

Connectivity, Contestation, and Security: Geopolitical Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative;
Connectivity;
Security dilemma;
Geopolitics;
Strategic infrastructure;
Regional security.

Article history

Received: January 2026

Accepted: April 2026

Published: June 2026

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.30546/200310.330.01.2026.063>

License

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Citation (APA)

Dana, A., & Siddiqui, N. N. (2026). Connectivity, contestation, and security: Geopolitical implications of the Belt and Road Initiative. *Journal of Belt and Road Studies*, 57-64.

ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as one of the most significant international infrastructure and connectivity projects of the 21st century. While widely presented as an economic and developmental programme aimed at enhancing trade routes, logistics networks, and regional integration, the BRI has increasingly generated strategic concerns linked to security implications of the BRI by analysing how large-scale connectivity projects reshape regional strategic environments and contribute to new forms of diplomatic and military contestation. It argues that BRI linked infrastructure must be understood not only as an economic instrument but also a strategic asset capable of influencing maritime routes, military access, and political alignment. The paper explores how the perceived dual use potential of ports, transport corridors, and digital infrastructure has contributed to strategic anxieties among rival powers, intensified security dilemmas in sensitive regions, and encouraged counterbalancing initiatives by external actors. In addition, the study highlights how internal security challenges such as insurgency, terrorism, and political instability in host states, which affect the operational sustainability of BRI projects and compel China to expand security cooperation mechanisms abroad. By situating BRI within broader debates on infrastructure geopolitics, economic statecraft, and regional security orders, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how connectivity driven development initiatives can generate unintended security consequences. The article concluded that the future of the BRI will be shaped not only by economic viability but also by evolving interaction between development priorities, strategic competition, and regional security governance

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents one of the most ambitious and transformative global infrastructure and connectivity strategies of the 21st century. Conceived in 2013 by the leadership of the People's Republic of China, the BRI was initially articulated through the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, signaling China's intention to integrate regional economies across the Eurasian landmass and maritime routes linking East Asia with Africa and Europe (Du, 2016). Over time, the initiative has expanded both in geographical scope and institutional reach, encompassing transport, energy, digital, and industrial infrastructure projects across multiple continents. At its core, the BRI

seeks to foster economic connectivity by reducing trade costs, upgrading logistics networks, and facilitating greater capital and commodity flows (Du, 2016).

Despite its developmental objectives, the BRI cannot be understood solely as an economic infrastructure programme; it also embodies broader strategic ambitions that intersect with questions of regional influence, power projection, and institutional shaping. The strategic dimension of the BRI is evident in how the initiative has been integrated into China's foreign policy and institutional strategy, where connectivity and governance agendas are intertwined (Du, 2016). From Beijing's perspective, the creation of physical and institutional links helps to reshape international economic architecture by embedding China more centrally within global

governance processes and intergovernmental networks (Du, 2016). This duality infrastructure as both an economic process and a strategic instrument places the BRI at the centre of contemporary debates about global order and strategic competition. One of the key arenas where the strategic dimensions of the BRI are most vividly contested is in the realm of international power politics, particularly in the context of China–United States strategic competition. Scholars highlight that the Belt and Road Initiative has influenced global geopolitical dynamics by altering how states perceive strategic influence, alignments, and competitive engagement (Zhao, 2021). As connectivity infrastructure becomes increasingly tied to influence over trade routes and regional partnerships, the BRI has also encouraged counter-initiatives and alternative connectivity frameworks from other major actors (Zhao, 2021). These developments underscore that connectivity is no longer a narrow economic matter but a fulcrum of renewed strategic rivalry in global politics.

Emerging research also demonstrates that the security implications of the BRI extend beyond geopolitics alone to include economics and financial vulnerabilities that interact with strategic risk. In policy debates, concerns are frequently raised about the debt sustainability of BRI projects, particularly when sovereign lending results in high repayment burdens for host states (Hurley et al., 2019). Some partner countries have experienced debt distress risks linked to BRI commitments, raising questions about fiscal resilience and the long-term stability of Chinese-funded infrastructure expansion (Hurley et al., 2018). These concerns suggest that security in the BRI context must also be understood in economic terms, including the financial sustainability of development corridors and the vulnerabilities produced by large-scale lending.

The growing literature on the BRI shows that while the initiative has been widely studied through development and connectivity frameworks, the relationship between infrastructure expansion and security outcomes remains unevenly analysed. A systematic review of BRI scholarship highlights that research has been dominated by economic, logistical, and transport analysis, while questions of strategic competition, risk, and security governance require deeper investigation (Panibratov et al., 2020). At the same time, studies of transport networks under the BRI show that connectivity reshapes route diversification, logistics capacity, and energy flows, indicating that the initiative has structural consequences that may also produce strategic leverage (Wang et al., 2021). Political economy research further demonstrates that participation in BRI projects is shaped by bargaining power, institutional conditions, and domestic political calculations in host states, suggesting that infrastructure engagement is inseparable from power relations (Li et al., 2021).

2. Literature Review

Building on the section above, the BRI occupies a contested space where development objectives increasingly intersect with strategic competition and security perceptions, where the scholarly literature has evolved rapidly to address these overlapping dimensions.

Early academic work largely interpreted the BRI through the lens of economic integration, infrastructure financing, and trade facilitation. However, as the initiative expanded across strategic corridors and politically sensitive regions, researchers began to treat the BRI not simply as a development programme but as a framework through which influence, governance, and security concerns are negotiated. The result is a diverse literature that reflects competing interpretations of the BRI's intent, effects, and implications for international order. This section reviews the major debates shaping contemporary BRI scholarship, focusing specifically on security-oriented discussions, the development versus geopolitics divide, strategic infrastructure perspectives, maritime security narratives, and the emerging gaps that justify a more integrated security analysis.

2.1. BRI and the Security Debate

One major strand of scholarship places the BRI directly within the context of geopolitical rivalry and strategic security. A prominent contribution argues that the BRI has become increasingly embedded in China–United States strategic competition, shaping not only connectivity outcomes but also international perceptions of power, influence, and alignment (Hurley et al., 2019). In this view, infrastructure corridors should be interpreted as geopolitical instruments, capable of influencing the distribution of regional influence and creating new strategic dependencies. Such perspectives suggest that the BRI has contributed to a competitive environment where connectivity projects are interpreted as markers of strategic ambition rather than neutral development tools. At the regional level, the security debate has also been explored through institutional frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Research examining the SCO's engagement with BRI-related cooperation highlights how security and development agendas converge, particularly through counterterrorism mechanisms, intelligence coordination, and regional stability initiatives (Azizi, 2024). This literature suggests that the BRI is not only an economic platform but also a vehicle for building institutionalised cooperation that links economic integration with security governance.

2.2. The Development vs Geopolitics Debate

A second major debate concerns whether the BRI should be understood primarily as a development programme or as a geopolitical strategy. Some scholars frame the initiative as China's emerging geopolitical project aimed at reshaping regional influence through connectivity expansions (Zhang, 2018). This interpretation argues that infrastructure projects and trade corridors are strategically positioned to enhance China's access to markets, resources, and geopolitical leverage. However, more recent work complicates this binary. Research emphasizing "views from the ground" argues that the BRI is better understood as a relational and contested process, shaped not only by Beijing's ambitions but also by host state agency, local political bargaining, and fragmented implementation realities (De Oliveira et al., 2020). This approach suggests that BRI outcomes vary significantly across contexts and cannot be reduced to a single strategic logic. Political economy research further strengthens this argument by demonstrating that foreign direct investment

along BRI routes is mediated by institutional credibility, domestic politics, and geopolitical conditions, meaning that BRI participation is shaped as much by negotiation and legitimacy as by economic opportunity (Li et al., 2021).

2.3. Strategic Infrastructure and Connectivity Scholarship

The strategic implications of BRI have also been analysed through infrastructure and connectivity research, particularly transport studies. A major review of transport research under the BRI maps how scholars increasingly examine logistics systems, corridor planning, route diversification, and resilience frameworks (Wang et al., 2021). Importantly, this literature highlights that transport connectivity influences broader strategic outcomes such as supply chain stability, trade security, and energy access. This reinforces the argument that infrastructure is not simply an economic asset but also a structural component of strategic capability.

Beyond transport, scholars of urbanisation and spatial political economy argue that BRI infrastructure is embedded in deeper transformations of global capitalism. Research on the emerging geographies of BRI-driven urbanisation suggests that connectivity projects shape spatial restructuring, ecological consequences, and urban expansion patterns, producing new forms of governance contestation (Williams et al., 2019). Although this scholarship is not always explicitly security focused, it is relevant because it demonstrates how infrastructure produces long-term structural effects that can influence state capacity and political stability. Relatedly, work on the structural reshaping of globalisation situates connectivity politics within a world increasingly shaped by fragmented value chains, techno-nationalism, and strategic sectors, highlighting that infrastructure competition is unfolding within a broader transformation of global economic order.

3. String of Pearls & Maritime Security Narratives

A substantial literature focuses on maritime security and the BRI's sea-based corridor. The String of Pearls narrative, suggesting that China seeks to establish a chain of ports and facilities across the Indian Ocean, has become influential in strategic analysis. Yet some scholarship cautions against treating this framework as a definitive explanation. One study argues that while Chinese port investments raise strategic concerns, the evidence for a direct Sino-Indian security dilemma is more ambiguous and dependent on regional context and state behaviour (Brewster, 2018). This critique is significant because it challenges simplified threat narratives and calls for more empirical evaluation of the strategic implications of BRI maritime projects.

Maritime contestation is also shaped by broader US–China rivalry, particularly in the South China Sea. Research examining maritime claims and energy competition highlights how access to resources and sea routes has intensified strategic rivalry and security perceptions in the region (Brewster, 2018). At the same time, geo-economic analyses of the Maritime Silk Road emphasise that maritime connectivity must also be understood through trade and market integration patterns,

suggesting that maritime infrastructure carries both economic incentives and strategic consequences (Hu et al., 2022).

3.1. Research Gap

Despite the expansion of BRI scholarship, several gaps remain relevant for security-oriented research. While many studies examine trade outcomes or geopolitical narratives, fewer integrate the BRI's economic, political, and security implications into a unified analytical framework. The literature on BRI-driven urbanisation notes that scholarship remains relatively embryonic and overly China-centric, calling for deeper attention to host state agency, local political dynamics, and comparative case studies (Williams et al., 2020). Similarly, broader horizon scans highlight that governance risks, social tensions, environmental pressures, and security vulnerabilities remain underexamined in relation to corridor development (Hughes et al., 2020). These gaps suggest that the security consequences of connectivity cannot be captured solely through military analysis or macro geopolitical narratives; rather, they require an approach that incorporates financial vulnerability, domestic instability, and strategic rivalry into the same analytical field.

3.2. Conceptual Framework

To examine the security implications of the BRI, this article adopts a conceptual framework that treats infrastructure not as a neutral economic instrument, but as a strategic object embedded within geopolitical competition, financial influence, and contested regional ordering. The framework integrates four key lenses: (1) the security dilemma and strategic competition, (2) economic statecraft and infrastructure power, (3) dual-use infrastructure as a strategic concept, and (4) connectivity as geopolitics. Together, these approaches allow the BRI to be analyzed as a connectivity project that produces both cooperation and insecurity by altering power relations, shaping dependency structures, and reorganizing strategic space.

3.2.1. Security Dilemma and Strategic Competition

The security dilemma provides a useful starting point for understanding why infrastructure development under the BRI generates strategic anxieties. In classical international relations theory, a security dilemma occurs when actions taken by one state to enhance its security, such as building alliances, expanding capabilities, or securing strategic routes, which are interpreted by others as threatening, thereby triggering countermeasures and escalating mistrust. Although the BRI is formally framed as a cooperative development programme, its scale, geographic reach, and association with Chinese state power have increasingly led rival states to interpret it through a strategic lens.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the growing body of scholarship that situates the BRI within China–US strategic rivalry. Zhao argues that the BRI has become a central arena through which China seeks to consolidate influence across Eurasia, while the US increasingly views the initiative as a geopolitical challenge to its strategic position and regional alliances (Zhao, 2021). In this interpretation, BRI corridors do not merely connect

markets but also influence patterns of alignment, access, and political leverage. The security dilemma emerges because connectivity projects can be perceived as instruments of long-term strategic positioning, even when they are justified through economic rationales.

Similarly, debates over whether the BRI constitutes China's "new geopolitical strategy" reinforce how the initiative is embedded in competitive interpretations. Scholars note that many states view the BRI not simply as infrastructure cooperation but as a pathway for China to secure energy routes, expand influence, and reshape regional balances of power (Zhang, 2018). Even when China articulates the initiative as "win-win cooperation," strategic rivals often interpret the same infrastructure expansion as a form of indirect power projection. This mismatch in perceptions helps explain why the BRI has generated competitive responses, alternative corridor initiatives, and growing discourse around strategic vulnerability.

3.2.2. *Economic Statecraft and Infrastructure Power*

A second conceptual lens frames the BRI as a form of economic statecraft, where financial resources and infrastructure investments function as instruments of political influence. Economic statecraft refers to the use of economic tools, such as investment, lending, trade incentives, or sanctions, to shape the behaviour and preferences of other states. In the context of the BRI, infrastructure becomes a mechanism through which China can deepen economic interdependence while also creating leverage in diplomatic and strategic relationships. Research on Europe's financial security highlights this point by showing how Chinese lending and infrastructure engagement are interpreted as a challenge to economic sovereignty and financial autonomy (Pardo, 2018). The study argues that infrastructure projects are not simply commercial arrangements but can create political leverage through long-term dependence on finance, construction firms, and repayment structures. In this view, BRI investments are not merely an economic opportunity; they are a channel through which influence can be institutionalized.

This argument is strengthened by analyses of China's policy banks and the restructuring of development finance. Chen (2020) explains that Chinese development financing is neither purely concessional aid nor entirely private market lending; rather, it represents a state-supported model in which policy banks provide large-scale credit tied to strategic objectives. These banks operate as key instruments of China's overseas engagement by shaping project design, repayment structures, and the broader financial environment of recipient states. The BRI therefore reshapes development finance architecture by offering alternatives to Western-led institutions, while also expanding Chinese influence through credit networks and project dependency. This model blurs the distinction between economic cooperation and strategic leverage, reinforcing why BRI financing is frequently debated as a security concern rather than a neutral development tool.

3.2.3. *Dual-Use Infrastructure as a Strategic Concept*

A central concept in contemporary BRI security debates is that of dual-use infrastructure. Dual-use refers to assets that serve civilian economic purposes but also hold

potential strategic or military utility. In the BRI context, ports, rail corridors, logistic hubs, and digital networks may facilitate trade and transport while also enabling strategic mobility, surveillance capabilities, or military logistical support. The dual-use concern does not necessarily require immediate militarisation; rather, it arises from the possibility that infrastructure can be repurposed or leveraged in future contingencies.

Studies on maritime network restructuring under the BRI demonstrate how infrastructure corridors influence the geography of trade routes and transshipment hubs, particularly through chokepoints and strategic maritime nodes (Saeed et al., 2021). While the article focuses on trade flows, it indirectly supports a dual-use argument: the same maritime corridors that enhance commerce also influence strategic mobility and access. Ports that function as transshipment hubs can, under different circumstances, become strategic assets for naval presence, logistical replenishment, or maritime surveillance. Thus, infrastructure planning alters not only commercial flows but also the strategic landscape of maritime power.

The dual-use logic is further developed in contemporary geopolitical studies that conceptualize global politics as a competition for centrality within infrastructure and production networks. The argument advanced in the "Second Cold War" framework suggests that great powers increasingly compete to occupy central positions in global infrastructure, finance, digital, and production systems (Schindler et al., 2023). From this perspective, infrastructure is not simply a developmental asset but a strategic network that can determine long-term geopolitical advantage. This conceptualisation helps explain why the BRI has become a focal point of security attention, where it represents an attempt to reorganize global connectivity networks in ways that enhance China's centrality, thereby producing strategic anxiety among rival states and encouraging balancing behaviour.

3.2.4. *Connectivity as Geopolitics*

A final lens interprets connectivity itself as a geopolitical process rather than a neutral technical programme. Connectivity projects are often presented as economic solutions but they shape political order by creating routes, dependencies, and institutional linkages that reorganize regional space. The conceptual framework developed in "Connectivity and Order" is particularly useful here, as it argues that connectivity operates through multiple logics like cooperation, contestation, coercion, and containment (Gaens et al., 2023). This framework is valuable because it allows BRI infrastructure to be analyzed as a tool of order-making. Connectivity can produce cooperation through trade and integration, but it can also generate contestation when rival actors perceive it as exclusionary or strategically threatening. It can enable coercion through financial dependence, and it can prompt containment through competing corridor strategies and alliance responses.

Importantly, this approach also aligns with scholarship that rejects simplistic interpretations of the BRI as a singular master plan. The "views from the ground" perspective argues that BRI is not a fixed blueprint but a relational process shaped by local bargaining, contested implementation, and uneven political geographies (De Oliveira et al., 2020). This highlights that connectivity

outcomes are not predetermined by China alone, but are negotiated through domestic politics, regional interests, and institutional constraints. Such a framework is essential for security analysis because it prevents overly deterministic conclusions about BRI militarization while still recognising that connectivity projects can generate strategic consequences.

Furthermore, research linking the BRI to global urbanisation demonstrates that connectivity must be understood through its spatial and political-economic restructuring effects. Scholars argue that BRI infrastructure is embedded in a wider transformation of global capitalism, where corridors and mega projects reorganise urban spaces, ecological landscapes, and regional development patterns (Williams et al., 2019). This perspective expands the meaning of security beyond military concerns, showing how infrastructure-driven connectivity can produce new forms of social contestation, environmental pressure, and political instability. These indirect effects are crucial for understanding BRI security risks, since infrastructure projects reshape governance capacity and political legitimacy within host states.

Taken together, these conceptual lenses provide a framework for interpreting the BRI as a connectivity project that simultaneously advances economic integration and generates security dilemmas. This framework also enables the subsequent empirical sections of the paper to analyse security outcomes not as accidental side effects, but as structurally embedded possibilities within the political economy and geopolitical logic of contemporary connectivity projects.

4. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how the BRI generates security implications through strategic infrastructure expansion and connectivity politics. Building on the conceptual framework developed above, centred on security dilemma, economic statecraft, dual-use infrastructure, and connectivity as geopolitics, the study treats BRI projects as political and strategic assets rather than purely technical development interventions. The objective is not to measure BRI outcomes in purely economic terms, but to assess how infrastructure development reshapes perceptions of power, vulnerability, and regional security ordering. Methodologically, the study relies on qualitative content analysis of academic scholarship, policy reports, and institutional documents related to the BRI. Particular attention is given to texts that address strategic competition, debt risk, and maritime connectivity, as these dimensions capture the broader security externalities of infrastructure development. The study draws from both critical and mainstream IR literature in order to avoid deterministic interpretations of the BRI as either a cooperative development agenda or an expansionist geopolitical project.

The analysis proceeds through a thematic approach, structured around four themes: (1) strategic rivalry and security dilemmas generated by BRI corridors, (2) financial leverage and development lending as economic statecraft, (3) the dual-use potential of ports, transport routes, and logistic networks, and (4) regional and global responses that reflect containment, balancing, and

adaptation. These themes allow the article to trace how security concerns emerge at multiple levels, from state perceptions and alliance politics to domestic vulnerabilities in host countries. Rather than offering a single country case study, the study uses illustrative examples from major BRI regions, maritime and land corridors, to demonstrate recurring patterns of strategic anxiety and policy response. This approach supports broader analytical generalisation while remaining grounded in empirical discussions found in existing scholarship. This study's contribution lies in integrating fragmented debates into a unified analytical framework that conceptualises BRI security as multidimensional, encompassing geopolitical rivalry, financial vulnerability, and strategic reordering of connectivity networks.

5. China's Security Adaptation, Diplomatic Responses and Security Risk

The expansion of the BRI across politically sensitive regions has exposed China to an evolving spectrum of security risks that challenge the assumption that connectivity projects are inherently stabilising. While the BRI was initially framed as an economic and developmental strategy, its increasing exposure to conflict zones, fragile political environments, and contested strategic spaces has made security governance an unavoidable dimension of China's overseas engagement. This has generated two parallel developments: first, a growing recognition that BRI projects are vulnerable to host-country instability and non-traditional security threats; second, an adaptive shift in China's diplomatic and security practices to manage risks and protect overseas interests.

A major theme in the BRI security literature is the argument that China now confronts "security externalities" generated by the very geographies it seeks to connect. Studies identify that BRI corridors pass through regions characterized by terrorism, separatism, political fragility, and cross-border instability, making infrastructure development increasingly exposed to disruption (Wuthnow, 2017). The significance of this argument lies in its framing of security not as a secondary concern but as a structural condition shaping the BRI's viability. From this perspective, BRI projects become embedded in environments where the protection of personnel, assets, and long-term investment returns require more than commercial planning; it requires political risk management, security cooperation, and diplomatic negotiation.

Beyond traditional security threats, scholars increasingly highlight the importance of human security dimensions in BRI contexts. Dellios and Ferguson argue that the BRI's sustainability is dependent not only on state-to-state agreements but also on how projects interact with local communities, livelihoods, governance capacity, and social stability (Dellios & Ferguson, 2017). Their analysis is valuable because it expands the security debate beyond militarized interpretations and shows that local grievances, inequality, and environmental disruptions can create destabilising pressures. Under this view, BRI security risks emerge not only from terrorism or insurgency but also from social tensions and governance failures, which

can trigger political backlash and undermine the legitimacy of Chinese projects in host countries.

This broader understanding is reinforced by work mapping regional security dynamics, highlighting that BRI-related security concerns operate at both traditional and non-traditional levels, including geopolitical rivalry, domestic instability, energy vulnerability, cyber risks, and transnational crime (Maryam et al., 2024). Such analysis suggests that the BRI has become deeply entangled in multidimensional security environments, where economic connectivity creates new dependencies and exposure to threats. These dynamics are particularly visible in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), frequently described as one of the most strategically significant BRI corridors. Research on project risks in CPEC's transportation network highlights that infrastructure development faces numerous vulnerabilities, including governance challenges, political instability, financing uncertainty, and physical security threats. Studies demonstrate that transport corridor risks include both technical concerns, such as construction delays and operational inefficiencies. This illustrates how infrastructure corridors generate security challenges that directly shape their feasibility, cost, and strategic value. The CPEC case therefore functions as a useful reference point for understanding why China increasingly treats security planning as integral to infrastructure diplomacy. In response to these realities, China has gradually adapted its overseas engagement strategy. Liu argues that China's choices involve a difficult balance between its long-standing principle of non-interference and the growing necessity to protect its overseas citizens and investments (Liu, 2019). This dilemma has encouraged China to expand diplomatic engagement with host governments, strengthen intelligence cooperation, and rely on security partnerships to manage threats. Such developments suggest that the BRI is contributing to a shift in Chinese foreign policy practice, where infrastructure expansion produces pressures for deeper security involvement abroad.

Overall, the security risks surrounding the BRI demonstrate that connectivity projects generate complex vulnerabilities that require diplomatic adaptation. Host-country instability, terrorism, political contestation, and socio-economic grievances represent persistent threats to the long-term sustainability of BRI corridors. At the same time, these risks have compelled China to modify its diplomatic and security posture, signaling that the BRI is not only reshaping global connectivity but also transforming the practice of China's external engagement in fragile and strategically contested regions.

6. Does the BRI Create a New Security Order?

The question of whether the BRI contributes to the emergence of a new security order has become central to contemporary debates on global governance and regional stability. While the BRI is often framed as an economic integration initiative, its scale and institutional reach have raised deeper questions about whether China is indirectly reshaping security governance through development corridors, connectivity institutions, and new patterns of cooperation. Rather than producing an immediate replacement of existing frameworks, the BRI appears to

contribute to a gradual reconfiguration of regional order through institutional overlap, economic dependency, and security-development linkages.

One prominent perspective suggests that the BRI's influence on security order is mediated through regional institutions, particularly the SCO. Scholars argue that the SCO functions as a platform through which China integrates economic cooperation with security governance, particularly through counterterrorism frameworks and regional coordination mechanisms (Azizi, 2024). The SCO's relevance lies in its institutional capacity to combine security dialogue with economic integration, thereby supporting China's broader connectivity agenda. This supports the interpretation that BRI is not merely an infrastructure project but also an institutional strategy that can strengthen regional governance arrangements aligned with Chinese priorities.

Related scholarship emphasizes the "peace through development" logic that underpins many Chinese policy narratives. Sun and Zhang highlight how China's strategic thinking often links development investment with the reduction of conflict and insecurity, presenting economic integration as a stabilizing tool (Sun & Zhang, 2021). This approach assumes that poverty reduction, infrastructure expansion, and interdependence can reduce the incentives for conflict by creating shared material interests. Within this logic, BRI becomes a mechanism for stabilisation, not through military alliances but through the construction of economic corridors that bind regional actors into networks of shared development.

The question of order-building also becomes more complex when placed within the wider Indo-Pacific strategic environment. Koga's analysis of emerging minilateralism demonstrates that the Indo-Pacific has witnessed the rise of flexible strategic groupings designed to manage regional rivalry and balance China's expanding influence (Koga, 2022). Such minilateral initiatives, including security-oriented coalitions, indicate that the BRI's expansion has not produced uncontested regional integration but has instead generated countervailing responses. These responses suggest that rather than establishing a single China-led security order, the BRI may be contributing to a more fragmented regional environment where competing security frameworks coexist.

Thus, the BRI's contribution to a "new security order" should be interpreted not as a replacement of existing alliances but as a gradual restructuring of security governance through economic corridors, institutional partnerships, and the linking of security cooperation with development finance. The initiative encourages new forms of regional coordination and strengthens China's role in shaping connectivity governance. At the same time, it also triggers balancing behaviour, strategic suspicion, and institutional competition, which limits the possibility of a stable and unified security order emerging directly from BRI processes.

7. BRI's Contribution to Shift in Security Structures and Alliances

The BRI has not only influenced bilateral economic engagement but also contributed to the reshaping of regional security structures and alliance dynamics. While

the initiative does not operate as a formal military alliance system, its strategic infrastructure corridors and financing mechanisms alter the political economy of regional relations, creating new forms of dependence, hedging behaviour, and strategic recalibration. The BRI's effects on security alignment are therefore indirect but significant, especially in regions where multiple major powers compete for influence.

Central Asia provides a particularly important context for assessing these dynamics. Scholars argue that Central Asian states are increasingly positioned between Russia and China within the evolving frameworks of Greater Eurasia (Kazantsev et al., 2021). Their analysis highlights how BRI-linked integration expands China's economic presence in the region while Russia continues to play a major role in security governance through legacy ties and institutional mechanisms. This produces a layered regional order where Central Asian states must navigate competing strategic pressures. Rather than fully aligning with any power, many states pursue hedging strategies that allow them to benefit economically from China while maintaining security linkages with Russia. This suggests that the BRI reshapes regional security structures by altering the economic foundations of influence without directly displacing existing security arrangements.

Kazakhstan provides a useful illustration of this balancing logic. Kazakhstan's relationship with China is shaped by careful efforts to prevent regional domination, reflecting both economic pragmatism and strategic caution (Kondapalli, 2023). Kazakhstan participates actively in BRI connectivity and investment opportunities while simultaneously maintaining a foreign policy strategy that avoids overdependence on any single power. This balancing behavior reflects how BRI participation can strengthen economic ties without necessarily producing straightforward geopolitical alignment, thereby complicating simplistic narratives that treat the BRI as a direct mechanism of strategic control. The security consequences of BRI-related corridors are also evident in South Asia, particularly in the case of CPEC, which carries security implications for India, particularly due to its geographic proximity to disputed border areas and its potential strategic value in regional power projection (Sangkar & Huda, 2023). This perspective reflects broader concerns that BRI corridors can reshape regional security perceptions by altering strategic geography and strengthening China's presence in sensitive zones. While such arguments often focus on military implications, they also highlight how infrastructure projects contribute to regional strategic anxiety and influence alliance behaviour.

Taken together, these regional examples demonstrate that the BRI contributes to shifts in security structures through economic integration, strategic corridor development, and the expansion of China's political and infrastructural presence. However, the reshaping of alliances is not uniform. In some contexts, BRI engagement encourages closer strategic partnership with China; in others, it produces hedging strategies or triggers counterbalancing behaviour by rival states. The BRI therefore functions less as a direct alliance-building instrument and more as a catalyst for realignment, where infrastructure connectivity

alters the distribution of influence and compels states to reconsider their strategic positioning.

8. Conclusion

The paper has examined the BRI as a connectivity framework that increasingly operates within an environment of geopolitical contestation and multi-dimensional security concerns. While the BRI is formally presented as a development-oriented programme aimed at infrastructure investment, trade facilitation, and regional integration, the analysis demonstrates that its expansion cannot be separated from strategic rivalry, institutional competition, and evolving perceptions of risk. The BRI therefore occupies a dual identity, where it is simultaneously a platform for economic cooperation and a mechanism through which power, influence, and security dynamics are reconfigured. The literature reviewed in this paper highlights that the BRI has become embedded in broader strategic competition, particularly between China and the United States, where connectivity projects are interpreted not merely as commercial investments but as long-term instruments of influence and alignment. This strategic framing reinforces the logic of the security dilemma, as China's infrastructural expansion generates perceptions of threat or imbalance among rival actors, encouraging counter-initiatives and competitive connectivity frameworks. At the same time, the BRI's institutional and financial structures reveal the importance of economic statecraft. Infrastructure lending, policy bank financing, and corridor development create forms of dependency and bargaining leverage that shape political relations beyond the immediate economic sphere.

The study also shows that security challenges are not only external or geopolitical but are deeply rooted in host-country environments. Terrorism, insurgency, governance weakness, and local political contestation have emerged as persistent risks that undermine project sustainability and force China to adapt its diplomatic practices. This adaptation reflects an important shift in Chinese overseas engagement, as the protection of investments and citizens increasingly requires deeper security cooperation, institutional coordination, and risk management strategies. In this sense, the BRI does not merely generate security concerns; it also compels new patterns of security governance and diplomatic engagement.

A central finding of the paper is that the BRI contributes to a gradual reshaping of regional security structures, though not in the form of a unified China-led security order. Instead, the BRI operates through layered and uneven processes of realignment, hedging, and balancing. In Central Asia, states negotiate between Chinese economic influence and Russian security presence, producing a complex regional order shaped by overlapping power structures. In South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, BRI corridors generate strategic anxieties that strengthen counterbalancing coalitions and multilateral cooperation frameworks. These outcomes suggest that BRI-driven connectivity produces fragmentation as much as integration, as regional actors respond differently based on domestic politics, strategic vulnerabilities, and institutional interests. Ultimately, the BRI should be understood as a strategic connectivity project whose security implications extend beyond militarisation

narratives to include financial vulnerabilities, governance pressures, and contested geopolitical ordering. The initiative is likely to remain a defining feature of global infrastructure politics, but its long-term sustainability will depend on how effectively China and partner states manage the interaction between development ambitions and security realities. Future research must therefore move beyond binary interpretations of the BRI as either development cooperation or geopolitical expansion and instead examine how connectivity generates complex, evolving security outcomes across regions.

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