

India's Response to China's Belt and Road Initiative: Analysing the Impact on Indian Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This study delivers an overview of India's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and explores its impact on Indian foreign policy. The BRI, an extensive infrastructure development project spanning multiple continents, has raised concerns for India due to its potential strategic and economic implications. This study examines India's approach towards the BRI and analyses its effects on Indian foreign policy dynamics. The analysis also delves into the impact of India's response on its relations with China, other regional powers, and international organizations. It examines the potential implications for India's economic growth, trade routes, and geopolitical positioning in the Indo-Pacific region. Overall, this study offers valuable insights into India's strategic considerations and policy adjustments in response to China's BRI, highlighting the broader implications for Indian foreign policy in the evolving global order.

Keywords: India, BRI, foreign policy, Indo-Pacific region, Indian foreign policy

INTRODUCTION

India and China have a long and tumultuous relationship that has been portrayed in a variety of contradictory ways, ranging from conflict and containment to competitiveness and cooperation [1]. India has started to see commercial activities of China as a method for China to further its planned goals, frequently at the expense of India's interests. In 2016, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the former Indian foreign secretary, astutely observed the inherent correlation between strategic interests and connectivity initiatives, emphasizing its universal applicability, specifically within the context of our continent. However, he issued a prudent warning against the utilization of connectivity merely as a mechanism for imposing predetermined decisions, cautioning against its potential to unduly influence choices in a manner akin to hard-wiring [2]. Analysis of the China-led BRI frequently holds the belief that connectivity provides a set of tools for influencing decisions of other nations related to foreign policy.

The BRI, a far-reaching global infrastructure project, was initially introduced in 2013 by China with the objective of enhancing connectivity and promoting economic collaboration across Asia, Europe, Africa, and other regions. BRI comprises of two main components, namely the "Silk Road Economic Belt" & the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". The BRI, which was founded in 2013, has garnered considerable worldwide interest, eliciting both favourable and unfavourable responses. This initiative is notable for its significant efforts to promote connectivity and offer economic assistance for infrastructure endeavours. Within the South Asian context, the BRI underscores the growing rivalry between India and China in the subcontinental and Indian Ocean domains.

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The BRI is perceived through three distinct lenses at a worldwide level: pragmatic, utilitarian, and

revisionist. Certain countries adopt a utilitarian viewpoint towards the BRI, perceiving it as an essential economic strategy to offset China's manufacturing surplus. Certain individuals adopt a pragmatic viewpoint, emphasising the potential of the BRI to stimulate economic development through substantial investments in infrastructure across diverse regions. According to Bhardwaj, India has initiated the development of a policy response [3]. The culmination of India's resistance to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was evidenced by its decision to abstain from participation in the Belt and Road Forum, which was hosted by China in May of 2017. India has conveyed its doubts regarding the procedures and transparency of the initiative through official public statements. The government of New Delhi expressed opposition towards the CPEC due to concerns regarding the preservation of Pakistan's territorial sovereignty.

INDIA'S CONCERNS TO BRI AND ITS IMPACT ON FOREIGN POLICY

The CPEC, the BCIM Economic Corridor, the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor, and the MSR are four key BRI corridors that pass-through India's South Asian neighbours and can be used to better understand India's concerns (Figure 1). These four routes and the related infrastructure initiatives directly affect India's planned objectives. They are affecting India's security interests and strategic environment and are located close to its continental and maritime borders. China is interacting with India's close neighbours through these channels, which puts the prevailing power dynamics in the area in peril. India is concerned about the geopolitical effects of some Chinese-led efforts, even if it is not opposed to the building of infrastructure in the area [4].

In order to provide its neighbours with other connectivity options, India will need to coordinate with its regional allies. Up until now, India has been hesitant to choose, start, and put into practice a consistent strategy for connection in the area. Although India has recognized nations like Japan as important collaborators in developing a response, there has not been much work on a strategy. In order to defend its geopolitical objectives and maintain its position as a leading force in South Asia and the Indian Ocean area, India urgently requires a well-organized framework for offering a substitute to Chinese-led connectivity initiatives.

Concerns of Transparency

As per the official statement issued by the Indian government in May 2017, it was asserted that the BRI does not adhere to principles such as ethical leadership, legal compliance, and transparency. Furthermore, the project results in certain recipient nations being burdened with levels of debt that are not viable in the long run. An indicator of an unsustainable level of debt is exemplified by the increasing Chinese debt of Colombo. Additionally, both journalistic accounts and academic investigations have indicated that China's strategy towards the BRI carries the potential for unsustainable loan practises that may impose an overwhelming debt burden on recipient nations. Unsustainable loans, such as the one provided to Hambantota, serve as a clear demonstration of China's capacity to attain important economic and strategic benefits in the Indian Ocean area [5]. India has made concerted efforts to convince other nations that the BRI is a geopolitical tactic intended to establish hegemony over the Asian region. The purported "String of Pearls" geoeconomics strategy of China has raised apprehensions, as it is believed to entail imposing unviable debt obligations on countries in the Indian Ocean region, with the objective of acquiring influence over crucial choke points in the area [6].

Security Issues and Territorial Integrity Concerns

China's use of local connectivity projects to reframe the narratives neighbouring contested territory in China's favour is causing India increasing amounts of anxiety. The Indian government's declaration, which was published in May 2017, contends that China has exhibited a lack of respect for territorial sovereignty, specifically in relation to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through the contested region of Kashmir. India contends that the participation in the BRI would undermine its sovereignty and dilute its position on the territorial dispute, as China espouses Pakistan's stance on the matter [7].



Figure 1. Belt and road initiative of China (Baruah, 2018) [8].

The CPEC and certain other facets of the BRI have been observed to neglect India's apprehensions regarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity. China asserts its territorial claims over the state of Arunachal Pradesh and northern Ladakh, located on India's eastern border, despite both regions being currently administered by India. The 1962 Sino-Indian War, which was waged over Ladakh and Arunachal, has led to a sense of scepticism among Indians regarding Beijing's intentions in building

infrastructure projects in border regions and contested territories. Furthermore, India is apprehensive of China's endeavours to build infrastructure in the neighbouring countries, namely Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This could potentially grant Beijing a strategic edge in its rivalry with India [9].

HOW BRI WOULD IMPACT INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: LITERATURE REVIEW

India should recognise the potential benefits of leveraging China's investment and technological strengths to supplement its own human capital and economic growth. The "Make in India" initiative, spearheaded by Prime Minister Modi, is a foreign policy strategy that prioritises India's economic growth and seeks to establish trade partnerships with influential global powers. This approach is aimed at bolstering India's economic resurgence and enhancing its geopolitical standing. According to Sharma *et al.*, China has the potential to play a substantial part in facilitating the requisite investment and capital for the Make in India campaign [10].

It is recommended that India consider joining the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and leverage its inherent capabilities and resources to collaboratively establish the OBOR framework from an internal perspective, with a focus on advancing the nation's welfare. The nation of India necessitates a period of 30 years characterised by swift economic expansion. However, it is challenging to envision how this objective can be attained if India continues to remain on the outskirts of the trajectory that seems to lead to a surge of progress and originality in the Asian region. Hence, it is imperative for India to synchronise its developmental agenda with the BRI while ensuring the safeguarding of its national security [11].

The BRI offers a prospect for Asian nations to forge alliances among themselves to safeguard the future of the region. The failure of India to engage more actively and positively in the BRI would represent a lost chance. India will be required to achieve a precarious balance. The BRI poses a distinctive challenge in reconciling the vast long-term economic prospects and policies with the potential security risks in the Indian Ocean Region [8].

Hence, India's responsive strategy towards China's connectivity initiatives in the area is juxtaposed with China's unwavering advancement in positioning itself as a significant stakeholder in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The study centres on four specific corridors, namely the CPEC, the BCIM Economic Corridor, the Himalayan Economic Corridor, and China's augmented involvement in the Indian Ocean. India's principal opposition pertains to the economic corridor that connects China and Pakistan. This opposition is driven by concerns related to territorial sovereignty, security, and the strengthening of the strategic corporation between China and Pakistan. India harbours security apprehensions with respect to China's participation in areas that are grappling with insurgencies and security predicaments.

CONCLUSION: A WAY FORWARD

The recognition of connectivity as a means for employing foreign policy influence is gaining traction among nations such as India, as demonstrated by its firm stance on the significance of connectivity and infrastructure. The interdependence between politics and connectivity is apparent and complex. The limited prospects for collaboration between China and India on the BRI can be attributed to the geopolitical implications and India's apprehensions regarding China's approach to the initiative and its potential strategic advantages. India perceives endeavours to augment interconnectivity as a novel domain for geopolitical rivalry in the South Asia and Indian Ocean, concurrently offering a chance to reclaim regional eminence.

The BRI has significantly influenced India's foreign policy approach, prompting a re-evaluation of its regional engagements, prioritization of connectivity initiatives, and the need to strike a balance between competition and cooperation in the evolving geopolitical landscape of Asia.

In order to proficiently navigate this particular milieu, it is imperative for India to assume a more proactive position. China has been successful in executing development initiatives that extend beyond its national boundaries, whereas India is encountering difficulties in formulating all-encompassing strategies for its border areas. The city of New Delhi has expressed its intention to give precedence to development in its international engagements. However, it is imperative that New Delhi converts its impromptu initiatives into a well-structured plan for enhancing regional connectivity and infrastructure development. India needs to provide a viable substitute to China's regional initiatives while simultaneously tackling its internal infrastructure and developmental needs. The task at hand necessitates not only a reactive approach to the transformations brought about by China's involvement in its vicinity, but also a cooperative effort with allies to promote its conception of regional interconnectedness, while considering its inherent limitations in terms of capacity and resources. In light of cross-border initiatives such as the BRI and other connectivity projects, which are altering Asia's global connections with remote regions, policymakers are confronted with new concepts and obstacles. The economic and strategic outlook of the region for the foreseeable future will be shaped by the bilateral and domain-specific opposition and diplomatic interactions between China and India.

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