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Abstract

This research aims to elucidate the economic and environmental implications of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for China. President Xi Jinping announced the BRI in 2013 to connect China with Eurasia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. China has established financial institutions to support this mammoth project. It has economic benefits for China regarding its overproduction problem, finding new markets, and diversifying its economy. It will also help poor nations to emerge economically. It has been affecting the environment negatively by emitting carbon dioxide through its construction projects. It has been working in South Asia which is already vulnerable to climate change due to construction projects but China has been working on it to fulfill its aim of zero carbon emission. To complete it successfully, China should engage with partner states to mitigate environmental issues arising from BRT.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China, Economic Implications

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Economic and Environmental Implications of BRI for China

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Abstract

This research aims to elucidate the economic and environmental implications of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for China. President Xi Jinping announced the BRI in 2013 to connect China with Eurasia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. China has established financial institutions to support this mammoth project. It has economic benefits for China regarding its overproduction problem, finding new markets, and diversifying its economy. It will also help poor nations to emerge economically. It has been affecting the environment negatively by emitting carbon dioxide through its construction projects. It has been working in South Asia which is already vulnerable to climate change due to construction projects but China has been working on it to fulfill its aim of zero carbon emission. To complete it successfully, China should engage with partner states to mitigate environmental issues arising from BRT.

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Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War United States of America enjoyed global political and economic hegemony. There were hopes that Europe which had remained the center of world politics would

challenge the American hegemony but this was not proved right. During the early era of unipolarity, the US adopted unilateral policies that affected the whole world and initiated an era of new regionalism in Asia (Oba, [2019](#)). Many

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countries emerged in the hope of posing a challenge to American political and economic hegemony among them China is one and India is another. Indian economic pace was very slow as compared to China. After the economic reforms in the 1970s, China emerged as 2nd largest economy on the global stage. In the past, China was an active lender to the communist states in the 1950s and 1960s. After an economic boom in the early 1980s, China started the "Global go strategy" in 1999 and started to invest in overseas countries (Horn, Reinhart, & Trebesch, [2021](#)). China stands on the global stage with its 15% share in the global economy only 2.6% less than the United States. There were factors that were stopping China from further economic expansion like Chinese industrialization surpassing Chinese resources and the rate of accumulation of resources as well. To overcome this problem President Xi announced Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) (Khalid & Chawla, [2020](#)).

'The Belt and Road Initiative' is not just the revival of the Chinese economy but also the revival of an ancient trade route, spreading from China to other regions including Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. The trade took place not only through land routes but also through sea routes and it was not recognized as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' at that time but known as the Silk Road. The name was given due to the trade of Silk. The idea to revive this trade route was given by the US in 2011 due to its involvement in Afghanistan and to revive its economy, when Xi came into power in China he gave special attention to this idea and the US didn't progress on this idea (Chanda, 2015). BRI widely known as 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) was first announced by Xi the President of China on the 7th of September 2013 remembering the 'Old Silk Road'. It has the ambition to strengthen the Chinese economy and the economy of the region through the building of interconnected infrastructure but it is often taken as a geopolitical tool of China to gain political advantages (Khalid & Chawla, 2020).

BRI possesses two parts one is the Silk Road Economic Belt or Land Silk Road for the trading of goods by connecting countries on land and the other is the maritime Silk Road which spread through the sea trading routes. This initiative has seven trading routes that connect Asia with Europe, and Africa, these corridors include: (1) China-Magnolia-Russia economic corridor which connects these countries through land. (2) The New Eurasia Land Bridge will connect Japan, South Korea, and China with Europe and ends at Rotterdam's port. (3) China-Central Asia-West Asia spreads from China to Central Asia and then enters in Persian Gulf and Turkey. (4) The China-Indochina Peninsula corridor connects China with the ASEAN region and ends in Singapore. (5) The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor connects western China with the port of Gwadar in the Arabian Sea. (6) The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor will connect these mentioned countries. (7) 21st Century Maritime Silk Road will connect China with ports of other regions like the Gwadar port in Pakistan through sea routes and will connect other ports in other regions. China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the most important routes of this mega initiative which will open the trade for the Central Asian region, without this BRI will not completed (Jaleel, Talha, & Shah, [2019](#)).

China aims to support industrial development and connectivity in the region China has three goals for BRI (1) supplement regional development through economic integration (2) improve Chinese industry while exporting these same improved standards (3) resolve issues from excess industrial capacity. BRI would serve to accomplish the status of global power through economic growth would eliminate the industrial excess that China is facing and ultimately eliminate the inequality between rich seaboard provinces and underdeveloped western provinces (Himmer & Rod, [2022](#)).

This paper at start describes the historical background and the lengthy history of this mega project, which wasn't started in 2011 or was announced by President Xi in 2013 but its history

spans over millennia. The land and maritime trade route between China and other parts of Asia and Europe was under use by ancient people of ancient Chinese dynasties and people from Europe and Asia. The paper also discusses the decline of this ancient Silk Road which is due to various reasons including the rise of Mongols and the discovery of new sea routes by European imperialist powers. Then the revival begun by President Xi after gaining power, presents how China is providing financial assistance to this mega project by establishing different financial institutions, and how this initiative still manages to attract more countries specifically the third world nations. Moreover, this Chapter concluded with Why China started this initiative. This initiative was the need of the Chinese stagnant economy and the way for national rejuvenation.

Next this paper also presents economic implications for China and participating countries. This chapter presents the details of economic opportunities for China through this mega project how it will serve to mitigate economic stagnation and help China to become an economic power, and how BRI will connect the eastern developed provinces with western underdeveloped provinces to close the disparity among these regions and how it is serving the interest of the participating countries by developing their domestic infrastructure which is the need of every rich or poor state and connecting them more markets and trading partners. This paper also provides research related to the environmental implications of the Belt and Road Initiative. The infrastructure projects are giving birth to environmental problems, increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the air which is the main cause of climate change and the rise in temperature. This paper provides the other implications of this mega project on the environment including the loss of habit, deforestation, and loss of natural resources in participating countries and initiatives taken by China to combat this problem within China and in participating countries. In the end, this paper provides the conclusion of this research by providing that BRI has massive potential for

China to rise economically and that BRI has been providing a bunch of opportunities to Chinese firms. This paper also discusses the threat to BRI by environmental issues and the recommendations provide solutions to these problems.

Background of BRI

The "New Silk Road" or the "Belt and Road Initiative" is the revision of an ancient trade route that connects the Ancient dynasties of China with different regions in Eurasia, the name was given by the German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in the Nineteenth century and the name was given due to the trading of delicate stuff "Silk" only produced in China through this route. The routes between China and other regions were a combination of land and sea routes connecting most developed regions in East, China, and Arab Muslims in the West. With the discovery of silk, trade gained pace through the routes with different dynasties at different times trade through these routes took place with different regions the Romans, the Persians, and Arab Muslims those regions had been trading with China by using land or maritime routes, with material goods the cultural exchange also took place. Trade through the land silk route was disrupted by the emergence of different powers during different times like the Mongols and Ottoman Empire, China exported paper, gunpowder, silk, and imported glass, horses, and gold (Stošić, 2023).

The term "Silk Road" refers to the large network of routes on land and the sea which connects the Chinese land with the South Asian sub-continent, Iranian and Caucasian lands, and Eurasian and Arab regions. After the 10th century when the "Tang" Dynasty was on the decline the land route started to lose its significance the emergence of Mongols started a new era of interconnectedness between West and East more demands for goods in markets gave the initiation to search for new routes which would be safer and easier and the discovery of sea route to India by Portuguese in 15th century led to forget about the

route which once connected China with the world (Sarwar, 2018). The term "New Silk Road "in modern times was first used by US officials in 2011 to revive the trading route to build the Afghan economy when Western troops would leave the country the remarks were made by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. After some time when Xi took office a US official was informed by a Chinese representative avoid to using such a term because it belongs to them, and he was asked by a Chinese official to use any other name like "Historical Route" instead of the idea faded away after this (Chanda, 2015).

The Belt and Road Initiative

To connect the underdeveloped regions situated in the west of China with Central Asia and Europe and the part in the sea will connect the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian and western Pacific oceans (Smith, 2018).

The Chinese project of infrastructure development which aims to connect the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa through land and sea is the largest project of this kind in the entire history of humanity, it will include two-quarters of the world's population and requires hundreds of billions of dollars to connect the regions for trade. Different studies show various numbers of participants however 138 countries have signed the Memorandum of Understanding, at first the BRI was a project of hard infrastructure development specifically in the sector of energy, but now it has transformed itself into a technological road and has extended itself into every continent technically. Chinese leaders first proposed the "Silk Road Economic Belt" which would connect with Europe later Africa was included in the idea of the "21st century maritime Silk Road" also extending to space. The name includes two parts the "Belt" refers to the land corridors which are six in number and the "Road" which connects major ports in the sea (Schulhof, Vuuren, & Kircherr, 2022).

One Belt One Road" was the former name of BRI which came under discussion when Xi the

President of China announced this mega project to connect the neighboring economies in his speeches in Kazakhstan and in Singapore in 2013, after two years the first official blueprint was released by China, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) defined it in following words " A systematic project aims to promote connectivity of Asian, African and European regions and their adjacent seas" the BRI will "set-up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize the diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries". The Economic Belt over land will connect the underdeveloped regions situated in the west of China with Central Asia and Europe and the part of the sea will connect the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian and western Pacific oceans (Smith, 2018).

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Finance for BRI

Belt and Road Initiative stands alone as the largest infrastructure development project in history and

the investment promise made under this is 8000 billion dollars as only Asia requires 1700 billion dollars in investment in the infrastructure sector each year (Schulhof, Vuuren, & Kircherr, 2022). The Chinese government is not the only party to give capital for this project instead it has established various institutions to provide loans to this project like "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank" (AIIB) and "Silk Road Fund" both these were established soon after the inauguration of this project the AIIB was launched with the USD 100 billion as its initial capital besides this the "New Development Bank" working under the organization of BRICS is also a financier of Belt and Road Initiative, China is hoping for foreign direct investment in various projects till the end of this decade of 2020 (Khalid & Chawla, 2020). China has been engaging with 151 countries and 32 global organizations under nearly 200 cooperation projects and these projects are related to infrastructure development, the energy sector, transportation, and digital networks (Smith, 2018).

Need for Belt and Road Initiative

In world scholars view Belt and Road Initiative as the plan given by US after WW2 known as Marshall plan to gain political leverage over adversary or a sort of Monroe doctrine, but on the other hand the Initiative has been solving Chinese problems related to economic expansion, despite its economy boom China has been facing economic slowdown and accumulation of products produced by industrial sector, China know has been producing more goods and services that it can utilize and also lacking the excessive resources which its economy needed for further expansion, so connecting with resources rich countries and then selling back the finished goods would diversify its economy, to which Eric Olander compared with English colonialism which used to import raw material from its colonial outposts and then sell back finished goods, furthermore connecting with resources rich countries in Middle East and Africa will decreased the economic dependence of China on western hemisphere to which China currently exports

technology and competition is high there for these Chinese goods, this would give opportunities to diversify its economy and decrease the economic dependence on west (Khalid & Chawla, 2020).

The legitimacy of the Communist regime is based on continued economic growth and the security of its people, China needs an energy supply for its industry and market that could absorb the over-production of cement, steel, and glass, furthermore, Obama's East Asia Strategy gave China the opportunity to make close ties with energy-rich countries, Belt and Road Initiative worked for China to counter the problems of security and economic progress. President Xi announced the "New Silk Road" with three approaches (1) " to promote relations between China and its neighbors and ensure security, while diminishing US influence in Asia" and (2) " to find new markets for Chinese oversupply of products, generated due to economic crises and the inability of the domestic market to absorb it, (3) " to secure all China's strategic routes". China needs BRI for this purpose (Stošić, 2023). If anybody asks what type of interests BRI will serve? The answer would be it serves all types of interests, it has been serving energy-related interests by connecting with energy-rich countries, it has been serving interests related to counter-terrorism and separatism, it can solve economic problems and can balance strategic environment (Smith, 2018). BRI, as described by the People's Republic of China, is a " bid to enhance regional connectivity and embrace a brighter future" Its other objectives described by China are "to construct a unified large market and make full use of both international and domestic markets through cultural exchange and integration, to enhance mutual understanding and trust of member nations, ending up in an innovative pattern with capital inflows, talent pool, and technological database" these were the objectives set forward by China but skepticism is high that these are camouflaged with interests related to the rise of China and to make this world a world with two superpowers (Choudhury, 2021).

Economic Implications of BRI for China

China has an export-led economy and exports goods to the world and accounts for 13% of the global export market, but after the international economic slowdown caused by the anti-globalization wave China has also faced a slowdown in its growth with China has faced industrial excess means that China was producing goods beyond its need which was causing accumulation of these things, industries facing these problems included cement and steel industries at top. The mammoth project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initially known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) came to rescue China from this economic slowdown. Under BRI China has been connecting itself with different regions' infrastructure on land and sea the land infrastructure will help China to absorb industrial excess capacity and find new markets for these materials and it will help China to integrate its economy and globalization of its currency. The infrastructure will reduce the material cost of transportation and generate markets for firms and jobs in China (Bishnoi & Sahoo, [2020](#)).

Helping Economic Consolidation

China has a large economy so vulnerabilities to the 2008 economic recession unfold the interdependence China has with the outside world, the disruption of certain raw materials, energy, and food commodities to feed the population can cause legitimacy problems for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) the ruling party of the China thus BRI came to help against these vulnerabilities. China imports food, raw materials, oil and gas, and technology like semiconductors and other technologies. Initially, China to help itself against the disruption of oil and gas built reserves to store energy but this was not the solution to the problem. Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is the major supplier of hydrocarbons and China is diversifying this by building pipelines with Russia and opening new trade routes with the Eurasian

region by investing in land-based infrastructure like rails and roads and also exploring the Arctic Sea for trade to bypass the Malacca vulnerabilities (Paterson, [2024](#)). Belt and Road Initiative would include bilateral agreements with the resource-rich countries around the BRI route and open new markets for Chinese goods. Eric Olander contrasts this model with the imperial era in these words "One Belt One Road is also reminiscent of Britain's Old imperial trading network that was designed to extract natural resources from its colonial outputs and then sell back finished goods to these markets" (Khalid & Chawla, 2020).

New Opportunities

BRI also includes bilateral trade agreements with countries that have resources and these agreements also open fresh markets for Chinese goods to be exported. This would not only solve the problem of overproduction but also mitigate Chinese dependency on Western countries where China often faces problems like tariffs in the case of the US and competition in markets of Europe where China exports technology like solar. With the establishment of BRI China can export these products to Africa where demand is high. China has the ambition to become an economic power and the US is a barrier to the Chinese way due to economic interdependence, opening new markets would help China overcome this problem. China will also provide new routes to export its goods by avoiding facing the US in the Strait of Malacca which records 80% of Chinese trade through this route, and Chinese products would travel more safely. China will invest in infrastructure in developing countries which would be more beneficial than purchasing US bonds at low interest rates, and China can also internationalize its currency with the help of BRI (Khalid & Chawla, 2020).

Environmental Implications

BRI is a mega project for the construction of hard infrastructure including rails, road networks connecting different regions and countries, ports,

special zones for industries and investment, production of materials like cement and steel and construction of industrial units for these materials have impacts direct or indirectly over the environment, all these economic problems related activities will be resulted by producing a large amount of waste, this will create the difficulties for the communities either local or international. Such type of large infrastructure projects have an impact on domestic communities and international communities as well and bring them near to social and environmental risks. This mega project is still spreading, and scholars, researchers, and the international community have concerns regarding its impacts on the environment for example the trade route connecting central Asia and South East Asia will increase carbon dioxide (CO₂) emission by 7%. No need to mention that infrastructure is very important for transportation every country first world or third world needs it and in Asia trillions of dollars are needed for infrastructure development, China is providing the investment that will reduce the transportation costs and will act as a time saver, it will also produce a great number of jobs and will change the life standards of people living in BRI countries. But all of this will also affect the environment, contribute to climate change, and will have ecological impacts (Ali, Faqir, Haidr, Shahzad, & Nosheen, [2022](#)).

BRI and CO₂

Belt and Road Initiative is a 'Grand Strategy' connecting the Eurasian region through land and their bordering seas it covers 64% of the world's population, 39% world's trade, consumes 50% energy of the world, and emits 54% CO₂. The mega operations of BELT and Road Initiative demand large sums of energy and other materials which is not environmentally friendly the amount of CO₂ in China increased by 8% and in member states of the Belt and Road Initiative this increase was 5%. It highlights the link between BRI and Carbon emissions, the environmental health of participating states depends on the operations of industries linked with this mammoth project like

the construction of infrastructure, use of technology, tourism, and energy industry. The traveling of visitors keeps with itself Carbon emissions due to transportation which requires the burning of fossil fuels for energy, foreign direct investment, and economic friendship carry the burden of environmental health it cause the over-consumption and exploitation of existing natural resources. China with its continental countries in Asia like India contributes half of Carbon emissions worldwide. China made investments in 240 coal power plants in 65 countries of BRI years between 2001 to 2016 and provided capital for 22 power plants that will produce energy through the burning of fossil fuels, China is also moving its industry which causes pollution to member states of Belt and Road Initiative resulting in environmental issues and other labor-related concern (Sattar, Hussain, & Ilyas, [2022](#)). In overseas investment in the energy sector under BRI 80% goes to fossil fuels and only 3% is going towards green energy the other environmental threat posed by China is the extraction of natural resources under Polar BRI and cement production. All of these together with coal plants in third world nations are posing a threat to nature (Chiu, 2022).

Other Environmental Issues

The risks posed by the construction of infrastructure to the environment include pollution like water pollution, air pollution, noise pollution, and also the disturbance of the ecosystem, these risks originate directly from the infrastructure due to its design or the way it is operated (S.Optiz-Stapleton, F.Khan, Y.Cao, B.Tanjango, & R.Nadin, [2021](#)). The construction of physical infrastructure has direct impacts on plants used for medicine, soil, and air, it causes deforestation and destruction of habitats, and chemicals that are used for construction or transportation cause the emission of Green House Gases. It contributes to climate change generation of waste material and the loss of natural resources, moreover, the construction of hills causes closer of roads due to rock failing and land sliding.

Construction of such infrastructure without taking into account environmental care may lead to demanding environmentally friendly policies by member states of BRI or non-members (Ali, Faqir, Haidr, Shahzad, & Nosheen, 2022).

Policies Adopted by China to Mitigate Environmental Issues

It was the year 2015 since China started to put emphasis on environmental issues in BRI countries to mitigate the challenges related to environmental degradation and pollution. Ministry of Environment Projections portrayed the 'Green Silk Road' in response to the concerns of participating countries over environmental health and loss caused by these projects to natural resources. At a UNGA speech in September 2021,, the President of China announced their Carbon policy by describing that China would start to reduce carbon emissions from 2030 at the domestic level and would achieve zero carbon emissions after 30 years in 2060. President Xi also said that China would not build coal-fired power plants in other countries. In a white paper issued in October 2021, China announced to freeze previous models of economic development which has caused environmental issues. The environmental issues have had an impact on Chinese companies and since its beginning, China has made it strict for its companies to follow the laws and policies of countries in which these companies are operating regarding environmental protection, China's own domestic regulations for the environment are stricter than those of other countries. China adopted in 2017 the 'BRI Ecological and Environmental Cooperation Plan' which gives instructions related to overseas construction and codes related to environmental protection. In 2021 China again adopted for its overseas companies the 'Green Development Guidelines for Overseas Investment Cooperation' this gives codes to the companies to follow 'Green Development' in hosting nations and engage with locals, media, government, and NGOs, and make

investments in environment-friendly energy. (International Republican Institute, [2022](#)).

Conclusion

Economically BRI is not only solving the problems of overproduction and economic stagnation but is creating opportunities for China to make trade relations with Africa, West Asia, and Eastern Europe, greatly reducing its dependence on the US and its Western allies where China faces hurdles like competition, tariffs and other regulations policies, and blocking its way to become an economic power. The other opportunities for China in BRI projects are investment opportunities for Chinese companies and jobs for Chinese laborers, new markets for its products which face competition in the West. BRI will not only transform the Chinese economy but also give a chance to small states to boom economically which are facing hurdles due to lack of infrastructure, connections with other nations, and lack of sea ports like in the case of Central Asian States. So as a result BRI will not just have economic benefits for China but will also transform the majority of the third world economies. With that BRI is also affecting the health of the environment as the major BRI or any such kind of mammoth project has negative impacts on the natural environment causing climate change in already devastated areas like South Asia, and in South East Asia which would work against the Chinese ambition for BRI. Governments and NGOs raise their voices against such projects causing environmental degradation and pollution and would ask the Chinese government to stop such projects, which is a drawback of BRI's construction and energy projects. This is a major issue as the international community is more active towards climate change, it would become difficult for China to conduct operations under BRI. China has started to mitigate this challenge by adopting various policies that are not only effective within China but also in other participant countries with poor implementation present against climate change.

Recommendations

Belt and Road Initiative is the largest infrastructure project in the history of mankind it is not only helping China in terms of its economy but also helping the poor states to develop the highly demanding physical infrastructure which they can't build on their own due to lack of capital and resources. To consolidate the economies of nations working under BRI China should invest more in the industrial development of these nations so these nations in the future will not fall into economic chaos and civil wars like many countries in Africa and the Middle East which would eventually take away all Chinese efforts and investments. For its success regional powers

should be engaged for example India a major regional power and trade partner of China must be included in BRI or it would play against BRI with the help of other Chinese rivals. To make BRI successful China should work to invest in soft infrastructure which would foster BRI operations in poor nations but also encourage people-to-people interaction and mitigate environmental issues which cause hurdles to BRI success. To mitigate environmental issues Chinese government should promote the same standards of operation in other participants as it has been implementing in its own soil and should develop methods to balance growth and development with the SDGs of the United Nations.

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