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INDIA'S SECURITY CONCERNS ON CHINA'S 'BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)' IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION (IOR) AND COUNTER-DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES

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Abstract

This research paper examines the implications of the expansion of China's BRI in the IOR on India's geo-strategic interests and thereby emerging counter-diplomatic responses to balance a favourable regional power architecture. Launched in 2013, the BRI seeks to integrate China's economy with the global system through extensive infrastructure connectivity, and has since attracted participation from a majority of countries, with cumulative investment surpassing USD 1 trillion. Within the IOR, both China and India emerge as pivotal actors vying for influence; however, China has deliberately concentrated its investments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives to dilute India's traditional strategic primacy in the region. This recalibration of power dynamics is reshaping the regional order, thereby challenging India's longstanding geopolitical stakes. Employing an analytical-interpretative methodology complemented by a case study approach, this study draws upon primary and secondary literary sources to contextualise and interrogate its research objectives. The analysis concludes that India has responded through multifaceted counter-diplomacy at the foreign policy level, notably by forging institutional alliances such as the QUAD and INSTC, alongside strengthening bilateral partnerships with key regional actors.

Keywords

India, China, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, USA, South Asia, BRI, DTD, IOR.

Resumo

Este artigo de investigação analisa as implicações da expansão da Iniciativa «Um Cinturão, Uma Rota» (BRI) da China na Região do Oceano Índico (IOR) para os interesses geoestratégicos da Índia e, consequentemente, as respostas diplomáticas contrárias que estão a surgir para equilibrar uma arquitetura de poder regional favorável. Lançada em 2013, a BRI visa integrar a economia da China no sistema global através de uma ampla conectividade de infraestruturas e, desde então, tem atraído a participação da maioria dos países, com um investimento acumulado que ultrapassa os 1 bilião de dólares americanos. Na IOR, tanto a China como a Índia surgem como atores fundamentais na disputa pela influência; no entanto, a China concentrou deliberadamente os seus investimentos no Paquistão, no Sri Lanka e nas Maldivas para diluir a primazia estratégica tradicional da Índia na região. Este reajustamento das dinâmicas de poder está a remodelar a ordem regional, desafiando assim os interesses geopolíticos de longa data da Índia. Recorrendo a uma metodologia analítico-interpretativa complementada por uma abordagem de estudo de caso, este estudo baseia-se em fontes bibliográficas primárias e secundárias para contextualizar e questionar os seus objetivos de investigação. A análise conclui que a Índia tem respondido através de uma contra-diplomacia multifacetada ao nível da política externa, nomeadamente

forjando alianças institucionais como o QUAD e o INSTC, a par do reforço das parcerias bilaterais com atores regionais-chave.

Palavras-chave

Índia, China, Sri Lanka, Paquistão, EUA, Sul da Ásia, BRI, DTD, IOR.

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INDIA'S SECURITY CONCERNS ON CHINA'S 'BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)' IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION (IOR) AND COUNTER-DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES[1]

MULE ROHIT ASHOK

Introduction

According to the IMF Report (2024), China has emerged as one of the leading economic powers by attaining a GDP value of USD 18,273 billion, which is next to the USA's 29,167 billion. Principally, the Economic Modernisation Program (1976) was responsible for the substantial economic results in the 1990s, when China could achieve a double-digit growth rate. In recent times, several macroeconomic issues have surfaced in China that have lowered its growth rate drastically (Clover, C. et al., 2017). Undoubtedly, the past four decades of an economic trajectory have helped China to figure out its global vision for the twenty-first century, which is indeed reflected in a policy document entitled *'A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions (2023)'*.[2] The process envisioning the philosophy of the shared future of humanity was already undertaken through the development of various projects such as the BRI, the Global Development Index (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Civilizational Initiative (GCI), etc. Among all these projects, the BRI has evolved as the functionally most dynamic and geographically well-reached across the region. Details of it have been thoroughly illustrated in a document titled *The Belt and Road Initiatives: Progress, Contributions and Prospects.*[3] (BRI, n.d.).

Among all regions, the development of the BRI in South Asia, or the IOR, has led to certain issues relating to national security and the Balance of Power (BoP). In the 21st century, India has emerged as a major actor possessing significant political-economic stakes in the IOR, claiming that BRI's expansion through China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC), and the China–West Asia Economic Corridor (CWAE) is threatening its position, especially

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[2] To read the full document: Full Text: A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China
[3] To read the full document: The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects | english.scio.gov.cn

by monopolising strategic assets of the countries in the region through Debt Trap Diplomacy (DBT). Therefore, the structure of the political equilibrium or BoP in IOR appears to be shifted in favour of China and its ally, Pakistan. Such a developing power structure has created a security complex situation for Indian policymakers to deal with in the future context. There has been substantial academic literature added on the topic of the BRI and South Asia. Prof. Brahma Chellaney articulated well about China's strategic intention behind BRI in South Asia in his self-written article titled "China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy" and "China's Creditor Imperialism" during 2017 (Chellaney, B. 2017; Chellaney, B. a2017). Additionally, Prof. Shrikant Kondapalli has also expressed enough critical views on China's BRI project in South Asia and claims that China is more aggressive in bringing India under the BRI ambit to facilitate projects across the corridor smoothly, but India is strategically denying game-politics (Kondapalli, S. 2021). Mukesh Bharati, in his article, also illustrated the expansion of the BRI in South Asia and rising economic challenges to India (Bharati, M. 2024: 21). Bhumika Chakama has also analysed India's position on BRI activities in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. She has taken the position that the Indian government has not appeared aggressive in the context of counter-BRI in South Asia, as the policy is being implemented so rapidly (Chakama, B. 2019: 184). Michal Himmer has led his investigation to determine whether DBT is a reality or a myth (Himmer, M. 2023). This literature has not adequately addressed the dynamics of changing BoP in IOR as BRI is expanding; additionally, Pakistan also joined it to counter India. This research article will connect the gap in understanding BRI expansion, IOR and India's strategic concerns by focusing on DTD. However, the study will also examine India's counter-diplomatic initiative to counter China in the region. This article is divided into four sections, such as: First, the BRI and China's global vision; Second, a case study of countries from the IOR where China focused and application of DTD; Third, Understanding the shift in BoP and India's strategic Concerns; Fourth, India's counter-diplomatic initiatives.

Research Methodology

This research study has used an analytical-interpretative method. However, a case study approach has been used to decode the dynamics of BoP in IOR through BRI investment in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. However, the concept of Debt-Trap Diplomacy (DTD) would be essential to explore China's intention to target India's strategic position by crushing the country's economic sovereignty. In the context of the time framework, this article will focus on the period from 2014 to 2025 to analyse India's evolving counter-diplomacy. This study has relied on primary literature, such as government policy documents and reports, as well as secondary sources, including newspaper articles and journal articles, to achieve the intended objective.

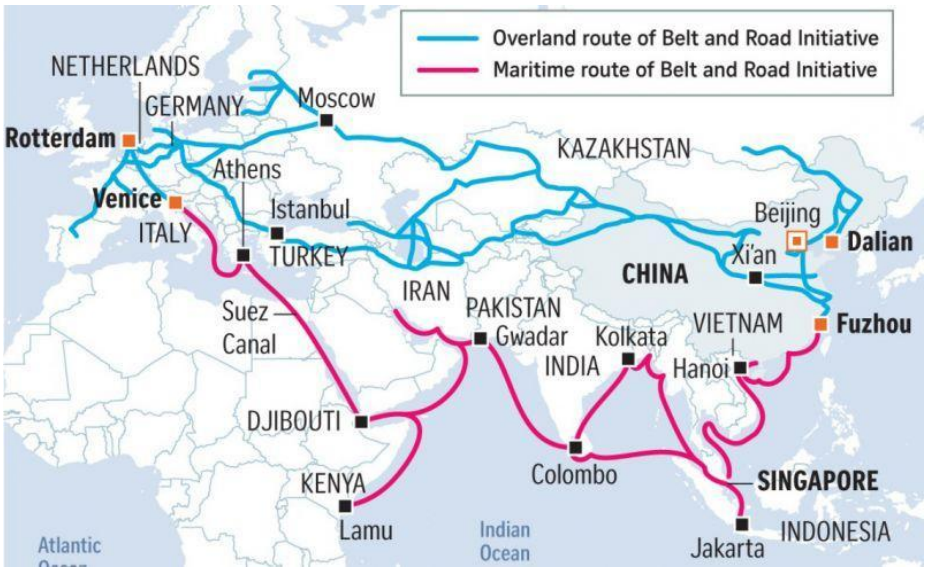
Result and Discussion

21sr Century China's Global Vision: The Belt and Road Initiatives

The global economic system is undergoing a significant shift, as China has emerged as one of the major economic players in Asia, alongside the USA and Europe. Currently,

China's purchasing power parity (PPP) is the highest globally and statistically, it needs to bridge only a USD 10 trillion gap to surpass the USA's economy. Such an economic transformation is an outcome of the Modernisation Economic Policy pursued by President Deng Xiaoping in the mid-1970s. Therefore, Zhu Min, a former deputy chief of the IMF, speculated that 'China is expected to surpass the US economy by 2035' (Xueying, Li, 2024). On the contrary, a recent economic recession[4] in the Chinese economy led one another prediction that if China's economic growth declines below 5 per cent would make it impossible to overtake the US until 2060 (Sharma, R., 2022). This rise of its economic footprint on the global economy motivated the Chinese leadership to define its role for the welfare of global humanity. As a result, President Xi Jinping, in an address at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (2013), raised a common concern about humanity by asking: *Where is humanity headed?* And further stated, *"building a shared future is the guiding philosophy to lead global humanity towards achieving common political, economic, cultural, and ecological stability and prosperity"* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2023). Afterwards, at the UNGA 70th Session (2015), he further stressed the agenda of welfare of humanity by proposing five points, such as Equal Treatment; Common Security; Win-Win cooperation; Respect diversity; Green and Low-carbon development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2015). Finally, a philosophy of shared future was taken to concrete shape in the form of a white paper titled *"A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions (2023)",* which fundamentally focused on the common aim of the Sustainable Development of Humanity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2023). It unwittingly assigned China a status of a responsible actor, besides the USA, in the current global order. 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 a reflection of a dream of a shared future of humanity.

Map 1. Belt and Road Initiative



[4] To get the details of China's economic trajectory, see the link: GDP growth (annual %) - China | Data

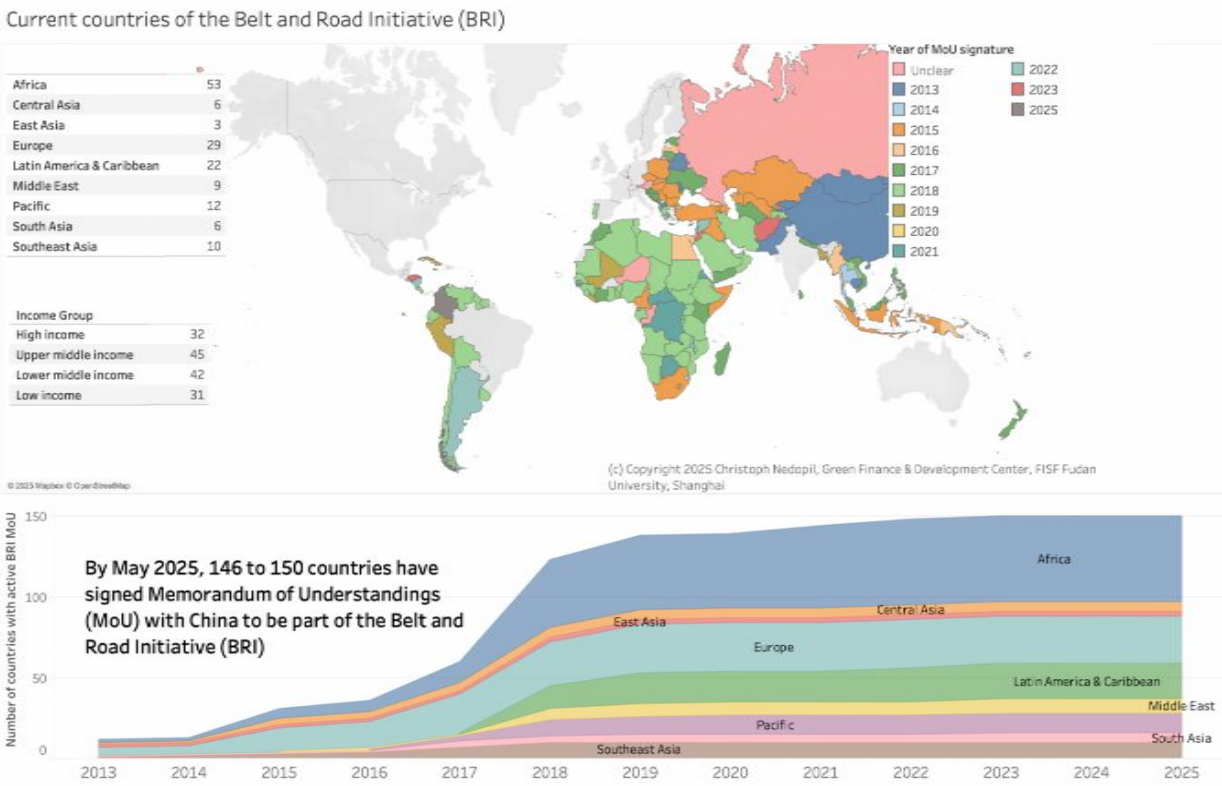
The BRI or OBOR, which is highly acknowledged globally and an important focus topic of this paper. Thus, the section illustrates the nature and scope of the BRI. The BRI, launched in 2013, is an ambitious global 'infrastructure connectivity' policy that was launched by reviving the century-old concept of 'Silk Road'[5], aimed to integrate China's economy with the global economy, vice versa (Bharti and Kumari, 2024: 3-4; Ibrahim, S and A. Kizito, 2021: 71). It vision document titled *"Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (2015)"*[6] provides a comprehensive outlook of initiative, which defines the aim is *"to promote the trade, investment, and connectivity networks across regions"* (BRI Portal, n.d.). Five strategic pillars are choreographed, which includes: a) To focus on expanding trade routes and opening up new markets for Chinese goods; b) To enhance global infrastructure for reducing transportation costs; c) To ensure resource security strengthen China's supply chains; d) To build economic diplomacy with partnering nations; e) To position China as a key leader in global economic development, etc. (FDI China, 2025). A 'Joint Cooperation Framework (JCF)' was developed specifically for its branding across the region, which mainly looks after priorities, such as Policy Coordination, Facilities Connectivity, Unimpeded Trade, Financial Integration, and People-to-people bonds. The win-win cooperation is the focal doctrine of bilateral or multilateral agreements. Positively, by 2025, nearly 146-150 countries joined it, most of them from the developing and underdeveloped global south bloc, where the world's almost 2/3 population lives, and deficit with infrastructure. Thus, the prediction is that the BRI will be a beacon for development of the Global South (Nedopil, 2025). Diplomatic outreach of the BRI has truly assigned it a global character and made it the world's most expensive endeavour in modern history (Rolland, Nadege, 2017: p. ii). The outcome of the BRI is that it will reduce transport times along economic corridors by 12 per cent, trade will increase 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).

The BRI encompass five major functional components, such as the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the Digital Silk Road (DSR), the Health Silk Road (HSR) and the Green Silk Road (GSR), etc. First, the SREB is a *"Chinese Dream"* of development of a strong network land infrastructure along six corridors: New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC); China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC); China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC); China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CIPEC); The Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BICMEC); The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Economy, Elizabeth, 2018; Kumar, Sudeep, 2022; BRI Portal; OBOReurope, n.d.). According to Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, the SREB has revived the Cold War strategic 'corridor' approach, which depicts aspects of the 'politics of territory' played by both superpowers to broaden their respective ideological blocs. It constituted three major things: a) the territorialization and projection of state power across time and space; b) the spread of civilisation across time and space; c) the extension of the state's manufacturing production and its circulatory system across space. China's facsimile of the corridor approach has predicted

[5] Historically, the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) applied the concept of 'Silk Road'. To know more see: Silk Road | Facts, History, & Map | Britannica
[6] To read further: Full Text: Vision and actions on jointly building Belt and Road - Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation

that it would likely pose an existential threat to the U.S.-led status quo (Burna-Asefi, Sophia, 2024).

Map 2. Map of countries of the BRI in May 2025



Source: Nedopil 2025

Second, the Maritime Silk Road is another important component of BRI. 'Affordability' is a crucial factor for promoting the ocean trade, which is now operating more than 80 per cent of the volume of international trade commodities, and sustains the livelihoods of billions of people (United Nations, 2016). The MSR is aiming to promote approximate $1.2 trillion 'Blue Water Economy', which would serve range of interests, such as, improving food and energy security, diversifying and securing sea lines of communication (SLOC), upholding territorial sovereignty, and shifting international discourse on major powers, and dominance in Asia (Ghiasy, R. et. al., 2018: 2). Map No. 1 provides details informatio about extension of MSR, which stretched from China's (Guangzhou[7], 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). Through the MSR, nearly 50 ports are under heavy financial investments across the region that making China the world's largest seaport operators and constructors. In Asia, no doubt, the ports infrastructure will ensure China's trade dominance over the South China Sea,

[7] To know more about these port cities, see: Maritime Silk Road Route, History, Map, Tour 2025

Strait of Malacca, Indian Ocean, Gulf of Bengal, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf and the Red Sea (Mingxin, Ma & Jian, Liang, 2024: 1). In 2017, the appendix to the MSR was the 'Polar Silk Road (PSR)' attached, referring to the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which was officially mentioned in the White Paper titled 'China's Arctic Policy'[8]. Its 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., & Yifie, D., 2023). Erdem Lamazhapov and others have argued that Chinese officials have taken no significant policy steps to implement the PSR in Russia after 2023 because of emerging challenges from the intensification of the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Erdem Lamazhapov et. al., 2023). Mingxin Ma and Jian Liang jointly argued that 'in future China's major focus will be on building strong port infrastructure in Southeast Asia and South Asia, while Europe will be a lesser focused area because of interrelated factors of 'distance' and 'developmental priorities (Mingxin, Ma, & Jian Liang, 2024: 7).

Third, the innovation of Artificial Intelligence has stretched the arms of BRI to the Digital Silk Road or the Information Silk Road (2015), which encompasses the development of telecommunication networks, artificial intelligence capabilities, cloud computing, e-commerce, mobile payment systems, surveillance technology, smart cities, and other high-tech areas in the partner countries (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Ajeje Lele and Kritika Roy have succinctly argued that the DSR is an outcome of China's long-standing technological development process since 1949, which transformed the country from an innovation-driven economy to a global technological powerhouse. Therefore, China accounts for almost 40 per cent of global e-transactions, with e-commerce standing at 15 per cent, 32% of global ICT goods exports and 6% of ICT services exports (Lele A. & K. Roy, 2019). Resultantly, China no longer remained only the *'world's traditional manufacturing workshop'* but emerged *as a 'highly professional economy'* (Burna-Asefi, Sophia, 2024). After its integration, a 'Soft Power' has become a dominant component within the foreign policy agenda to promote a 'China-centric digital connectivity network' (Adee, S., 2019). A hot debate, whether through DSR, China is aiming to shift the centre of digital innovation from the West to the East, with Beijing at its centre, is at the centre of the US academic circle (Blogger, Guest, 2019). For example, recently, the debate on 'DeepSeek' technology is very relevant for contextualization tech-race between the USA and China (Allen, Gregory, 2025). Against DSR, the USA has spread a narrative that Chinese tech corporations are posing an unpredictable risk to national security through the mishandling of countries' intelligence data and promoting 'Chinese Authoritarianism', thus persuading allies to ban the entry of Chinese digital corporations. Despite such a narrative, the Global South is positive to welcome China's DSR because of the factor of needs (Singer, D. et al., 2019; Losavio, Joseph, 2019).

Fourth, in early 2017, a new initiative, the HSR (Jiankang Sichou Zhilu), with the motto *health for all humanity',* was launched to prevent infectious diseases through information sharing about modern and traditional medicine, which was also endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (An Baijie, 2017). Its principal commitment is to strengthen international cooperation in health through 'sharing of epidemic information, the exchange of prevention and treatment technologies and the training of medical

[8] China's Arctic Policy - BELT AND ROAD PORTAL

professionals [which will] improve capability to address public health emergencies jointly' (Rolland, N., 2024, p.23). China has taken responsibility for providing medical assistance and emergency medical aid to partner countries, as well as for carrying out practical cooperation in maternal and child health, disability rehabilitation, and the control of major infectious diseases, including AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. Now, the BRI is not merely an infrastructure-building plan, but also extended to cover domain of humanity (Rolland, Nadege, 2017: 2). The National Health Commission of China has also claimed for promotion of health cooperation by: a) Development of a health network with the BRI countries; b) Increase China's soft power in regional; and c) global health governance mechanisms.[9] In 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 (Xi Jinping, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, China offered great medical help to a large number of countries. Additionally, China convened a High-Level video conference with partner countries to deepen cooperation for combating the COVID-19 pandemic and promoting economic recovery (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

Fifth, the Green Silk Road was launched in 2015 to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting renewable energy projects, environmental sustainability, and climate-friendly policies globally, and became part of the BRI strategy (BRI Forum, 2017). This has ensured objective climate sustainability while ensuring economic prosperity (Yayan, H., 2024). In 2023, the Green Silk Road Development Report was released, which demonstrated China's key achievements from 2015-2023 in partnering countries on the development of green infrastructure, green energy corridors, green transport, climate change adaptation, and green finance (Yayan, H., 2024). Notably, China established the BRI International Green Development Coalition[10] in April 2019, marking the first international climate-sustainability organisation to guide various projects internationally. 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 (GCA, 2024). The second project is 'the Tema New Container Terminal project in Ghana', situated on the west coast of Africa, off the Gulf of Guinea (Xinhua, 2022). Heydays, China's economy has grappled with certain macroeconomic issues, which have led to a slowdown pace of investment across the region; therefore, specific economic challenges are before China. In response to that, in 2021, President Xi Jinping unveiled the BRI's "Small and Beautiful (S&B)" model, which prioritises sustainable, medium-sized investments that meet the developmental objectives of partner nations while preserving Chinese influence through technological collaboration as opposed to debt-based leverage (IFPP, 2025).

The BRI in the IOR: A case of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives

In the 21st century, the IOR region has emerged as one of the major geo-politically contested hotspots. The reason is that it connects Asia, Africa, and Europe, which will be

[9] 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.
[10] To know more about, see: BRI International Green Development Coalition

crucial for trade and commerce. The Malacca Strait and the Hormuz Strait are two important choke points that belong to the IOR and carry nearly 50 per cent of the world's oil shipments. Therefore, it became a prerequisite for China to ensure dominance over the IOR region for strategic purposes, such as expanding trade and commerce, expanding military partnerships, containing India, countering US influence, and ensuring the security of sea lines of communication, etc. As China has begun to dream one of the global powers, especially after the launch of the BRI. It motivated China to pursue a strategic goal of establishing a significant footprint in the IOR, competing with rising India and the USA. (Kannangara, P. et al, 2018). China's strategy in the IOR is specified to control strategic assets of the countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh, etc, which will be critical for China in pursuance of strategic goals. This section will analyse China's expansion of the BRI through controlling strategic assets of the countries through DTD.

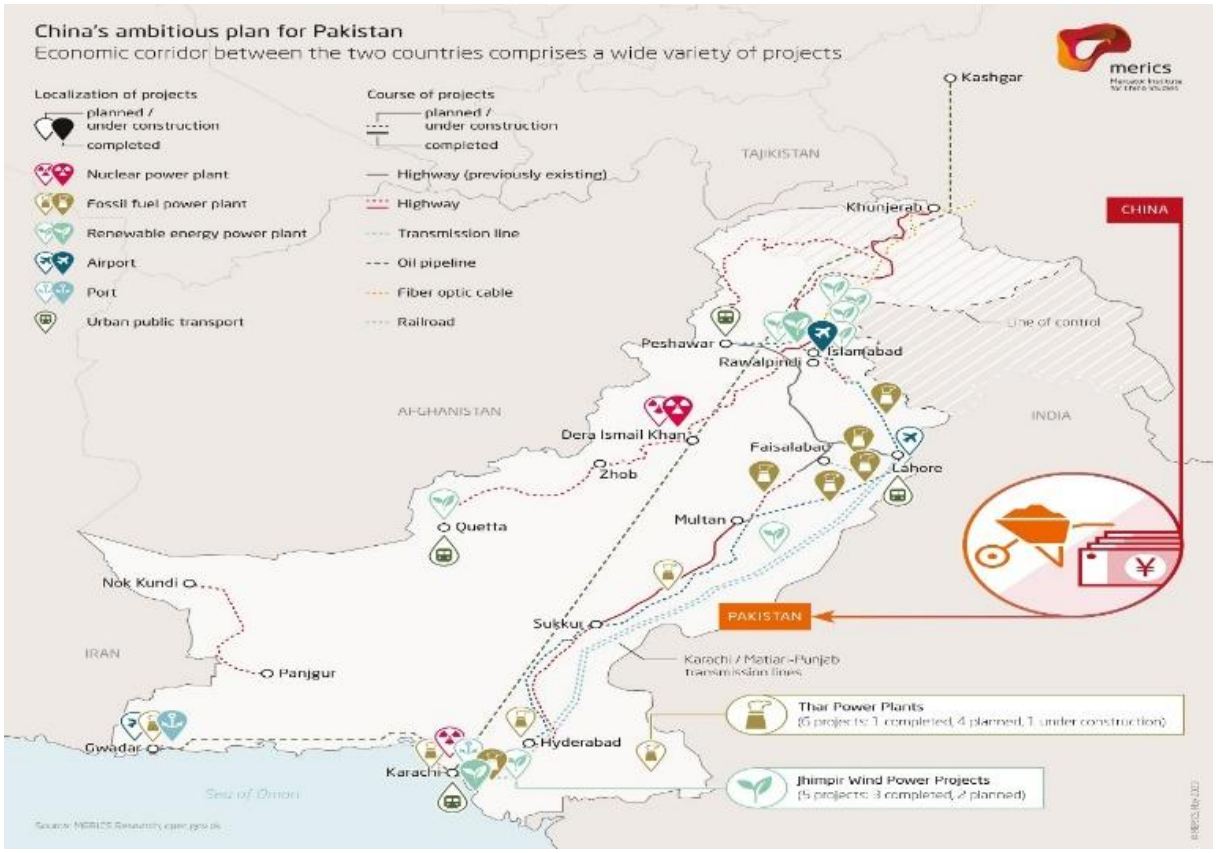
Pakistan: The Gwadar Ports and Karakoram Highway

This map, no.3, provides an overview of the scope of the infrastructural projects ongoing under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The estimated total cost is USD 62 billion, which includes construction of highways, ports, energy, health health-related projects. Since its inception has been entangled with certain security-related objections from the regional actors, that is, India. The major objection raised by India is the compromise of its security stakes in the region because of ongoing projects such as the Gwadar Port and the Karakoram Highway, which traverses from the disputed PoK (Chaudhary, Fatima, 2024; Tiwari, S., 2024). India has territorial conflicts with both Pakistan (over J&K) and China (over Ladakh), which are linked to post-independence history (1950s). India observes that both adversaries are exploiting such a conflicting scenario against it through developing the collaborative platform of CPEC. The politics behind such strengthening partnership between China and Pakistan is tends to shift the BoP in the South Asia in their favour, with inflicting India's geo-political and geo-economic stakes. Consonance over geo-political adversary such as India can be presumed one of major reason for receiving constant politico-economic support to Pakistan from China. The certain development on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between two further widened the scope of their bilateral relationship, while created strategic insecurity for India (Bhaumik, Anirban, 2025).

Map No. 3 shows that under the umbrella of the CPEC, various projects have been planned in all major cities of Pakistan, such as Kashgar, Khunjerab, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Lahore, Multan, Sukkur, Quetta, Hyderabad, Karachi, and Gwadar. A huge amount of investment in CPEC by China raised expectations of Pakistan for an economic boom in future, but in reality, issues of terrorism, internal political instability, youth protests, and rising fundamentalism have impeded progress (ABC News, 2025; ABC News, a2025). Very important among all ongoing projects are the Gwadar Port and the Karakoram Highway, on both of which India has shown its disapproval (Economic Times, 2025). Definitely, the completion of these projects would help China to reduce dependence on traditional trade routes of the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait, for trading with Africa, West Asia, and Europe. However, there will be a significant reduction in cost and time of trading with these regions of the world. The

Gwadar Port is located near the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's busiest oil transit points, thus providing China a strategic advantage in regional trade. This access would strengthen China's economic foothold in the region and establish Pakistan's position as a key transit hub for global trade. Therefore, China is very interested in seeking its strategic interests by ensuring its monopoly over the Arabian Sea via Pakistan. However, Pakistan is offering China direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing potential maritime conflict with Western powers. This reduces trade risks and enhances China's energy security, ensuring uninterrupted supplies of oil and raw materials. This is the reason for China is highly focused on these two flagship CPEC projects on a priority basis (Sun, Q. and S. Awale, 2025; Hashmi, N., 2025). However, the Karakoram Highway goes through the disputed PoK region, which is India's sovereign territory, and it will go against international legal norms. The outcome of CPEC, India observes more threats to its geopolitical standing and make tough to pursue its interests. Because, undoubtedly, it will be easy for both India's adversaries to contain its interests. And, the success of these two projects would help China to establish a sole hegemon in the region.

Map 3. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor



Source: Council of Foreign Relations

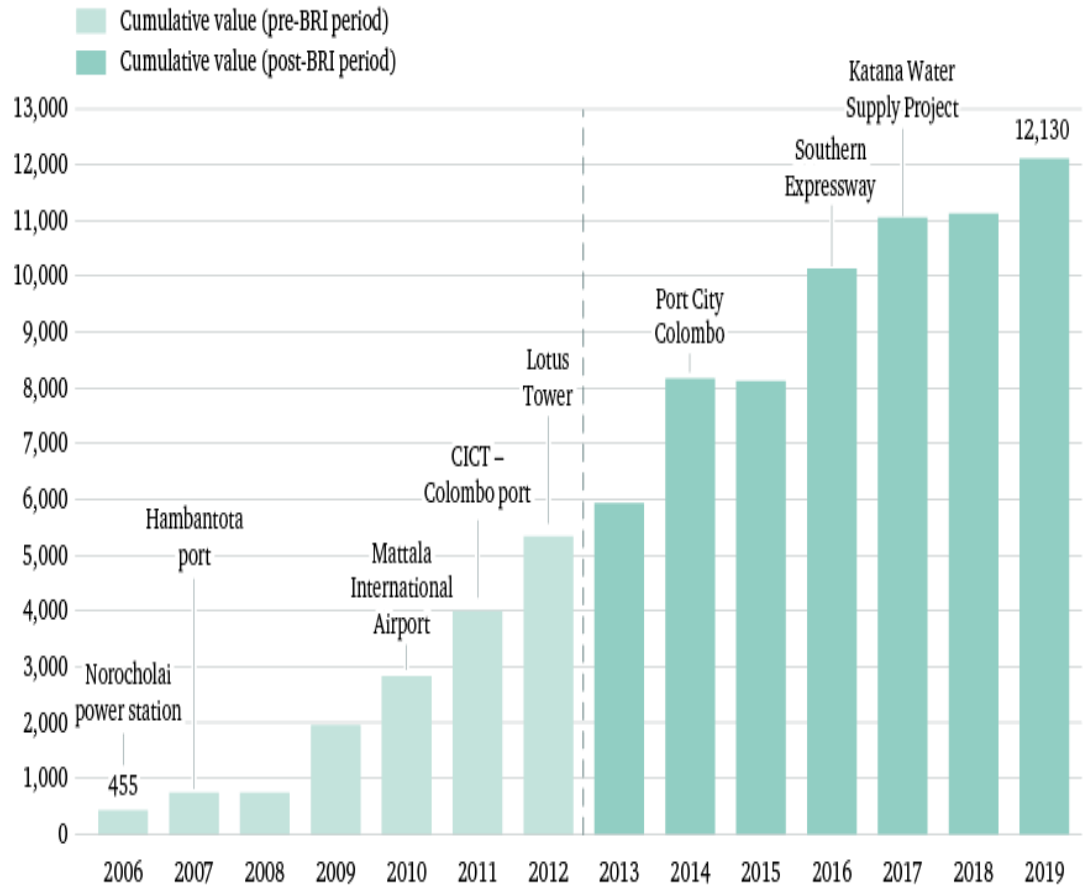
Sri Lanka: The Hambantota Port

Sri Lanka has emerged as one of the important partners of China in the IOR. China's first infrastructure investments in Sri Lanka took place in the 1970s in the form of outright grants, which included the construction of a convention centre.[11] Then, in the regime of President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015), the relationship was upgraded to a commercial model of interest-bearing loans for infrastructure development. As a result, several projects of transport, energy, and telecommunications with Chinese support were initiated, including the coal-fired Norocholai power station in 2006, the Hambantota port in 2007, the Mattala International Airport in 2010, the Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) at the Colombo port in 2011, and the Lotus Tower in 2012. After the formal involvement of Sri Lanka in BRI in 2013, followed by extensive investment of China in several road and expressway projects, water and sanitation projects, and further investments in existing projects such as the revised Hambantota port deal in 2017 (Wignaraja, G. et al, 2020: 4).

The following chart clearly shows trends of China's investment in Sri Lanka from 2006 to 2019. Before BRI, China's investment was not as heavy as after the BRI. In 2006, investment was merely USD 455 million and by 2012 reached a level of more than USD 5000 million. Within five years since 2013, the investment was more than double, which was USD 12000 million. This upscaling trend of investment from China is showing the importance of Sri Lanka for BRI expansion in IOR for certain geopolitical and geo-economic motives. In January 2025, Sri Lanka's newly elected ideologically leftist President Anura Kumara Dissanayake showed a politically tilting attitude by preferring to visit China after the election to have agreements for widening the scope of businesses with China. Several MoUs were signed between stakeholders to facilitate BRI investment. The visit resulted in China's offer to invest $3.7 billion in building the refinery in order to enhance its business footprint in the smaller countries in South Asia. Experts have argued that these projects would likely be debt traps for host countries, which are then forced to give control of the strategic asset to China. However, Sri Lanka has already experienced such a debt trap with the Chinese project of Hambantota port (Economic Times, 2025). Debt to China is partly blamed for an unprecedented financial crisis, which led Sri Lanka to default on its USD 46 billion foreign debt in 2023. In 2017, unable to repay a huge Chinese loan, Sri Lanka allowed China Merchants Port Holdings to take over the port at Hambantota. The deal, which gave the Chinese company a 99-year lease, raised fears about Beijing's use of 'debt traps' in exerting its influence abroad. Professor Mick Moore from the University of Sussex and former consultant on Sri Lanka for the Asian Development Bank said even though it looked like Sri Lanka was struggling from the effects of global economic problems, it was "emphatically not that" and "This is the most man-made and voluntary economic crisis of which I know" (Hoskins, P., 2022). Early last year, Sri Lanka leased a white-elephant international airport built with Chinese loans to a joint venture between India's Shaurya Aeronautics and Russia's Airports of Regions Management Company, as the island nation's bankrupt government sought to offload loss-making assets. The airport is named after former President Mahinda

[11] The iconic Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall.

Rajapaksha, who borrowed heavily from China for infrastructure projects that quickly became commercial failures (Economic Times, 2025).



Source: Chathamhouse.org

China's expanding footprint in Sri Lanka is a cause of concern for India because any Chinese strategic foothold in IOR threatens India's interests. China was once seen as having the upper hand in Sri Lanka through its huge loans and infrastructure investments. While China remains the country's largest bilateral lender, Sri Lanka's economic collapse provided an opportunity for India, which stepped in with massive financial and material assistance, including food, fuel, and medicines. For years, China has been trying to expand its influence in Sri Lanka, which it considers part of its strategic backyard. Dissanayake's visit to the Chinese capital can be seen as an effort to navigate the rivalry between India and China, which his party traditionally has leaned toward. In New Delhi, President Dissanayake Met PM Modi and said he would not allow Sri Lanka to be used in "a manner that is detrimental to the interest of India" (Economic Times, 2025).

The Maldives's Strategic Partnership with China

The Maldives, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, has become embroiled in the regional power rivalry of India and China. For both countries, the Maldives is a crucial location for security purposes and to maintain regional strongholds through controlling international sea lanes. Hence, in India's Neighbourhood First policy and MAHASAGAR policy, the Maldives has consistently held a very strategic position. But the newly elected President, Mohamed Muizzu, in January 2024, has preferred to distance the country from India and to be closer to China. Therefore, to strengthen bilateral ties, China was chosen as the first destination for an official visit then India, when he signed twenty new agreements with Beijing that included financial and military assistance (Regan, H., 2024). Since the election's the political campaign, he garnered an agenda of "India Out" on the issues of treatment of the Indian minority since the BJP-led PM Modi held power in India (Jain, K., 2025). The alignment shift to China has sparked fresh concerns within India about the expansion of China's maritime influence in the IOR. However, since the Maldives joined with BRI in 2014, the country has received around USD 1.4 billion from Chinese banks, which now makes up 20 per cent of its public debt (Woo, R. and J. Cash, 2024). This percentage of external debt raised concerns about China's DTD, but the Maldives ambassador Fazeel Najeeb, in an interview with Yeping Yin, said that "The idea of so-called debt-trap is misleading and does not accurately reflect the dynamics inherent in the Maldives-China partnership…The Maldives has benefited much from the BRI, and we look forward to continuing this partnership into the long term" (Yeping, Y., 2025). China has made several large infrastructure investments in the Maldives through BRI, including the USD 200 million China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which connects the islands of Hulhule and Hulhumale with the capital, Male (Yeping, Y., 2025). The upgraded relationship also offers potential benefits to China. The Maldives sits along one of the busiest maritime trade passages in the Indian Ocean, through which nearly 80 per cent of Chinese oil imports flow (Kaushik, Krishn, 2024). All these economic engagements led to the upgradation of China's partnership with the Maldives to a Strategic level in 2024 (The President's Office, 2024; PRC China, 2025).

India's Strategic Concerns on BRI in IOR

Indeed, the BRI has notably filled infrastructure development gaps in countries belonging to the Global South because most of its corridors are concentrated on their development. Morever specifically, experts are pronouncing for Asia as "*The Dawn of the Asian Century"* because of pace of economic development of region is high*,* on contrary, according to estimate of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the region require around USD 22.6 trillion fund by 2030, or USD 1.5 trillion per year, to tackle poverty and malnutrition, and other kinds of non-traditional security challenges. In light of such funding requirements for Asia, the BRI would be a beacon for bridging development gaps (Agrawal, N., & Bhardwaj, A., 2024; PPIAF, 2025). Asia's geo-economics and geo-politics have taken more binary lens; India and China are indeed playing a leadership role. Their politics are intensely concentrated on the agenda *'who gets what'* at the regional level, as Gabriel Almond defined. In the context, China's BRI platform has evolved into a major to gain more stakes in the region, which has created insecurity for India. Historically, these two countries have been good adversaries in the region to challenge each other's stakes.

India has perceived the BRI as a regional architecture that is reshaping trade routes, transforming investment flows, and altering security patterns in Asia (CBBF, 2025). As mentioned above, because out of six economic corridors, four 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.). Undoubtedly, such a marvellous economic inflow in Asia would go on to transform the region's economic landscape more in favour of China by compromising India's interests.

Even within Asia, the IOR region is the most significant for India for economic and security reasons. However, the IOR is also emerging as pivotal in China's foreign policy because major trade routes are situated along this maritime region. Of course, dominance over it would safeguard China's strategic interests in the region. Investments in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives have shown that these countries have fallen into China's economic-diplomatic traps, either due to investment loans or a lack of counter-capabilities. The BRI outreach in the IOR has raised a major criticism from Indian policymakers on its objectives, which are not purely 'economic' but rather 'strategic' and directed against India. 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy (DTD)' or 'Cheque-book Diplomacy' is a major critical argument emerged from the side of Indian policy experts. Indian scholar and diplomat Brahma Chellaney, in a self-authored article titled "China's Creditor Imperialism" (2017), 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 by monopolising partner countries' policy decision-making autonomy (Chellaney, Brahma, 2017). He warned the Indian intelligentsia to recognise in early China's economic incursion into its periphery through the DTD, therefore need to build a counter policy. The DTD is a policy of intentionally lending excessive loan amounts to low-income states for a specific period. Suppose the country is unable to return debt dues in time, then China forces countries to relinquish ownership of its strategic assets for an extended period until the debt is repaid. In South Asia, nearly all small countries are victims of China's strategy and, in turn, aim to curtail India's strategic interests in the IOR (Chellaney, Brahma, 2017).

By 2025, Sri Lanka's total external debt is USD 57 billion, of which 20 per cent belongs to China (Trading Economics, 2025). In 2015, it was around USD 40 billion, Sri Lanka was facing certain issues of political-economic stability, and Colombo found it challenging to repay China's debt. At the time, China compelled Sri Lanka to lease the Hambantota port for 99 years in place of returning the debt amount. In July 2017, Sri Lanka signed a USD 1.1 billion deal to sell a 70% stake in the port to China (Sanyal, Ankita, 2023). The New York Times journalist Kai Schultz described it as a deal that *'threatens the country's sovereignty'* (Schultz, Kai, 2017). Immediately after the agreement, Brahma Chellaney blatantly criticised the agreement and called it a '*closed strategic threat for India*' (Chellaney, Brahma, 2017). Because China is obsessively monopolising the high-value assets with strategic importance on key Indian Ocean trade routes to ensure India's containment in the region (Chellaney, Brahma, 2017). Unlike Sri Lanka, China's loans to Bangladesh and Nepal are not posing a risk factor for India. 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). Recently, U.S. officials have also raised concerns over China's DTD in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, 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) and many depicted it "China's neo-colonialism in the twenty-first century" (Rana P.B. & Xiabai, 2020: 2).

Another concern is raised by India on China's exploitation of Pakistan's strategic location to target India's stake in the region. Historically, India has had conflicts with Pakistan over land boundary issues. A political aphorism, 'Enemy's enemy is friends', has been applied by China against India. China and Pakistan have built good strategic ties, particularly after the inclusion of Pakistan in the BRI, and CPEC is being particularly dedicated to Pakistan. The CPEC is primarily responsible for intensifying strategic competition between India and China in the IOR. Along the CPEC, two major infrastructure developments are disturbing India, such as the Gwadar port-building and the Karakoram-Himalaya highway routes. Through it, China is attempting to influence regional political dynamics to target India's geo-economic and geo-political stakes. The Himalayan highway traverses a politically sensitive area, over which both India and Pakistan have conflicting claims (Samuel, A., 2018: 97). China's significant investments in the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and the Chittagong Port in Bangladesh have established a direct trade partnership with the entire West Asia (or Middle East)[12] region, which has sent a clear security signal to India. 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. However, Pakistan's political standing in regional politics against India has appeared enhanced. 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, Y., 2024). Such investment has provided China a legitimate strategic ground to establish 'logistic bases' in the IOR region (Samuel, A., 2018: 97), thereby shifting the security architecture of the IOR in favour of China, which has created significant security apprehension among Indian policymakers about compromising India's stake there (Faruque T., 2018, pp. 4-5). In the region's politics, it has become apparent that China has expanded its footprint by aligning with countries through the BRI to overtake India in both economic and security dimensions (Bajpayee, C., 2017: 117).

India's counter-diplomacy against the BRI

In the contemporary phase of the global order, India has emerged as one of the major powers due to its economic development, participation in global politics, and demography. India is considering a major responsibility to play a vital political-economic role in Asia, specifically. China is one of the challenges for India in securing its geopolitical and geo-economic stakes. Both countries' power politics have become more visible across

[12] The term West Asia is very new in academic therefore unfamiliar, which is used as an alternative to Middle East. The term West Asia show India centric orientation towards the region, while the Middle East show the Western inclination towards the region. Author has prescribed to the Orientalist framework behind using the term of the West Asia.

the IOR because of the BRI. India has found itself more in diplomatic difficulty in securing regional stakes as China, through BRI, is taking control of strategic assets, such as ports, straits, and choke points. It has compelled Indian policymakers to place a diplomatic framework to counter China's influence in the region. Nevertheless, India's Foreign Policy in the 21st century has appeared quite pragmatic in comparison to the last century in taking substantial policy steps to forward its strategic interests against China. For example, the boundary issues with China, on which India has been proactive. In recent times, the Doklam controversy (2017), where India never retreated from its political stance. Beyond the contestation over the boundary, against the BRI at the regional level, India has strategised its 'Pragmatic Multi-alignment policy' to preserve geopolitical and geo-economic interests in the IOR by aligning with different regional actors according to strategic preference (K.H. Mohammed, 2025). The 'Pragmatic Multi-Alignment Policy' has led to India's involvement in different regional initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), and the QUAD partnership, etc., which is a relevant part of the discussion in India's counter-diplomatic initiative against BRI.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

The INSTC (2000) is a strategic multi-modal trade route connecting India with Central Asia, Russia, and Europe through sea, rail, and road networks was signed mainly among India, Iran, and Russia, and more than 13 countries joined it later on. Its vital objectives were enhancing trade and transport connectivity among the countries along the routes (Aliyev, N., 2024). Therefore, India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs found that the potential outcome of INSTC would lie in enhancing India's geo-strategic connectivity with Central Asia and the Eurasian region and vice versa (MEA, 2023). Over the period, India has been more enthusiastic about the developmental initiatives in the project, but certain regional conflicting issues, such as Israel-Iran, US involvement in the region, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, have slowed its progress. But the INSTC has once again come into focus of India's Foreign Policy agenda due to China's hyper-involvement in the region through the MSR via Pakistan (Taneja, N. et al, 2024, p. 3). Another reason was that, in 2021, India's nearly 300 container ships were stopped in the Suez Canal for six days, which caused disruptions in trade and led to heavy losses for shipping companies. These frequently occurring incidents also created an urgency for India's policymakers to find alternative routes for trade. There are three strategic advantages in operationalising INSTC: first, it offers an alternative to the Suez Canal route; second, it provides India an opportunity to explore the untapped export potential that exists in the INSTC member countries, especially the Central Asian Countries; and India would be able to place a counter-strategy against BRI (Taneja, N. et al, 2024, p. 3). The Chabahar Port project in Iran, which connects all members of the INSTC, is a centrepiece for India's regional strategic ambitions. Therefore, focal in India's counter CPEC strategy. Scholars have also argued that perhaps it is more important than the Bandar Abbas Port (the original Iranian Port that was part of the INSTC), because of its proximity, which provides more direct and cost-effective access to Central Asian countries via Afghanistan and as a key access point to the eastern and western flanks of the corridor. Although Afghanistan is not part of the INSTC, it has acceded to the TIR convention. To provide acceleration for

development, recently, in May 2024, India and Iran signed a 10-year agreement for the management and development of the Chabahar Port, thereby advancing the INSTC (Taneja, N. et al, 2024, p. 4). 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). Iran-US conflict (2026) has created confusion over the development of the Chabahar Port as Iran is facing strict US sanctions. Official authorities from both sides have conveyed several dialogues to find alternative legal ways to continue access to the port (FPJ Journal, 2026).

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)

The QUAD is a diplomatic partnership between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia that has emerged as a key forum in the evolving strategic architecture of the Indo-Pacific region. Currently, the Quad has jumped to prominence; it developed in two distinct stages. The origin of Quad 1.0 lies in the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, when four countries formed the "Tsunami Core Group" to coordinate the emergency response and humanitarian assistance. In the subsequent years, there were efforts to institutionalise the Quad, spearheaded by Japanese PM Abe Shinzo, during 2006-2008. Abe's rationale for the Quad was to defend the international rule-based order, implying that China had become a threat to that order. By 2017, with the rise of China's assertive military behaviour in the East and South China Seas, as well as along the border with India, a returned Abe resurrected the idea of the Quad. Abe had begun advocating for a democratic security diamond to preserve the 'common good' in the Indo-Pacific as early as 2012 (Fraser, D., 2023). That transformed QUAD into a platform for regional resilience and cooperation. Two frameworks are often invoked to interpret this transformation: Strategic balancing and containment. In the current century, India is one of the main epicentres in regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region; however, India's participation in it is to counter rising China's influence in the IOR. China's growing economic and military influence in the Indo-Pacific region has been a significant factor in shaping the aims and objectives of QUAD. Expansion of China's strategic footprint in the region by giving economic promises to partnering countries has created strategic concerns for the like-minded democratic countries in the region. Major concern is that small countries' sovereignty has been under threat because of economic dependencies, which is also called as DTD. That has directly impinged on its sovereignty and territorial integrity as it creates an imbalance in India's neighbourhood through the String of Pearls strategy (Trigunayat, A. & A. Khemka, 2024).

In the recent QUAD Foreign Ministers' Meeting (July 2025), they announced key initiatives to strengthen maritime and transnational security, economic prosperity and security, critical and emerging technology, and support humanitarian assistance and emergency response across the region. In the context of maritime security, the two most essential frameworks are the Indo-Pacific Partnerships for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and the Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI), which aims to assess the capability gaps in the region and enhance maritime capabilities in consultation with regional partners (MEA, 2025).

Conclusion

The BRI has helped China to shift its image globally as one of the emerging 'major actors' alongside the USA in the 21st century (Wang, C., 2025). It has truly envisioned China's global vision that was choreographed in the document "A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions", which aims for the betterment of global humanity. On the line, other policies, including the GDI (2021), the GSI (2021), and the CGI (2023), were also launched. This paper has purposefully focused on the illustration of the profile of BRI, which currently involves partnerships with more than 150 countries, with an estimated value of USD 1.175 trillion. Though experts claim that such an extensive global footprint of China may displace the centre of economic activities from the Atlantic region to Asia. But, right now, as China's economy is slowing down may be impossible to prove the claim at least for a few decades. No doubt, developing countries in Asia and Africa have significantly benefited from the BRI investments in basic infrastructure facilities. Like the success stories elsewhere, India has raised prominent concerns against the BRI outreach in the IOR because of the threat to its strategic interests and autonomy in the region. China is strategically using Pakistan, the Maldives and Sri Lanka to contain India's geo-political and geo-economic stakes. Therefore, India has taken effective countersteps to contain China's BRI and secure its own stakes in the IOR. Aftermath, the IOR has become a geopolitical hotspot because of rising strategic competition between India and China. The stand includes collaboration with the USA in the Indo-Pacific region through QUAD, enhancing partnership with Iran on Chabahar Port through the promotion of INSTC, and increasing collaboration with the South Asian countries. India's strategic engagement with the countries in the IOR is called as the 'Necklace of Diamonds', which includes building Changi Naval Base in Singapore, Chabahar Port in Iran, the Assumption Islands in Seychelles, and Duqm Port in Oman. In addition, India has also built strong ties with Vietnam and Mongolia to counter the Chinese 'String of Pearls' strategy. China's enhanced political leverage in South Asia would not only pose a threat to India but also to the United States' stakes in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, the USA has also initiated a counter-policy in the Asia-Pacific Region, i.e. the "Asian Rebalance Strategy" by actively including India in such strategic game diplomacy. India, at its own level, opted out of all three BRI forums (in 2017, 2019, and 2023) to show its reluctance against China's unnecessary interference in the region (Rafi & Amna, 2018, p. 106).

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