

The Belt and Road Initiative: Implications of US-China Power Struggle with a focus on Bangladesh

Abstract

How does China use the BRI to achieve its global ambitions as well as fueling the US-China power struggle in case of Bangladesh? This paper seeks to identifying China's global ambition through BRI in political, economic and strategical perspectives. Besides, this paper also discusses the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive investment project initiated by China's president Xi Jinping in 2013 that aimed at connecting China to Middle East, Central Asia, Eurasia, South and Southeast Asia both through land and maritime routes. The paper analyzes the power contest between the US and China, BRI's part in this power game, and its geopolitical implication in Bangladesh, and its position in maintaining balance between the two players of the power struggle.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, silk road, QUAD, corridor, strategic, territorial disputes, governance.

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative is a massive investment project introduced by China's president Xi Jinping in 2013 that aims at connecting China to Middle East, Central Asia, Eurasia, South and Southeast Asia, and even to South America both through land and maritime routes. It was proclaimed by Xi as a revival of the ancient Silk Road that connected imperial China to other parts of the continent. The ancient silk road was a network of trade routes established by China to conduct trades with foreign territories. The term 'Silk Road' is however of relatively recent origin. Whereas the commercial route was established during the Han dynasty of China in 130 B.C.E and used by traders for 1500 years since then, 'Silk Road' as a name for this passage was only used in 1877 C.E. by the German geographer and traveler Ferdinand von Richthofen (**National Geographic, 2020**). Marco Polo, the famous Italian traveler of the 14th century was one of the most famous travelers to use this route for his travels to China. His itinerary made him and the route he used both famous to foreign traders. This famous route of the ancient and medieval period however perished before the 15th century. The Belt and Road Initiative is viewed as an attempt to revive the silk road in the 21st century. China, seeks to bring back its glorious past through this grand-scale investment and infrastructure venture.

The BRI is a central piece of Xi Jinping's foreign policy. The BRI consists of two main components. One, the Silk Road Economic Belt, and two, the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road'. As of January 2023, a total of 151 countries have joined the BRI and these active participants uphold almost 75% of world population and contribute to more than half of the world's GDP (**Caridi, 2023**).

Much research including those conducted by the World Bank showed positive potential for development and increase in world GDP through the BRI. According to the World Bank, if

completed, the BRI transport projects could reduce travel times by 12% along economic corridors, increase trade between 2.7% and 9.7%, increase income by up to 3.4% and lift 7.6 million people from extreme poverty (**World Bank, 2018**).

However, considering China as an emerging global power western countries especially the United States recognizes the BRI as a threat to its global interest and a Chinese strategy to expand its influence on the collaborating countries reducing USA's power in those states. It is even compared by many to the US Marshal Plan of 1948, which was an initiative to provide aid to Western Europe (**Nordquist, 2022**). The Marshal Plan was designed to counter communism in Europe, enhance ties with European countries and also have a dominance in the region. The BRI, similarly, is regarded as China's Marshal Plan to increase influence and enhance strategic standing by building strong political and economic ties with participant nations. The relationship between the USA and China is complex and in current context antagonistic in nature, as both countries are in clear contest for global power and seek to curb each other's influence from foreign territories. The USA has been the only global power during the unitary world order between 1990 and 2000. But the enhancement of Chinese power in military might, modern weapons, economic strength placed it in face-to-face with the USA. The Belt and Road Initiative took this power contest and fuels it to a significant or a dangerous extent.

Bangladesh has also signed in for the BRI in 2016 and one of the major members of the BRI. It is the second most loan-receiver from China in South Asia after Pakistan (**The Diplomat, 2021**). China has been the largest trade partner of Bangladesh for a period of time making it a major development partner of the country. But due to its strategic location in South Asia, connected to the Bay of Bengal to the South makes it an area of interest for other superpowers - the United States being one of them. Furthermore, as a country almost totally surrounded by India, it has also the necessity to choose its foreign policy that is to ensure good relationship with all the partner countries at the same time. India is a member of Quad, a quadrilateral group led by the USA and the United States through Quad or in other words, through India may try to exert its influence or prevent China's influence in Bangladesh.

In this paper attempt has been made to understand the extent to which this power game between the US and China is taking place, BRI and its role in this power game, and its geopolitical implication in Bangladesh, and its position in maintaining balance between the two key players of the power struggle.

Rationale of the Study

The BRI has emerged as a significant global phenomenon, shaping the geopolitical landscape and power dynamics between major world powers. The power struggle between the United States of America and China, as key players in the global economy, has far reaching implications for global politics, economics and regional influence. This seminar aims to

explore the power struggle between the United States of America and China within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, with a specific focus on Bangladesh.

By examining the power struggle between China and USA in the context of BRI, this seminar provides a platform to, analyze the motives and strategies employed by both countries, explore the impact on regional dynamics and alliances, assess the economic and infrastructural implications, discuss Bangladesh's balancing act, examine broader geopolitical consequences.

On the whole, this seminar will provide an opportunity to gain valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of global power relations and their impact on Bangladesh's position within the BRI and the wider regional context. As student of political science, we find it a valuable topic for discussion.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study are,

1. To know about China's global ambition through BRI.
2. To find out US-China power struggle regarding BRI and how Bangladesh dealing with it.

Methodology

Research Design: This qualitative study investigates China's global ambitions through the Belt and Road Initiative and the implications of the US-China power struggle in the context of Bangladesh's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. The qualitative method permits a comprehensive examination of the complexities surrounding the power struggle and its effects on Bangladesh. This study utilizes secondary data sources to collect pertinent information from various published sources.

Data Collection: The process of collecting data consisted predominantly of collecting and analyzing secondary data from various sources. These sources included scholarly journals, research reports, policy documents, government publications, reports from international organizations, and credible media sources. The collected data included a variety of viewpoints, analyses, and opinions regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, the US-China power struggle, and their implications for Bangladesh.

Data Analysis: The collected secondary data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Initial data familiarization was achieved through a thorough examination and organization of the collected materials. Coding and categorizing pertinent data regarding the effects of the US-China power conflict on Bangladesh's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative revealed key

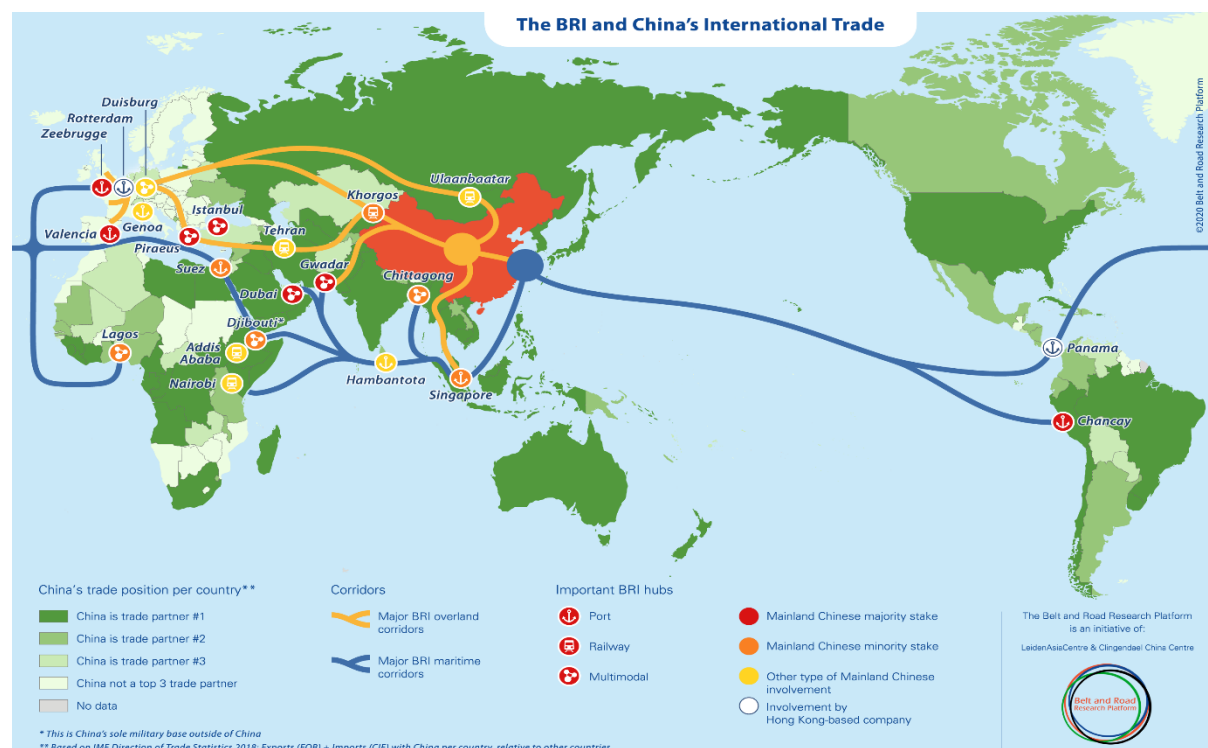
themes and patterns. The analysis centered on identifying ideas, arguments, and perspectives that recurred throughout the sources.

Concept of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) or 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) is a project launched by China to enhance global connectivity and aid in the development of countries. Initiated by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, the initiative's scope and popularity continue to expand. The initiative focuses on establishing networks that will facilitate a more efficient and productive free flow of international trade as well as the physical and digital integration of international markets.

BRI is comprised of the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' and the 'Silk Road Economic Belt'. The Silk Road Economic Belt refers to the land-based route that connects China with Central Asia, Russia, Europe, and the Middle East. Together, they will connect over 65 countries, representing over 62% of the world's population, approximately 35% of the world's trade, and over 31% of the world's gross domestic product. It will consist of highways, railways, and ports, as well as energy, telecommunications, healthcare, and education facilities.

“Announced in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, also known as One Belt, One Road) aims to strengthen China’s connectivity with the world. It combines new and old projects, covers an expansive geographic scope, and includes efforts to strengthen hard infrastructure, soft infrastructure, and cultural ties. As of October 2019, the plan touches 138 countries with a combined Gross Domestic Product of \$29 trillion and some 4.6 billion people.” (China Power Team, 2020).

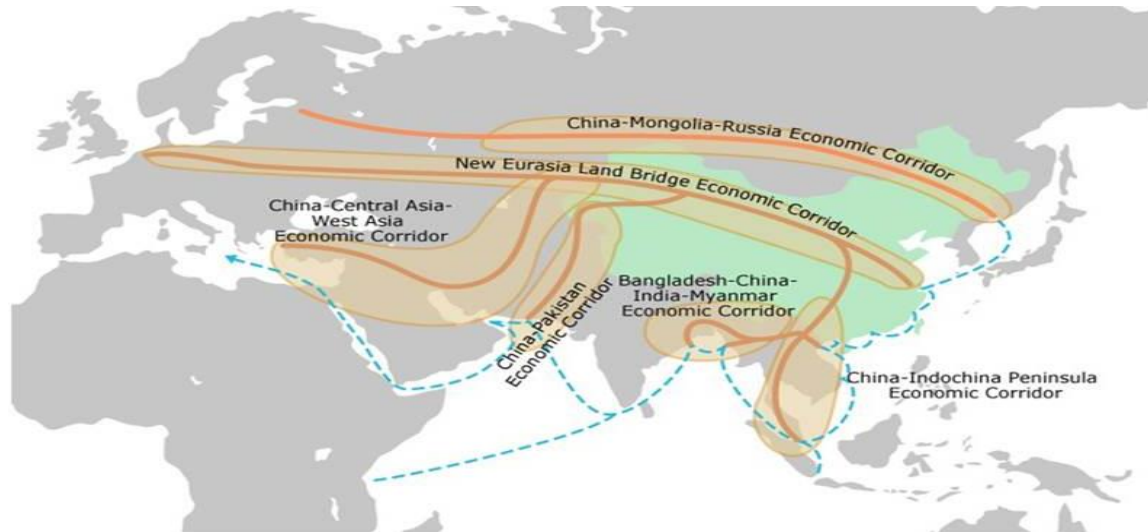


Source, Leiden Asia Centre (2021)

Figure-1: Map showing areas under one belt one road initiative

Six economic corridors have been proposed under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),

1. New Eurasian Land Bridge (Connect Western China to Western Russia)
2. China- Mongolia- Russia Corridor (North China to Eastern Russia via Mongolia)
3. China- Central Asia- West Asia Corridor (Western China to Turkey via Central and West Asia)
4. China- Indochina Peninsula Corridor (Southern China to Singapore via Indochina)
5. China- Pakistan Corridor (South-Western China to and through Pakistan)
6. Bangladesh- China- India- Myanmar Corridor (Southern China to India via Bangladesh and Myanmar)



Source, HKTDC(2017)

Figure-2: Six Economic Corridors of BRI

Objectives of BRI

BRI focuses on five key objectives,

- (I) *'Policy Coordination,'* i.e., the initiative's goal is to encourage countries to work together and cooperate to complete projects.
- (II) *'Cultural Exchange,'* the purpose of which is to foster human-to-human ties, business-to-business interactions, and a deeper cultural understanding in order to advance international cooperation.
- (III) *'Financial Integration'':* BRI is intended to improve monetary and financial cooperation in risk monitoring and management, as well as in general financial interactions. Moreover, it intends to expand currency exchange and its extent.
- (IV) *'Trade and Investment'':* The Belt and Road Initiative aims to make cross-border investments and trade simpler and more cooperative between Belt and Road countries, thereby promoting economic integration.
- (V) *'Facilities Connectivity'':* this focuses on building facilities to facilitate greater connectivity between Belt and Road countries, such as rebuilding and developing ports, removing barriers, fixing roads, etc., as well as creating better networks

through the development of highways, railways, and fiber-optic lines between Belt and Road countries.

According to Chinese President Xi Jinping, as of January 2017, over a hundred nations and international organizations had positively responded to the initiative, and over forty had signed cooperation agreements. Over \$900 billion in BRI-related initiatives are already underway. Notably, the Asian Development Bank estimates that the initiative will cost more than \$22.6 trillion by 2030. Despite this, the initiative has received an overwhelming number of positive responses. With its headquarters in Beijing, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was established in conjunction with the Belt and Road Initiative. AIIB is, according to its official website, "a new multilateral financial institution established to bring Asian nations together to address the continent's formidable infrastructure needs." It has 56 member states and 26 prospective members, including all BRICS nations as well as the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, and Hong Kong. It was formally inaugurated in January 2016, and it currently has 56-member states and 26 prospective members. China is the largest shareholder, accounting for 26.06 percent of ballots. It is the only party with more voting authority than the 14 EU members of AIIB, who hold a combined 19.04% of voting rights. In 2016, the bank committed \$1.73 billion USD to nine development initiatives along the Belt and Road, six of which are in collaboration with other financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Credit is given to the bank for enhancing China's connection to the rest of the world through international financial transactions and infrastructure funding (**The Belt and Road Initiative, 2020**).

China's Global Ambition through BRI

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive infrastructure development project aimed at connecting China with countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The BRI is part of China's larger global ambitions, which involve increasing its political, economic, and strategic influence around the world. Following are significant discussion regarding this,

Economic Perspectives

1. **Increasing Trade and Investment:** One of the primary economic implications of the BRI is the potential for increased trade and investment. By improving connectivity and infrastructure along the BRI route, the BRI aims to facilitate greater trade and investment flows between China and other countries, particularly those in Asia, Europe, and Africa. This has the potential to stimulate economic growth and create new business opportunities for both China and other countries along the BRI route. "The BRI has economic implications for both China and the participating countries. For China, the BRI can help diversify its export markets, access natural resources, and promote its technological standards. For the participating countries, the BRI can offer opportunities for infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and regional cooperation." (**Zhang, 2018**).

For example, China has invested heavily in the construction of the Gwadar port in Pakistan. The port is strategically located near the Strait of Hormuz, through which much of the world's oil passes. Once completed, the port will serve as a gateway for Chinese exports to the Middle East and Europe.

2. **Expansion of Investment in Infrastructure:** Another economic implication of the BRI is the potential for increased investment in infrastructure. Many of the countries along the BRI route have significant infrastructure gaps that need to be addressed in order to support economic growth and development. The BRI seeks to address these gaps by investing in infrastructure projects such as ports, railways, highways, and airports. This has the potential to create jobs, improve access to markets and resources, and enhance overall economic development in these countries. For example, China has invested in the construction of the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia, which will connect the east and west coasts of the country. The railway will boost Malaysia's connectivity and promote economic development in the eastern states of the country.

One significant way the BRI has expanded investment in infrastructure is through the financing of large-scale projects. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a multilateral development bank initiated by China, has been actively involved in funding infrastructure projects under the BRI. For instance, the AIIB provided a \$1.7 billion loan for the construction of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline project, which enhanced natural gas transportation from Turkmenistan to China (**Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 2016**). This project improved regional energy connectivity and strengthened economic ties between Central Asia and China.

Another example of BRI's infrastructure investment is the construction of transportation networks. One prominent project is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship initiative of the BRI. "The CPEC involves building highways, railways, and ports to connect China's northwestern region with Pakistan's Gwadar Port. This project aims to facilitate trade and improve connectivity between China and the Arabian Sea. The CPEC is expected to bring significant economic benefits to Pakistan and promote regional development" (**Sajjad, 2018**). "China has pledged over \$62 billion for the implementation of various infrastructure projects under the CPEC" (**China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Authority, 2022**).

Furthermore, the BRI has supported the development of renewable energy infrastructure. "China has invested heavily in renewable energy projects, including solar and wind power, in BRI participant countries. For instance, in Egypt, China's State Grid Corporation invested \$400 million in building the world's largest solar park in Benban" (**The World Bank, 2018**). This project has not only contributed to Egypt's transition to clean energy but has also attracted further investments and created job opportunities in the region.

3. **Enhancement of China's Economic Influence:** The BRI also fits into China's broader global economic ambitions by promoting China's economic interests and expanding its

economic influence. The BRI is a key part of China's strategy to become a global economic superpower and to enhance its position as a global leader in infrastructure development. By investing in infrastructure projects in other countries, China can increase its influence in those countries and promote the use of Chinese technology, standards, and equipment.

4. **Expanding China's International Market Share:** The BRI is part of China's "going out" strategy, which aims to expand Chinese businesses and investments overseas. The BRI provides an opportunity for Chinese companies to participate in major infrastructure projects, increase their exports, and expand their international market share. By doing so, China is able to reduce its dependence on domestic consumption and exports and promote the growth of its own industries. "Here mainly BRI has three main motivations: to create more secure trade routes for China, to provide an alternative market for China's state-owned companies, and to stimulate the economies of China's central provinces." (Chatham House, 2021)
5. **Enhance the Position as Global Economic Power:** The BRI also fits into China's broader economic strategy, which aims to enhance its position as a global economic power. By investing in infrastructure projects in other countries, China is able to increase its influence in global economic governance and to promote its own economic interests. The BRI also provides China with an opportunity to promote the internationalization of the Chinese currency, the renminbi, and to expand the use of Chinese technology and standards in other countries.
6. **Stimulating Economic Development:** The BRI has the potential to stimulate economic development in other countries. By providing much-needed investment in infrastructure and promoting trade and investment, the BRI can create jobs, promote economic growth, and improve living standards in countries along the BRI route. For example, the BRI includes major projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the China-Malaysia Industrial Park, which have the potential to create jobs, promote economic growth, and improve living standards in these countries.

Political Perspectives

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a major economic and strategic initiative launched by China to enhance its global influence. The BRI is an ambitious plan to create a network of trade, transportation, and communication links across Asia, Europe, and Africa. While the BRI has economic and strategic dimensions, it also has significant political implications that reflect China's global ambitions,

1. **Expanding Influence in Key Regions:** The BRI provides an opportunity for China to expand its influence in key regions around the world. For example, by investing in

infrastructure projects in Central Asia, China is able to increase its influence in a region that is critical to its interests, particularly with regard to access to natural resources and trade routes to Europe.

2. Create or set up a Platform of Global Governance /Promoting Global Governance:

The BRI is a platform for China to promote its vision of global governance. China has criticized the existing international system and has called for a more inclusive and cooperative form of global governance that reflects the interests of developing countries. The BRI provides China with an opportunity to showcase its own governance model and to establish a new model of international cooperation that is more aligned with its own interests.

3. Increasing Influence in International Organization: The political implications of the BRI include strengthening China's ties with other countries, enhancing China's influence in international organizations, and promoting Chinese values and principles of governance. The BRI also serves as a vehicle for China to expand its global economic influence and to address domestic economic challenges, such as excess capacity in certain industries.

China has actively engaged with the UN to promote the BRI agenda and gain support for its initiatives. China has utilized its diplomatic efforts and financial resources to promote the BRI within the UN framework. It has actively promoted the BRI through UN bodies such as the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the UN Development Program (UNDP). China's engagement has allowed it to influence discussions and policy debates on infrastructure development, sustainable development, and regional connectivity within the UN system.

The AIIB, initiated by China, provides financial support for infrastructure projects in BRI countries and beyond. China's significant contribution to the AIIB has allowed it to gain influence over the bank's decision-making processes and priorities. As one of the major shareholders, China can shape the AIIB's policies, project selection, and regional economic integration initiatives in line with the BRI's objectives.

4. Promoting Chinese Political Ideology: The BRI allows China to promote its own political ideology, including its vision of a "community of shared destiny for mankind." China's vision is that the BRI will help to create a new economic order that is more equitable and just, and that the initiative will promote cooperation, mutual benefit, and win-win outcomes. By promoting these values, China is seeking to differentiate itself from the West and present itself as an alternative model of development.

5. Expanding Strategic Presence: The BRI enables China to expand its strategic presence in regions that are crucial to its interests. The initiative includes several projects in Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, which are all critical regions for China's energy security and geostrategic interests. Through the BRI, China is investing in infrastructure projects in these regions, which helps it to establish a foothold and increase its political influence. The BRI's Maritime Silk Road component

aims to enhance China's strategic presence in key maritime areas. China has invested in port infrastructure projects in countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti, strategically positioning itself in critical sea lanes and maritime chokepoints. For instance, the construction of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan provides China with a strategic foothold in the Arabian Sea and access to the Indian Ocean, enhancing its maritime influence and presence. The BRI's initiatives in the Indian Ocean region, often referred to as the "String of Pearls" strategy, further expand China's strategic presence. China has invested in the development and operation of ports and maritime facilities in countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. These investments help secure China's energy supply routes, provide strategic naval logistics support, and increase its influence in the region.

6. **Creating Diplomatic Influence:** The political implications of the BRI are significant. By investing in infrastructure projects in other countries, China is increasing its economic and diplomatic influence in those regions. This influence can be used to advance China's strategic interests, such as securing access to natural resources and markets.
7. **Enhancing Soft Power:** The BRI also fits into China's global ambitions of becoming a superpower. China aims to challenge the United States' global dominance and establish itself as a leading power. The BRI provides China with an opportunity to increase its economic and political influence globally and enhance its soft power. "The BRI also fits into China's global ambitions by enhancing its soft power, expanding its strategic influence, and challenging the US-led world order. The BRI is seen by some as a manifestation of China's vision of a multipolar world, where China plays a leading role in shaping global governance and norms." (Zhang, 2018)

Strategical Perspectives

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive infrastructure development project that seeks to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through a network of railways, highways, ports, and other infrastructure projects. The BRI is part of China's global ambition to increase its economic and geopolitical influence by expanding its reach into new markets and territories. Here's a detailed discussion of China's global ambition through the BRI in strategic perspectives:

1. **Economic Goals:** China's primary goal with the BRI is to expand its economic influence and establish new markets for its goods and services. By investing in infrastructure projects in developing countries, China hopes to increase its access to resources, raw materials, and new markets for its exports. This will help the Chinese economy to maintain its growth and ensure long-term sustainability.

2. **Geopolitical Goals:** The BRI is also a part of China's broader geopolitical strategy to increase its global influence and reduce the influence of the United States and other Western powers. By investing in infrastructure projects in developing countries, China is seeking to increase its soft power and win allies in regions that have traditionally been dominated by Western powers.
3. **Strategic Goals:** The BRI is also a part of China's broader strategic goal of achieving regional dominance in Asia and beyond. By investing in infrastructure projects in key strategic locations, such as ports and airports, China is seeking to establish a network of strategic assets that it can use to project its power and influence in the region.
4. **Cultural Goals:** The BRI is also a part of China's broader cultural ambition to promote Chinese culture and values around the world. By investing in infrastructure projects in developing countries, China is seeking to promote Chinese language, culture, and values, which it sees as an important part of its global identity.
5. **Military Goals:** The BRI is helping China to build its military capabilities, particularly in the areas of maritime and air power. By investing in port and airport infrastructure projects, China is establishing a network of strategic assets that it can use to project its military power in the region.
6. **Security Goals:** Finally, the BRI is also a part of China's broader security strategy to secure its borders and protect its interests in regions that have traditionally been unstable or vulnerable to external influence. By investing in infrastructure projects in these regions, China is seeking to increase its control over key strategic locations and reduce the risk of instability and conflict.

The US-China Power Struggle and BRI

The relationship between the United States of America and The People's Republic of China can be characterized by contest and dominance for power in the global political arena, which has become more manifest since the turn of the century. The economic, political, and military clout of both nations has grown exponentially in recent decades, creating a complex web of interdependence and competition that is changing the global balance of power. From trade disputes and military tensions to technological rivalry and ideological differences, the US-China hegemonic power struggle is one of the defining geopolitical challenges of current time. The two main player of this power struggle, namely the United States and China both have different ends but these goals connect to one thing and that is – power. At one side, there is the US, which has played the role of the hegemon, especially after the collapse of the USSR in 1990, is trying to maintain its status quo in the world politics, which is to remain at the lead position. On the other hand, China, which is considered to be the revisionist state in this context is seemingly trying to replace the US. Many already think that China has replaced and now

playing the role of the USSR in this new “cold war”. And as Fernand Braudel puts it, “Just as a country at the center of a world-economy can hardly be expected to give up its privileges at international level.” (Estachy, 2020)

The Historical Context: This power game between the US and China is a complex issue, having its roots in historical events that spans several centuries. Western powers including the United States, have played a significant role in shaping China’s history as they did to other countries during the colonialist era, both through economic and political influence and military interventions.

The Opium Wars of the 19th century marked a turning point in China’s relationship with the West, as British forces defeated Chinese armies and forced China to open up to foreign trade and investment. This led to a period of intense Western economic and political influence in China, as foreign powers established spheres of influence and imposed unequal treaties on China.

The rise of Communist China in 1949 and the subsequent Cold War created a new context for the relationship between China and the United States. The US supported the Nationalist government in Taiwan and imposed a trade embargo on Communist China, leading to decades of hostility and suspicion between the two nations. Taiwan is still a major area of conflict between the countries, where US recognizes Taiwan as a sovereign democratic nation, and China considers it a part of its territory.

However, in the 1970s, US-China relations began to thaw as a result of changing geopolitical circumstances and the emergence of shared strategic interests. The normalization of diplomatic relations in 1979 and the subsequent economic reforms in China opened up new avenues for cooperation and competition between the two nations.

In recent years, however, tensions between the United States and China have escalated as a result of a range of factors, including trade imbalances, territorial disputes, human rights issues, and technological competition. The historical context of the relationship between the United States and China provides important insights into the current power struggle between these two global superpowers, which is likely to shape the course of international relations in the coming decades.

Trade Imbalances: The trade imbalance between the US and China stands out as a primary factor contributing to tensions between the two nations. China has been the largest exporter of goods to the US since the early 2000s, and the US has consistently run a trade deficit with China over this period. In 2020, the US trade deficit with China was \$310 billion, down from a peak of \$418.2 billion in 2018. In 2020, the US exports to China were only \$124 billion, while imports from China were \$435.5 billion (**The Balance Economy, 2021**). The Trump administration launched a trade war with China in 2018, imposing tariffs on a range of Chinese goods in an effort to reduce the trade deficit. On March 23, 2018, President Trump announced a first wave of tariffs on \$50 billion worth products imported from China and in September of the same year, an additional \$200 billion was subject to tariff. (Estachy, 2020). Although the Biden administration has taken a less confrontational approach, the trade imbalance remains a source of tension between the two nations.



Source: (Statista, 2019)

Territorial Disputes: Another issue driving tensions between the US and China is territorial disputes in the South China Sea and Taiwan. This territorial and other economic and political disputes with China escalated more when along with the Pentagon, United States Department of Defense, other US agencies started considering China to be the main source of the 2008 crisis and the difficulties that followed it. “The notion that international trade, economy, and defense are linked is the main reason why the Pentagon is able to once again prevail in its view, considering that China is the main threat to US national security.” (Estachy, 2020)



Source: (Asia Times Maps, 2018)

China claims a large swath of the South China Sea, including islands and reefs that are also claimed by other countries, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. China has built military installations on some of these islands, which has led to concerns about its growing military presence in the region. The US has conducted freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea in response to China's claims, which has further escalated tensions between the two countries. In addition, the US has maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity with regards to Taiwan, which China considers to be a renegade province. The US has continued to sell weapons to Taiwan and has pledged to support its defense in the event of an attack by China, which has further strained relations between China and the USA. Condoleezza Rice, future adviser for the National Security advisor and US Secretary of State, wrote in February 2000, "China is a great power with unresolved vital interests, particularly concerning Taiwan. China resents the role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. This means that China is not a 'status quo' power but one that would like to alter Asia's balance of power in its own favor. That alone makes it a strategic competitor, not the 'strategic partner' the Clinton administration once called it." (Estachy, 2020)

Human Rights Abuse: Human rights issues have also played a role in the US-China power struggle, particularly in relation to China's treatment of its Muslim Uighur Minority. The Chinese government has been reportedly alleged to engaging in widespread human rights abuses in Xinjian province, including forced labor, sterilization, and internment in "reeducation" camps. The US has imposed sanctions on Chinese officials and entities involved in these abuses, while China has accused the US of interfering in its internal affairs.

Technological Competition: Technological competition is another significant factor in this power game, particularly in relation to the development of 5G technology and artificial intelligence. China has invested heavily in these areas and has been accused of engaging in cyber espionage and intellectual property theft to gain a competitive advantage. The Commission on the Theft of Intellectual Property estimated in March 2018 that, "the annual cost of counterfeiting, software piracy, and theft of trade secrets to the American economy is more than \$225 billion a year, and could be even be as high as \$600 billion, and that China is the main source of offenders." (Estachy, 2020). The US has responded by imposing sanctions on Chinese tech companies and restricting their access to US markets.

BRI: China's Tool for Dominance

The BRI, while having the capacity to boost economic growth and development in participating countries, it has also been a major source of tension in the ongoing power struggle between the United States and China.

The BRI has become a focal point of strategic competition between the two nations, as each seeks to exert influence over the countries and regions involved in the initiative. From the US perspective, the BRI is seen as a challenge to its traditional dominance in global trade and investment, and as a threat to the rules-based international order that the US has long

championed. The US has been critical of the BRI, citing concerns over its lack of transparency, environmental impact, and potential for debt trap diplomacy.

China, on the other hand, views the BRI as a key tool for expanding its economic and political influence, both regionally and globally. The initiative is seen as a way for China to create new markets for its goods and services, and to promote the use of its currency, the renminbi, in international trade. China has invested heavily in the BRI, providing funding for a range of infrastructure projects, including ports, highways, railways, and power plants.

However, it is important to note that assessing the impact of the BRI in China's power contest with USA requires a more comprehensive analysis, considering multiple factors, and acknowledging diverse perspectives.

One aspect of China's increasing geopolitical influence is its expanding economic presence in the BRI-participating countries. China has invested heavily in the partner countries in infrastructure and development projects. Apart from the developmental activity such as enhancing infrastructure connectivity and stimulate economic growth, the BRI is also suspected to aiming at increasing economic influence on the recipient countries. For example, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under the BRI, involves the construction of highways, railways, and energy infrastructure in Pakistan. This project has contributed to closer ties between China and Pakistan, promoting China's geopolitical influence in the region. Similarly, China's investment on the port of Gwadar, Pakistan, as a part of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, is expected to provide a crucial geopolitical privilege. Gwadar is strategically located near the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping route. The development of Gwadar Port has the potential to provide China a crucial maritime access point to the Arabian Sea, allowing it to bypass the Malacca Strait and reduce its reliance of the South China Sea for trade (Ali, 2020).

In terms of political influence, the BRI has allowed China to strengthen its relationships with participating countries. China has used the initiative as a platform for diplomatic engagement, promoting its own development model and fostering partnerships.

Furthermore, China has used the BRI to promote its own technological standards, such as the Digital Silk Road and the development of 5G networks. By exporting its technological capabilities, China aims to shape the digital infrastructure and governance systems of participating countries, potentially giving it an advantage in the digital economy and data governance. China's investments on Brazil's energy sector and 5G technology are noteworthy in this context.

The growing influence of China in not only in Asia, Africa and Europe as it was initially planned, but also in Latin America has infused concerns within the United States. Along with the economic objective of the BRI, United States takes its greater strategic purpose under primary concern. Many of the US official questioned its transparency, stated their concerns regarding the debt trap diplomacy as it is called, and its negative impact on environment. A number of countries, USA being at the top, have accused China for Sri Lanka's economic crisis, terming as the debt-trap diplomacy. Although, Deborah Brautigam, a professor at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at John Hopkins University, refuse the accusations

of debt-trap diplomacy against China calling the theory a meme, as she believes it became popular due to “human negativity bias” (Brautigam, 2020). She has shown in her research, published in 2019 that most of the countries have voluntarily participated in China’s BRI project and accepted positive working experience with China.

However, Deborah Brautigam has further stated that the reason for the popularity of the debt-trap diplomacy theory is based on anxiety of the USA and other western countries about the rise of China (Brautigam, 2020).

BRI: How is the U.S.A countering it?

The United States has undertaken a number of strategies to inhibit China’s growing influence and maintain its strategic interests and influence in the regions that China is trying to exert its dominance. These strategies include both direct conflict with China, for example economic sanctions and criticisms of China’s foreign policy especially relating to BRI, and undertaking of strategies similar to BRI to build an alternative to it.

The most noticeable among these strategies is the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The United States has pursued an Indo-Pacific strategy to enhance its engagement and partnerships with countries in the region. This includes strengthening alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

The QUAD was formed in 2007. It is a strategic partnership between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. The group seeks to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region, enhance regional security, and promote economic development and prosperity. The QUAD has emerged as a key player in countering the Belt and Road Initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region. The QUAD countries see the BRI as a challenge to their strategic interests, and have taken steps to counter China’s influence. They have launched a number of initiatives to promote infrastructure development and investment in the region, including the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) and the Blue Dot Network.

The AAGC, an initiative aimed at promoting economic cooperation and connectivity between Asia and Africa, was jointly launched by India and Japan in 2017 as an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Although the AAGC is directly led by U.S., it could be an alternative to the BRI in the development of Asian and African countries.

The Blue Dot Network is another initiative, led by the United States, along with Japan and Australia. The Blue Dot Network was officially launched in November 2019. According to the U.S. department of State, “The Blue Dot Network aims to promote quality infrastructure investment that is open and inclusive, transparent, economically viable, Paris Agreement aligned, financially, environmentally and socially sustainable, and compliant with international standards, laws and regulations.” (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The words in the statement themselves reflect its positions against the BRI. Whereas the BRI is accused of being ambiguous, lack of transparency, risk for debt trap, the United States’ Blue Dot Network presents it as transparent and economically viable.

Apart from these clear depictions of power chase, both countries are trying to build strong ties with other countries to gain and consolidate more influence on the other. China through its BRI projects have significant improvement in this context as it has enhanced its relationship with South and South-East Asian, African and Latin American countries. On the other hand, USA maintains its strong relationship with countries like India, Japan, Australia, and other European countries to impose diplomatic pressure on China.

The BRI has been a source of competition between the US and China in the realm of soft power as well. While China has sought to promote the BRI as a means of fostering greater cooperation and understanding between nations, the US has sought to counter this narrative by highlighting the risks and challenges associated with the initiative.

BRI: How is Bangladesh Dealing with it?

Bangladesh officially joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2016, right before China's President Xi Jinping's visit to the country. During his visit both countries have signed several MoU under the Belt and Road Initiative. Under the BRI, China has pledged almost \$40 billion in aid, loans and other assistance in Bangladesh, making it the second largest borrower of loans from China in South Asia after Pakistan (**The Diplomat, 2021**). The China-Bangladesh relationship has grown exponentially since 2009, and the joining of Bangladesh in BRI has strengthened the tie. Difficulties in getting funds from other financial organization, for example the World Bank's reluctance in funding the Padma Bridge, has made Bangladesh lean more over China. China has now become the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh. The death of BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor) at its initial phase has not prevented Bangladesh from taking its relationship with China further. China has already invested in some of the major infrastructure projects in Bangladesh including Padma Bridge Rail Link, Bangabandhu Tunnel and Dasher Kandi Sewage treatment plan (**The Diplomat, 2021**).

Nonetheless, maintaining this state of relationship with China was in fact challenging for Bangladesh as it had to maintain friendly relationships with other countries such as India, USA, and Japan who feel threaten by China's emerging power. Additionally, leaning on only one country will eventually make a country totally dependent on that country which poses serious threat to healthy development and sovereignty. Maintaining relationship with the USA and China is equally important as they are the two largest and most important economic power in the world. It is important for Bangladesh to keep both door open – China and the West – to hold its development running.

Bangladesh is situated in a strategically important location in South Asia connected to the Bay of Bengal making the have interests in the region. It is surrounded almost totally by India. This makes Bangladesh to choose its foreign policy with India and China carefully as it intends to not depend entirely on one country and go against anyone. Furthermore, USA as a global power has also interest involved in this area as it tries to prevent China from exerting its influence

over this South Asian and Southeast Asian region. The emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative and the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) have added further complexity to Bangladesh's foreign policy dynamics.

Regarding BRI and its peaceful relation with India, Bangladesh has faced complex situation in taking decisive decisions. Apart from being the biggest strategic partner, China is also the largest arms supplier to Bangladesh. It has created tension in the neighbor country – India, as it has an antagonistic relation with China. For example, in response to China offering Bangladesh USD 38 billion as investments and loans India has also offered loans to counter China's effort to curb China's influence in this region (**Chakma, 2019**).

Quad, a quadrilateral group, led by the USA seeks to prevent China's growing control over the South and Southeast Asian region, is also in act. When Bangladesh got the offer to join Quad, China lashed out against it. Chinese Ambassador to Dhaka Li Ji-ming, on May 10, 2021 has said in a virtual discussion, "Bangladesh's decision to join the anti-China alliance will harm bilateral relations." (**The Financial Express, 2021**). Bangladesh as a sovereign country considers the decision of it joining Quad or any alliances as its own accord, and didn't want China to interfere. However, Bangladesh has not joined the Quad considering its relationship with China.

Although, Bangladesh did not join the Quad, it has always good and active relationship with the Quad countries, like India, Japan, USA. Japan is another major development partner of Bangladesh involved in some of the major development project in Bangladesh including Dhaka Metro Rail Project, Matarbari LNG Terminal and Power Plant Project, Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit Development Project. About 321 Japanese companies are operating in Bangladesh (**The Daily Star, 2021**).

Bangladesh's depart from Sonadia Deep-Sea project with China could be given as an example of the power contest in this region. The idea of a deep sea-port was first appeared in 2006 and China proposed to build the port in Sonadia. But eventually Bangladesh moved away from Chinese investment showing environmental concerns. But, it is believed by many that geopolitics had a role in this context. At a cabinet meeting in late-August, the Hasina government formally revoked the Sonadia Deep Sea Port Authority Act 2012 and announced the cancellation of the project (**The Diplomat, 2020**). Later, Bangladesh has decided to build the port in Matarbari accepting offer from Japan. This shift from Sonadia to Matarbari, is an example of geopolitical complexity regarding the game of influence in Bangladesh. India was concerned with Bangladesh taking China's offer, as it was a way of influencing in the Bay of Bengal. This decision of cancellation came as a relief to New Delhi. The decision of cancelling the Sonadia project under Chinese investment can be seen as a balancing act in response to concerns of other Quad countries about China's growing influence.

Bangladesh's participation in connectivity initiatives, such as the Asian Development Bank's Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), can also be seen to be influenced by the power contest. BIMSTEC serves as a platform for cooperative actions for development among the countries in the region. This enables Bangladesh to balance its relationship with engaging countries without depending on one.

Bangladesh's current relationship with China could be a reason for the existing tension of the country with the United States. The USA has long been posing concerns regarding countries involving with Chinese investment projects.

These instances reflect Bangladesh careful position on maintaining healthy balance in its foreign policy. However, Bangladesh's foreign policy is neutral and transparent. "Friendship with all" represents the significance of Bangladesh's foreign policy. To ensure future developments Bangladesh must frame its foreign policy which would balance both of the powers. Proper and careful considerations in foreign policy will facilitate its systematic and planned development.

Conclusion

The BRI has been playing as a major instrument in China's pursuit of expanded regional and global influence through its ambitious goals of infrastructure development and connectivity since its birth in 2013. But concerns have been posed by other global players, particularly the USA, regarding the extensive political, strategic and economic influence associated with the BRI, as it appears as a challenge to USA's existing dominance in the world. The Pacific, Southeast and Eurasian region are consistently moving under China's umbrella of dominance. Hence, the USA is undertaking strategies, alliances, joint actions to prevent China's emerging power. This power contest encompasses economic, political, and geopolitical dimensions as interests are safeguarded and the international order is shaped.

Economically, the BRI faced suspicion regarding the sustainability, transparency, and impact of the BRI on recipient countries. Attention has been drawn to China's rapid economic growth and financial support for BRI projects, raising questions about its intentions and the long-term consequences for participation nations. But still significant number of countries have signed for the BRI projects, and it has been setting real example of development to many of these countries including Bangladesh. In contrast of the hard-to-get loans and funds from western international organizations like the World Bank, the BRI appears to be more convenient to developing countries.

Politically and strategically, the discussion regarding BRI has gained more importance. The United States considers the BRI as China's determination to gain more dominance in participant countries and regions. The power contest between the USA and China extends beyond economics. Military presence, alliances, and diplomatic maneuvers are at play as influence is sought and the geopolitical landscape is shaped. The BRI has prompted strategic calculations, powers, international organizations, and recipient countries affected by BRI projects.

In this power contest between two global superpowers, Bangladesh finds itself engaged in a delicate balancing game. As a recipient of BRI investments, Bangladesh's primary goal is to leverage economic benefits, and ensuring the protection of its national interest and maintaining equilibrium in its relationship with other countries at the same time.

Since its initiation until now, in this 13 years BRI has faced many criticisms, especially from western countries, particularly the USA and its allies, but it has shown consistency in its activities. It has faced both praise and criticism. Proponents argue that it promotes economic growth, facilitates trade, and fosters connectivity among countries. They believe it can help bridge infrastructure gaps, particularly in developing regions, and create opportunities for shared prosperity. Critics, on the other hand, raise concerns about the financial and environmental sustainability of BRI projects, as well as potential debt burdens on participating countries. Further investigations are to be conducted to examine the positive and negative aspects of the BRI and also on how to make it more effective and less conflict-provocative to ensure sustainable economic development as well as global stability.

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