRI, China has implemented a strategy aimed at curtailing India's strategic interests in South Asia (Chellaney, Brahma, 2017).

Sri Lanka is a notable example of the DTD game. The Sri Lankan government has a total external loan of USD 40 billion, of which 20 per cent is from China. As Colombo found it difficult to service its debt with China, the Sri Lankan government was forced to hand over the Hambantota to China on a 99-year lease. The Sri Lankan government signed a USD 1.1 billion deal in July 2017 to sell a 70% stake in the port to China (Sanyal, Ankita, 2023). Immediately after the Sri Lanka–China agreement on Hambantota Port, India raised serious concerns over China's interventionist strategy in Sri Lanka. Brahma Chellaney obsessively criticised the lease agreement and called it a '*closed strategic threat for India*' (Chellaney, Brahma, 2017). The New York Times journalist Kai Schultz described it as a deal that '*threatens the country's sovereignty*' (Schultz, Kai, 2017). The lease agreement has given China disproportionate control over strategic assets in Sri Lanka. Chellaney also argued that China's loans are often tied to high-value assets with strategic importance on key Indian Ocean trade routes, ensuring that failure to repay would grant China control over these assets (Chellaney, Brahma, 2017). Therefore, he warns Indian leadership to take effective policy measures to counter China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to secure national interests. To balance China's infrastructure projects in South Asia, India has sought to establish military ties with the states in the IOR, such as Mauritius, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. India has sold a patrol vessel to Mauritius, fast attack crafts to Seychelles, Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) to Sri Lanka and an advanced light helicopter to the Maldives. India has also deployed coastal surveillance radars in Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles and the Maldives. Additionally, India has leased the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, which is co-located with the Hambantota seaport in Sri Lanka (Samuel, Abraham, 2018: 97). In contrast, China's loans to Bangladesh and Nepal pose no risk factor for India, unlike those to Sri Lanka. Because Bangladesh's public debt remains 'sustainable' with a 'low risk of external and public debt distress', it is unlikely to face a similar fate to that of Sri Lanka and Pakistan (World Bank, 2022). Most of Nepal's external debt (USD 7.83 billion) is owed to multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank and the ADB (Sanyal, Ankita, 2023). However, the USA has also raised concerns over China's DTD because it is not just limited to Asia, but also extends beyond the region. In May 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused China of using DTD, as it involved corruption techniques and non-transparency, aiming to influence the given state's

critical infrastructure to undermine its political functioning by creating enormous debt (Panda, A., 2019). Scholars also said that DTD is “China’s neo-colonialism in the twenty-first century” (Rana P.B. & Xiabai, 2020: 2).

*b) India Stands Against CPEC*

Between India and China, strategic competition is not a recent phenomenon; it has a history dating back to the mid-twentieth century, as soon as both countries emerged as independent. Now, in the twenty-first century, their strategic rivalry has upgraded to a regional dimension, thus influencing the politics of South Asia. In the post-1962 conflict, Indian policymakers have remained highly suspicious of any policy steps taken by China, in order to understand its implications for India and the region thereof. This case is well-suited to the recent BRI, on which India raised concerns that it is not purely an economic initiative, but rather a strategy to encircle India’s political leverage in the region by partnering with countries through the BRI connectivity network, such as Pakistan. There are three prime ways by which China is strategically aiming to contain India: *first*, the DTD (discussed in the above section). *Second*, China’s assertive position in the IOR is evident in its port-building efforts. India’s apprehension is that the full functioning of these ports would likely make China a more influential player in the IOR. Therefore, the security structure in the IOR will likely favour China and may pose a threat to India’s national interests. For example, Bangladesh allowed China access to the Chittagong seaport, which is a clear signal to India (Faruque & Taufiq, 2018, pp. 4-5). The BRI has provided China a legitimate ground to establish ‘logistic bases’ in the IOR region (Samuel, Abraham, 2018: 97). In the South Asian context, China has overtaken India, because all the regional countries except Bhutan have joined the BRI. China’s emerging partnership with Pakistan and Bangladesh, the countries along India’s periphery, indicates China’s reinforced footprints in the region (Bajpayee, Chietigi, 2017: 117). *Third*, CPEC, the flagship economic corridor of the BRI, has been embroiled in regional strategic competition due to India’s objection to it. India has boundary conflicts with both neighbours, China and Pakistan. At the same time, both countries have closely aligned their strategic interests in South Asia and are targeting India’s political position in the region. Additionally, the CPEC serves as a common economic platform for this purpose. Pakistan is providing an excellent strategic ground for China to invest in various infrastructure projects, such as ports, roads, and pipelines, with a total cost of USD 62 billion (Samuel, Abraham, 2018: 97). China’s economic corridor goes from the strategically sensitive Himalayan region, which is

pivotal for the protection of India. India's first major concerns about CPEC are related to its perceived security compromises in the Himalayan region. Secondly, Pakistan's Gwadar Port holds significant strategic and economic importance due to its location, situated on the Arabian Sea and serving as a bridge connecting South Asia, West Asia, and Central Asia. It would grant China direct access to the IOR, thereby enhancing Pakistan's geopolitical standing in the region against India. Furthermore, Gwadar's proximity to the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz allows Pakistan to effectively monitor vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) (Payeng, Yalana, 2024). The enhanced leverage of China in the IOR would not only pose a threat to India but also to the USA's military bases in South Asia. Therefore, considering China's role in the IOR, the USA has also initiated a counter-policy in the Asia-Pacific Region, i.e. the "Asian Rebalance Strategy" (Khurana, 2016).

Purposefully, India opted out of all three BRI forums (in 2017, 2019, and 2023). Hence, in recent times, a strategic confrontation has emerged between India and China, which has become increasingly explicit due to the advancement of the CPEC (Rafi & Amna, 2018, p. 106). India has employed countermeasures to subvert the corridor, which include coercive methods and propaganda. *First*, Indian scholarship has coined the term DTD as part of the counter-narrative. The narrative has settled the presumption that the corridor is "China's predatory lending to Pakistan for possible geostrategic objectives" is part of the propaganda. *Secondly*, India has taken an active initiative to invest in the Chabahar seaport (Iran) that offers India a direct route to Central Asia via Iran. However, India's funded construction of the road network linking the Zaranj border crossing between Afghanistan and Iran aims to create a similar link between the Chabahar port and Central Asia (Lodhi & Bilal, 2019, p. 233).

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, the BRI reflects China's global economic and political ambitions for the twenty-first century due to its nature and scope. The principal philosophy underlying the BRI is derived from the policy document "A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions (2023)." Although the document was released in 2023, its dissemination had already begun when President Xi Jinping took office. The BRI is not only a policy to aspire to for global humanity, but other policies, such as the GDI (2021), the GSI (2021), and the CGI (2023), also aim to

achieve the same end. This paper has purposefully focused on understanding the BRI due to its scope, which currently involves partnerships with more than 150 countries and is valued at an estimated USD 1.175 trillion. Due to its global footprint, scholars refer to this as China's flagship project, capable of displacing the centre of economic prominence from the Atlantic region to Asia. Initially, its functional domain was limited to building routes along land and sea ways. Then, it extended to digital, health, and climate sustainability due to positive responses from across the region. No doubt, developing countries in Asia and Africa have significantly benefited from the BRI investments in basic infrastructure facilities. Like the success stories elsewhere, the BRI has posed strategic challenges to India in South Asia. India's prominent voice against the BRI is that it threatens its strategic interests and autonomy in South Asia, and the suppression of democratic voices through DTD in these countries. DTD is highly prevalent in Sri Lanka. However, it has been observed that China is consistently exploiting Pakistan's geo-political position to target India in the region. Therefore, India has perceived that these challenges need to be contained as soon as possible to ensure the safety of the region. The political game in South Asia has become highly complicated as India has taken its firm diplomatic stands on China's economic encroachment in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Simultaneously, the USA has also entered into the political game against the BRI by aligning with India in the region. There is no doubt that the BRI will expand its footprint across the region. However, the counter-strategy from India and the USA will also likely contain China's political ambition in the region.

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