



Strategic crossroads: India's geopolitical response to China's Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

The paper is a critical analysis of how India reacted geopolitically to the Chinese ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) an international infrastructure and connectivity project aimed at increasing the strategic and economic power of Beijing. India has been repeatedly opposing the BRI, mostly because of sovereignty issues regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) crossing on the disputed territories, and the fear of rising Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region and in the rest of the Eurasian sphere. India, in turn, has embarked on a multi-pronged policy that incorporates elements of diplomatic resistance, building alternative connectivity infrastructure, infrastructure diplomacy in its neighbours, continual enhancement of its maritime security architecture, and enhanced strategic alliances with like-minded states such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and the European Union as a way of offsetting the growing Chinese presence.

Keywords: India, Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC, Indo-Pacific, geopolitics, connectivity, Quad, infrastructure diplomacy

Introduction

Belt and Road Initiative, initiated by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, can be considered one of the most grandiose infrastructure and connectivity projects of the 21st century worldwide. The BRI was developed to restore old trade routes in Asia, Europe and Africa among others, but has now turned into a multi-dimensional approach in an attempt to boost the financial power, political and strategic influence of China. This project comprises of the Silk Road Economic Belt (land routes) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (sea routes), which envisages huge investments in transport infrastructure, energy corridors, the development of ports, and digital connectivity throughout over 140 countries (Ohasi 2018) [7]. China is spreading its global powers by engaging in massive infrastructure projects and connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which increases its diplomatic power by creating economic dependencies between countries involved. Also, the BRI corridors enhance the strategic presence of China in the important maritime routes, comprising the Indian Ocean, and the most significant chokepoints, including the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal, enhancing its global economic and geopolitical standing further (Rolland 2017) [27].

The building of a dual-use ports, the facility that can be used both by the civilians and the members of the military forces, is a matter of a great worry regarding the growing naval presence of China within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Having a strategic placement on major shipping routes, these ports are logistically and operationally supporting and have the ability to expand the scope of the global outreach of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Simultaneously, the BRI is used as a platform of the projection of Chinese soft power in the countries of participation, which leads to the establishment of influence under the influence of cultural exchange, cooperation in the media, and diplomatic forums. These military and the soft power aspects of the BRI are collectively leading to the overall geopolitical ambition of China that could transform the regional security dynamics and power balance. China is using its own institutions and relationships to influence international standards and guidelines, especially in the most important spheres of trade, finance and technology through the Belt and Road Initiative

(Clarke 2017) [27]. The BRI is a good platform through which China gains a larger influence on international structures that promotes the practices of infrastructure, digital governance, and economic systems that produce a global environment that is more consistent with the Chinese interests and values.

The BRI improves the transport infrastructure and transport infrastructure such as roads, railways, and ports, hence leading to minimized trading costs and increased connectivity in Asia, Europe, and Africa. This enhanced infrastructure does not only ease the process of trade but also broadens the market of Chinese products and offers which are enhanced in terms of economic strength and integration of China with the regions of partnership (Clarke 2017) [27].

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) directs huge Chinese investments in infrastructural projects within member nations, most of which are financed by Chinese state-owned banks and organizations (China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China) usually on non-transparent conditions. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) assists China in seeking remedies to its domestic economic situation whereby the country is able to export its surplus industrial capacity / steel, cement and construction equipment to the foreign markets, hence maintaining growth in these significant sectors. At the same time, the BRI helps China to gain access to key natural resources, such as energy, minerals, and food, through the development of new supply chains and strategic partnerships between the participating countries and, eventually, strengthens the Chinese economy and increases its level of influence on the world (Dunford 2019) [9].

Literature Review

The BRI is a enormous transcontinental infrastructure and connectivity project introduced by China in 2013, to increase China, economically, through economic corridors and sea routes, which have the potential to affect the entire world. The project has created much controversy within the South Asian region with India becoming one of the vocal critics. The BRI is perceived by India as an attack on its sovereignty, especially because of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which crosses Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. According to such scholars as Mohan (2017) and

Pant (2018) ^[19, 25], the BRI is a move by China aimed at redefining the world order directly affecting the Indian geopolitical and security interests.

The sovereignty issue and the absence of transparency in the implementation of the project by China have been the main arguments used by India when it opposed the BRI. The most mentioned example is the CPEC that India officially complained to the United Nations claiming it is encroaching on its territorial integrity. Baru (2018) and Sharma (2019) ^[2, 29] highlight the fact that the India withdrawal at the BRI summits represents not just a diplomatic objection, but also a greater strategic unease with the rising existence of China in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. The position of India can also be explained by the fear of debt diplomacy, as it happened in the case of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. India has undertaken several measures to counter the Chinese influence either on its own or by forming alliances. At home, India has been encouraging its regional traffic linkage programs, including India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Chabahar Port in Iran, as alternatives to the Chinese dominated networks. India has further built relationships with other like-minded countries in the global front, like the United States, Japan, and Australia, through the guidelines such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). According to such scholars as Brewster (2015) ^[4], such efforts have signified the transformation of foreign policy in India towards proactive rather than reactive geopolitics.

The Indian reaction also involves the advancement of other models of connectivity focusing on transparency, sustainability and respect towards sovereignty. This is seen in projects such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) that they have established with Japan and can serve to offer a normative response to BRI. According to the researchers like Chaturvedi (2018) ^[7], the Indian strategy is not just oppositional but positive the country is trying to provide a credible alternative to the existing one basing on the democratic principles and socially inclusive growth. India too underlines its presence in the forums including BIMSTEC, IORA and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) in order to solidify multilateralism in regional development.

The maritime policy in India is one of the most crucial elements of geopolitical reaction. India is keen to maintain its traditional sphere of influence by enhancing its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and entering into defence agreements with other countries such as France, Australia and U.S. The Indo-Pacific policy, which is promoted by various Western countries, supports the interest of India in equalizing the maritime growth of China in the form of the Maritime Silk Road. According to scholars such as Holmes and Yoshihara (2021) ^[18], now, the maritime doctrine of India has focused on practical connectivity (with the economy) and strategic aversion in the greater Indo-Pacific arena.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the strategic reasons and international goals of the Belt and Road Initiative of China.
2. To examine BRI and its geopolitics in terms of national interests and regional power in India.
3. To evaluate the diplomatic, economic and strategic responses of India to BRI.
4. To determine the opportunities and threats of India as it maneuvers around the changing geopolitical environment defined by BRI.
5. To add to the literature and discussion of competition between India and China in the Indo-Pacific region, and its connections, influence, and great-power rivalry.

Research Questions

1. What are the strategic aims of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in China and how it is transforming the geopolitical landscape of Asian countries and the Indo-Pacific?
2. What does the BRI mean to the national security of India, its economic interests, and regional impact, especially in South Asia and the Indian ocean Region?
3. How has India reacted diplomatically, economically and strategically to the BRI since its inception?
4. What is the effectiveness of the current policies and initiatives in India so far as countering or offsetting the effect of BRI in the region is concerned?
5. What are the opportunities and threats that India encounters at this strategic crossroad in dealing with its rivalry with China in terms of regional connectivity and influence?

Projects under the Belt and Road Initiative

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become the leader of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China to increase the connectivity of both nations and strengthen the financial interaction between China and Pakistan. The corridor consists of a vast system of highways, railways, and the Gwadar Port strategic development that is on the Arabian Sea. CPEC is a huge infrastructure project with an accounted cost of 50-60 billion that is aimed at supporting commerce and transport of energy between the western part of China and the Arabian Sea (Siddique and Shafiqat 2021) ^[30]. But the project has been an issue of dispute between Pakistan and India because some of the areas covered by the project are in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir which India considers to be its territory. This has also caused high objections and diplomatic opposition towards the project by India.

The China Central Asia West Asia Economic Corridor connects China to central Asia and further to West Asia. The highways, railways, and pipelines make trading and transport of energy easy, as this is a strategic corridor. The corridor is important in strengthening economic linkages within the region, intensifying regional collaboration, and ensuring the stable movement of products and energy between China, Central Asia, and West Asia by increasing infrastructure and connectivity in the region (Cinar 2021) ^[8]. One of the major projects under the Belt and road initiative (BRI) in China is the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, which is designed to improve the connectivity and economic cooperation among the three neighbouring states. The main feature of this route is the advancement and renovation of rail and road systems connecting China with Mongolia and Russia (Soni 2018) ^[32]. The rail links including the Trans-Mongolian Railway are critical in easing transportation of goods across borders and the new road lines are enhancing efficiency and lowering the travel times of land transport. These infrastructure upgrades will serve to improve trade, enhance regional integration and also generate new economic opportunities along the line. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China and the project targets to build maritime routes and port infrastructures in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Gwadar Port in Pakistan is one of the strategic resources of this program. Gwadar is a deep-sea port located on the Arabian Sea and run by the China Overseas Port Holding Company and used as an essential

component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This is an important port in energy security of China, allowing a shorter path to the oil imports in the Middle East and increasing the influence of China in the Arabian Sea (Nouwens 2019) ^[22].

A major one that is worth mentioning is the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. Being a Chinese-operated port leased to China at a 99-year term, it has become one of the most frequent references to the issues surrounding the topic of China and its debt diplomacy. Unable to repay loans taken in the construction of ports, the Sri Lankan government gave them to the control of the Chinese firms. The fact that the Hambantota Port is close to major shipping routes in the Indian Ocean highlights its strategic significance, but it also casts doubt on the consequences of its long-term Chinese dominance (Wignararaj *et al* 2020) ^[36].

China is building the Kyaukpyu Port and the related oil and gas pipelines in Myanmar. This infrastructure links the coast of western Myanmar to the Yunnan province of China. The port and pipelines also can help China to lessen its reliance on the Strait of Malacca to import its energy which is a more secure and shorter way. Also, this initiative enhances the economic and geopolitical relations of China with Myanmar, increasing the level of influence in Southeast Asia (Myoe 2024) ^[21].

Another presence that China has had in Europe is the Piraeus Port in Greece. In the hands of COSCO Shipping, the port has emerged to be a key Chinese trade route with Europe. It is the opening of China to the European market, Chinese investments have made it one of the busiest ports in the Mediterranean. Piraeus is strategically positioned in the wider China strategy to have a smooth transport chain linking part of Asia to the European markets (Myoe 2024) ^[21].

The port investments in East Africa are yet another example of the Maritime Silk Road by China. One of the projects is a naval base and commercial port in Djibouti, which provides Beijing with a military and commercial presence at the entrance of the Red Sea and Suez Canal. The Port of Mombassa in Kenya has been upgraded at Chinese expense to increase its capacity and efficiency. Building of the Bagamoyo Port is planned in Tanzania and is projected to be one of the largest in Africa on completion. These activities enhance the power of China along the most important shipping routes and promote the increasing trade with the African continent (Masabo 2021) ^[18].

The Strategic Concerns of India on BRI

One of the greatest prominent projects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China is called China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and it passes through the territory of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) which is strongly asserted by India as a part of its sovereign land. India has remained a constant and vocal critic of the BRI mostly because of the claim that such projects as CPEC violate its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The move of going through the contentious regions without the approval of India is perceived in New Delhi as a direct threat to its national and territorial interests. That has made India move away and alienate itself with the BRI, expressing great objections at different global forums (Ali 2019) ^[29].

India is also placing a lot of concern over the rising presence of China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), mainly due to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-funded infrastructural

projects like the Gwadar port in Pakistan, Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar. The locations of these projects are very strategic and seen to be in line with the general move of China in improving its connectivity and influence in the region through its strategic locations along important maritime routes. Although these ports are officially being marketed as business activities to expand trade and development, India sees them with doubts since they can be utilized beyond the scope of economic interests (Ali 2019) ^[6].

The worry of central concern to India is that these ports might be changed into dual-use which may involve commercial activities as well as military ones. This would enable the Chinese to extend influence into the Indian Ocean and, therefore, enhance its strategic capability and disrupt the maritime supremacy of India in its own neighbourhood (Butt & Siddiqui 2021) ^[5]. This increased Chinese presence is a real threat to limit the liberty of navigation of India, its security calculations, and may even alter the balance of power in the area.

India is also worrying that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China projects on smaller neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Nepal will lead to unsustainable debt burdens amongst the countries. A huge number of these infrastructure projects are being backed by huge Chinese loans that may not be repaid by the smaller economies. This reliance on debt increases the chances of such states to enter a debt trap where they are forced to offer strategic assets, or political bargaining to China in a way to get reprieve over their debts or restructure their debt.

These developments are likely to change the power equilibrium in South Asia, which India has always considered as its domain. When Beijing receives unwarranted political power due to these economic connections, it may destroy the established ties and regional dominance of India (Jacob 2017) ^[12]. This situation increases the strategic tensions in India, as New Delhi is exploring methods to offset the growing China impact, both independent efforts of India and by promoting diplomatic and economic connections with the neighbours.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China is using this initiative to enhance its bilateral ties with the neighbours of India, including provision of large-scale investments in infrastructure, connectivity, as well as development projects. This economic activity helps Beijing to increase its influence and create strategic alliances that have the potential to alter regional balances. With the construction of ports, highways, railways, and energy routes throughout South Asia, China is increasingly becoming a core participant in the economic environment of the region, thereby possibly eliminating the traditional role and influence of India on its immediate neighbourhood (Blah 2018) ^[3].

In the Indian eyes, the BRI is not a mere financial initiative but rather as a tool of strategy by which China aims to redefine the existing regional order to its own interest of geopolitics. New Delhi fears the increasing Chinese presence and influence in South Asia as it is likely to undermine the strategic space of India, its historical relationship with its neighbours and its aspirations of becoming a leader in the region. In turn, India is conscious of the BRI in terms of how it impacts the regional balance of power over the long term and tries to balance China by

reaching out to the latter with initiatives of its own diplomatic, economic, and security.

India has always condemned China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a number of fronts (Kumar 2019) ^[17]. The issue that India has been talking about the most is the unfamiliarity of transparency in BRI projects, where most of the agreements and financial conditions are not exposed to society and the stakeholders concerned. Also, India cites the lack of environmental and social protection that comes with BRI, which usually causes negative effects on the local communities and ecosystems. Additionally, India complains that most BRI projects fail to follow the set international norms and standards of international infrastructure development, which creates a question of debt sustainability and strategic dependency to the countries involved.

Unlike the practice in China, India is promoting infrastructure development, based on multilateral frameworks, which promote transparency, sustainability, and international standards. Other frameworks like the Quad (which includes India, the United States, Japan, and Australia) encourage a rules-based order and are concerned with the provision of high-quality and inclusive infrastructure projects that are environmentally friendly (Kumar 2019) ^[17]. India is trying to provide an alternative paradigm of development and by taking part in and endorsing such partnerships, India can ensure that the sovereignty of partner countries can be respected and long-term economic and social gains can be achieved.

India perceives the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a strategic tool with the help of which China tries to increase its world impact and alter the structure of power relations in the region. New Delhi understands the BRI as not only an economic initiative, but a wider geopolitical desire by Beijing to cement its presence in Asia, Europe and Africa, thus poking at the emerging self-assertion of India, in particular, in the highly strategic Indo-Pacific. This standpoint is what drives the Indian anxieties regarding the sovereignty, the stability of the region, and the possibility of further Chinese hegemony in the neighbouring state and major maritime corridors (Sachdeva 2018) ^[17].

Global Responses to BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a somewhat welcome development in developing nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America since it is perceived as a chance to attract much needed investments into infrastructure development in the form of roads, ports, railways, and energy facilities. To a number of these countries, the BRI is an important source of finance as well as expertise that can be used to revamp the already archaic infrastructure and long term issues of development.

Other countries such as Pakistan, which has been actively pursuing BRI such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and Sri Lanka among some of the African nations, have been attracted by the possibilities that the projects promise in spurring economic development, improving regional and global connectivity, and providing employment opportunities. Through enhanced transport networks and energy availability, the projects will introduce the local economies into the wider trade and investment processes, enhancing the development prospects in the long term (Sharma 2019) ^[29].

Central Asian, Eastern European, and even Southeast Asian countries are actively involved in the Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI) by China as a tool to improve infrastructure growth and improve monetary growth. To these countries, the BRI is a way of modernizing their transportation systems, enhancing energy connectivity, and attracting much-needed investments. The BRI is attractive because of its promise of increased trade relations and connection to global markets, particularly in the cases of countries that want to close the gaps in their infrastructure and develop the region (Khurana 2019) ^[16].

Nevertheless, these countries are still worried about a number of essential points of the initiative despite the positive side of it all. The issue of debt sustainability comes to the fore, since major BRI projects are usually highly borrowed which has the potential to put a strain on the national budgets. Also, the issues of transparency in project terms and decision making have become the cause of concern regarding corruption and unequal advantages (Khurana 2019) ^[16]. India has been perpetually resistant to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), passing through the Pakistan occupied Kashmir, which India considers to be its own and not a part of Pakistan. This is perceived by New Delhi as an infringement of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In addition to the sovereignty factor, there is also the wider geopolitical factor that India fears about BRI as a means to help China increase its strategic footprint in the region.

Equally, the United States, Japan, and a number of European nations have expressed very stiff criticisms to BRI. According to them, the project tends to issue poorer countries into debt traps, sabotages international financial and governance practices, and does not provide effective environmental and social protection. In addition, most countries in the West consider BRI as a medium through which China is propelling its geopolitical interests. European Union is divided on the matter: some of its members, including Italy and Greece, have officially become members of BRI projects, but other countries are still apprehensive about the rising Chinese influence in Europe (Rana 2017) ^[26].

The US is offering an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China using initiatives such as Build Back Better World (B3W) and the partnership of global infrastructure and investment (PGII). These efforts are designed to deliver quality, clear, and affordable infrastructural investments in developing countries based on climate robustness, digital connectivity, health security, and gender equity. In such a way the U.S. aims to offset the increasing role of China in the development of the global infrastructure (Siddiq and Abbas 2022) ^[31].

Japan has similarly developed the vision of the regional and international infrastructure by its own project of the quality infrastructure. These initiatives are focused on transparency, financial efficiency, environment and social inclusion. The strategy of Japan encourages projects that are in line with the norms of international regulations and provide a benefit to the host countries in the long term, marking the difference with the approach in China where the BRI is state-led and highly indebted (Siddiq & Abbas 2022) ^[31].

Equally, the European Union initiated its Global Gateway strategy to provide sustainable and open infrastructure funding on the global platform. The EU targets to enhance digital, energy, and transport networks and enhance green and socially responsible development. The Global Gateway

will focus on the principles of democracy, high standards of governance, and the involvement of local stakeholders, which will make it a viable alternative to the BRI in China and build robust and mutually beneficial relationships (Karjalainen 2023) ^[13].

Geopolitical Response by India to BRI

India, through its diplomacy, has continuously shown its opposition on several platforms to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. Among the most evident forms of resistance has been the unwillingness to join any BRI forums by India such as the Belt and Road Forum of International Cooperation. New Delhi has insisted that the move interferes with its sovereignty, especially with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that goes through Kashmir occupied by Pakistan. Multilateral forums have also been employed by India through the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as well as the G20 to air its grievances. Indian representatives have claimed in these forums that the BRI is not transparent enough and has ignored the international norms and imposed unsustainable debt on countries involved (Khan and Khan 2019) ^[15]. In these diplomatic efforts, India reiterates its focus on a rules-based international order and advances other connectivity projects, which focus on inclusivity, sustainability, and sovereign respect.

India is aggressively involved in bilateral and regional interactions in order to support its strategic presence and promotion of economic and political relationships within the Indian Ocean Region and the world at large. Development of relations with the members of the SAARC and BIMSTEC is one of the priorities since India is interested in the improvement of regional cooperation, facilitation of connectivity, and development of cooperation. By using such forums, India will establish a more integrated and stable South and Southeast Asian neighbourhood (Khan & Khan 2019) ^[15]. Also, the Indo-Pacific strategy of India focuses on tighter collaboration with the countries of ASEAN, which are considered to be in the center of the regional architecture. This activity involves collaborative maritime security, trade, and infrastructure development, which is part of a larger project to ensure a free, open-minded, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region (Vashisht 2023) ^[35].

India has been vigorously campaigning the use of alternative connectivity projects, as a reaction to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to increase its strategic and economic presence in the regions. The International North-South Transport Corridor is one of these initiatives, which is a multi-modal transport infrastructure that connects India to Russia and Europe via Iran and Central Asia (Ullah and Brohi 2018). Also, in 2023^[20, 34], the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was announced at the G20 Summit, which envisions a network of rails and shipping links between India and Europe via the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. The project also demonstrates a more general geopolitical plan to create resilient, sustainable, and rules-based infrastructure networks, in co-operation with other like-minded partners, thus providing credible alternative to the BRI practiced by China (Monroe 2023) ^[20].

India has been on aggressive building relationships with similar powers in an effort to balance the increasing power of China, especially in the Indo-Pacific. Deepening

cooperation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia is regarded as one of the major pillars of this strategy. The QUAD partners have a vision of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, and they are increasing their cooperation in fields of maritime security, infrastructure development, technology and resilience of the supply chain (Envall 2019) ^[10]. Besides the QUAD, India is intensifying its interaction with European countries; the European Union, France and the United Kingdom. These countries have shown growing interest in the Indo-Pacific and are taking sides with India so as to have the region stable and to maintain the law of international relations. India is collaborating with these like-minded powers to ensure a rules-based order through joint activities, discussions, and strategic alliances, to ensure a balance in the region (Envall 2019) ^[10].

India is gradually developing its domestic potentials in order to enhance its Indian Ocean Positioning. One of the main elements of this initiative is the development of the Indian Maritime infrastructure that entails modernizing ports, increasing ship building, and enhancing connectivity through navigation along the coastlines (Tarapore 2020) ^[33]. Such programs not only increase the economy but also lead to the increase of the naval forces of India and its capacity to control the crucial sea routes. In line with these initiatives is the Act East Policy of India that seeks to improve financial and strategic relationships with the countries of Southeast Asia. Through its more active participation in ASEAN states and the wider region of India, India aims to achieve an increased influence, safeguard the stability of the region, and resist the increasing impact of China in the region. Combined, these policies make an all-inclusive strategy to enhance the maritime ability and geopolitical position of India (Kesavan 2020) ^[14].

Difficulties with Indian Response

The reaction of India towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China has a number of challenges, the resource limitations being the most significant. India lacks the financial muscle of China to make massive investments or concessional loans to the partner countries. As China uses its huge foreign exchange reserves, state owned businesses to finance and roll out huge infrastructure works in Asia, Africa and Europe, India has a tendency to operate with limited budgets. This financial disparity means that New Delhi is not as capable of keeping pace with China in terms of size and pace in infrastructure development, and it becomes even more difficult to assert its influence economically (Chakma 2019) ^[6].

Political dynamics in the region also make it hard to work in India. A number of the neighbouring nations such as Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh are involved in a balancing game between India and China in order to optimize their economic gains. Such countries usually are not afraid of Chinese investments but still alert of gaining overreliance with one specific power. There is also the fact that, political instability or internal pressure in these countries may interfere with any Indian backed projects which will slow down implementation and diminish the strategic effect. The involvement of India has to find its way through this dynamic and fluctuating regional political landscape at all times (Chakma 2019) ^[6].

The other major challenge would be the competition on the financial and project delivery capacity with the Chinese.

Chinese firms with a solid state support are reputed in terms of doing large infrastructural projects with speed and efficiency. By contrast, government-supported efforts, as well as Indian companies often become bogged down in bureaucracy, a lack of coordination between various agencies, and legal obstacles (Rana 2017) ^[26]. This places India at a disadvantage where regional partners want quick and concrete results of the projects.

Finally, India has to deal with domestic policy and infrastructure issues that cripple its foreign outreach. Inadequate domestic reforms, poor domestic infrastructure and cumbersome regulatory conditions may restrict its capability of creating a consistent economic ally in the region. In addition, internal political discussions at times lead to foreign policy stuttering or they are inconsistent and this undermines India as a strategic competitor with China. It is important to address these internal issues to have a credible and long-term alternative to BRI as offered by China in Indo-Pacific region and further (Rana 2017) ^[26].

Conclusion

The response of India regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China is a multi-level and changing geopolitical approach that is informed by the issues of sovereignty, regional power, and the Indo-Pacific security on a long-term basis. India does not just consider BRI as an infrastructure initiative but as a mega plan by China to increase its geopolitical and geoeconomic footprints and hence change the balance of power in Asia and Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) flagship project traversing the contentious region of Gilgit-Baltistan has further intensified the opposition of India, as it has questioned its sovereignty and has become a precedent that China does not consider sovereignty issues.

The multi-dimensional response by India is strategic. First, there is diplomatic resistance: India has always been absent at BRI summits and expressed its discontent at the multilateral level, e.g., the United Nations, G20, and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Second, India is interested in establishing other regional connectivity systems. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) with Japan, and the expanded involvement in Quad (with the US, Japan, and Australia) are the attempts to counter the Chinese narrative and influence.

Third, India is improving its maritime policy in order to safeguard its strategic interests in the IOR. India seeks to reinforce its presence in the region as a net security provider through a series of measures such as SAGAR (Security and Growth in the Region), increased naval presence, and alliances with island countries such as Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius. Fourth, India is strengthening bilateral relationships with the countries worried about the rising assertiveness of China- especially the Southeast Asian countries with the help of the Act East Policy and the European Union.

The reaction of India is reserved but aggressive and balances a behavior that is necessary to protect its strategic interests and unnecessary escalation. It is also the yearning of India to have a multipolar Asia, where there is no hegemony of power. Going forward, the ability to reduce counteractions to BRI will be determined by the ability of India to fulfill its commitments to the rest of its infrastructure projects and connectivity, enhance strategic

relationships, maximize its soft power, specifically by the dissemination of the values of democracy, transparency, and respect of the sovereignty. It is a strategic crossroad where the geopolitical position of India will be the determinant in the formation of not just the regional order in Asia, but the direction in which global power dynamics will manifest themselves in the future as well.

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