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Belt, Road, and Resistance the Political Economy of China's Global Infrastructure Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

Background: The BRI is a global development strategy that was adopted by the Chinese government in 2013, and it focuses on infrastructure development and investments in countries and international organizations in Asia, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas. While the BRI promised win-win cooperation, BRI projects have raised worries over debt sustainability, opacity and local hostility in a number of host countries.

Aim: This article seeks to interrogate China's infrastructure diplomacy under the BRI through an analysis on how countries where BRI projects are located, such as Pakistan, Kenya, and Laos accommodate, contest, and relate to BRI projects. It examines the relationships of structural power, governance and local stakeholder reactions.

Method: The study uses a qualitative comparative case study design and methods, which draws on document analysis, stakeholder reports, government publications and secondary literature for 2021-2025. The study focuses on the adoption, absorption, and counteraction around three BRI key projects: China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Kenya Standard Gauge Railway, and Laos–China Railway.

Results: There are significant differences in host country reactions. National

governments may see BRI straightforwardly as a strategic, economic and development opportunity, but local communities or civil society actors may see degradation based on debt bondage, marginalisation and exclusion from laying down BRI-ties. BRI projects' success or failure may depend less on the completion of materialist plans than on institutional adjustment, inclusive governance, and sociopolitical compatibility.

Conclusion: China's BRI is driven by not just geopolitical ambition but complicated local dynamics. On the one hand, a realization of host country agency is essential for the assessment of the initiative's long-term success and legitimacy.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, infrastructure diplomacy, resistance, debt dependency, host country agency, China, Pakistan, Kenya, Laos

INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China is among the most ambitious visions of global infrastructure and connectivity in the 21st century, reaching across continents with roads, railways, ports, power plants, and digital networks. Recent studies place BRI not only as an economic development agenda but as part of China's global infrastructure diplomacy, where each investment holds geopolitical and institutional realignments significance (Jones & Hameiri, 2026). The wide-ranging mission of the initiative has created new trade paths amongst member countries, it has also sparked discussion of norms of sovereign independence, governance, and sustainable debt among participating entities (Li et al, 2021; Wang, 2023).



Critical perspectives have shown that BRI projects come in different shapes and forms, and their actual results may largely depend on local institutional capacities and how they interact on the ground with Chinese models (that are indeed discouraged to interact in a fixed, uniform and opaque way with local contexts) (Nedopil, 2024). The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), for instance, is symptomatic of both promise and complexity: as a would-be flagship line cutting through South Asia, its spotlight links with governance failures,

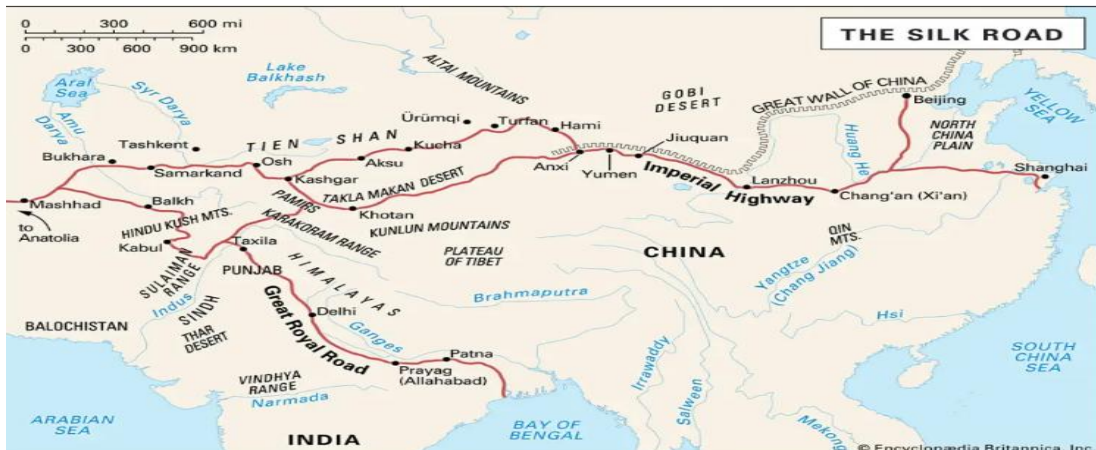
under-performance challenges and security tensions (Landry, 2023). Both Gwadar and other similar cases demonstrate that the distinction between transformative infrastructure investments and instruments of geopolitical leverage remains rather hazy (Sharma, 2023).

Another is the debt dynamics of the BRI. Some analysts point to skyrocketing debts that are directly connected to Chinese loans—the result of what some in the United States cast as “debt-trap diplomacy”—even as emerging evidence complicated that picture by emphasizing that loan terms are negotiated and context dependent and that the Chinese allow for different repayment outcomes (Lowy Institute, 2025). Furthermore, the record size of the 2025 repayment schedules demonstrate how large macro financial pressures may impact both recipient-country policy and China’s strategic reorientation (Lowy Institute, 2025).

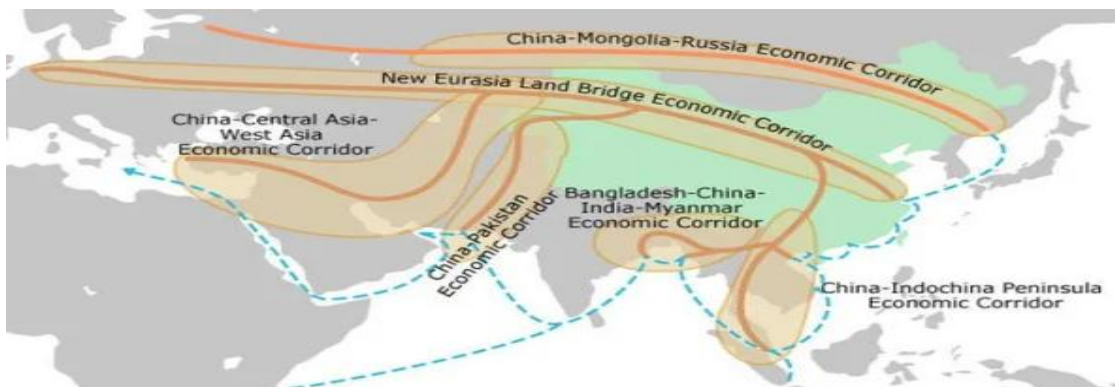


The transformation of the BRI is a result of internal and external pressures, and recent changes involve scaling back to focus on smaller, ‘high-quality’ sustainable projects – such as those in renewable energy, green finance and critical mineral extraction – in response to growing resistance, environmental opposition and financial retrenchment (Wang 2023). Green energy investments became a large prominent new focal area by 2023, as signalling both China's climate promises and its effort to recast the BRI story (Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2023).

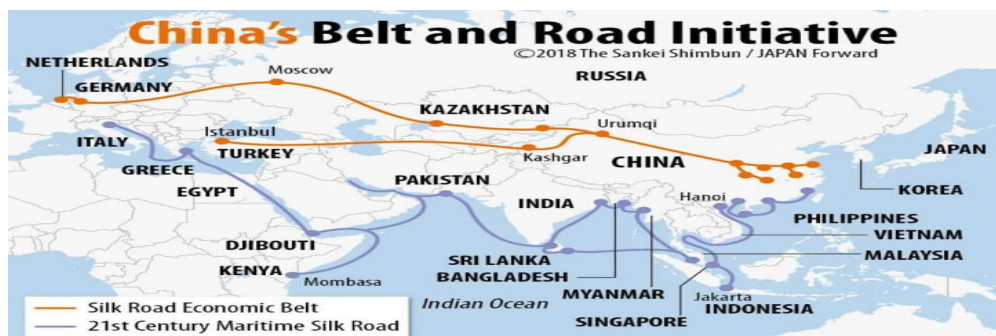
Source: Adapted from Reeves, 2019 Resistance to the Belt and Road has taken place on multiple registers local opposition to land grabs and resource distribution; civil society campaigns against environmental impacts; and at a wider geopolitical level in counter-frames like the G7’s Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (Aamir, 2021). Such coordinated responses, then, go some way to capture the ‘messy, contingent and uneven’ character of BRI implementation across sites (Sidaway et al., 2020).



Institutionally, BRI is executed through fragmented, multi-layered forms of governance on both the Chinese and the host country side. While decision-making often trickles down through central ministries, provincial authorities and state-owned companies, the result is often a patchwork of measures nothing like those the official national strategy is asking for (Nedopil, 2024). This disaggregation raises important questions around coherence, risk oversight and stakeholder alignment in BRI planning and delivery (Jones & Hameiri, 2024).



Furthermore, BRI's infrastructure diplomacy goes beyond the "hard infrastructure" with regard to standards for technology, frameworks of financial governance and digital connectivity--a kind of "sharp power," and the transnational populism wishes to refashion norms of global public goods, however, confronts pushback on account of muddled governance mechanisms and accountability vacuums (Wang, 2023; Sharma, 2023).



Overall, this corpus of literature locates the Belt, Road, and Resistance framework as a vital optic through which to understand China's global infrastructure diplomacy in terms of the interplay of investment, power, local agency, and contestation. This multi-level political economy approach reveals how grand infrastructure aspirations succeed—or fail—on the ground in an environment influenced by governance, debt, environmental, and social constraints (Jones & Hameiri, 2024; Li et al., 2021).

Problem Statement

While there has been a wide-ranging literature examining China's Belt and Road Initiative, existing work categorizes infrastructure projections analytically as unitary geopolitical or economic initiatives, and underplay their lumpy and contested realities at the local level. There is a clear need for synthetic analysis that reflects how infrastructure, finance, local resistance, and institutional fragmentation combine to condition divergent results across BRI cases—arguably even more so now as the BRI gradually takes on greener and more localized engagements amidst growing scrutiny and debt-related pressures (Nedopil, 2024; Lowy Institute, 2025).

Significance of the Study

Combining macro political economy analysis with nuanced localized case studies, this research also offers insights about how Chinese global infrastructure diplomacy works in practice. It provides useful lessons for policy-makers and development actors, national and local people's representatives, and development partners in governance, debt sustainability and community engagement – a particularly timely as infrastructure competition mounts globally, while developing countries negotiate sovereignty, finance and development priorities in changing global governance landscapes (Wang, 2023; Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2023).

Aim of the Study

This dissertation has the objective of critically assessing the political economy of China's Belt and Road infrastructure diplomacy by investigating the dynamics of financing architecture, governance dispersion, transition to green, and contestation in some representative BRI projects in the period 2021-2025. By way of comparison and context, it aims to shed light on when and how infrastructure diplomacy succeeds in reaching its developmental and connectivity goals, and when and how it fails or meets resistance (Jones & Hameiri, 2024; Aamir, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study is guided by a plurality of critical international relations (IR) and political economy frameworks and uses a qualitative comparative case study design. The research is also guided by economic statecraft, structural power and dependency, as well as soft power and global South-South cooperation theories (Jones & Hameiri, 2024). It discusses how China's infrastructure diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is enhancing its geopolitical influence, and the extent to which this is being received and resisted by different levels of actors.

Three particularly suitable BRI host countries (Pakistan, Kenya, and Laos) are selected as main case studies based on considerations of geopolitical importance, regime type variation, and degree of BRI-related contestation, according to Wang (2023) and Nedopil. (2024). This supports cross-case analysis of the governance, negotiation and contestation of BRI projects in diverse domestic political and institutional environments.

Data is collected through multi-source triangulation consisting of government documents, policy briefs, official Chinese white papers, loan agreements, and project-specific memorandums of understanding (MoUs). Reports from international organizations: World Bank, AIIB, UNCTAD Think Tank outputs (Lowy Institute, Boston University Global Development Policy Center) from 2021–2025 are used to reinforce institutional, financial and geopolitical context (Lowy Institute, 2025; Boston University GDP Center, 2023). It also draws on media reports, NGO positions and civil society documentation from host countries to track cases of local resistance, protest or governance pushback to Chinese-led infrastructure schemes. Themes cover: (i) financial conditionality; (ii) institutional fragmentation; (iii) sovereignty tensions; (iv) environmental sustainability; (v) and local agency, which are inductively generated through a process of iterative coding through NVivo.

Analytically, the article subscribes to an hermeneutic logic based on IR-methodology and informed by problematics about power asymmetries, the diffusion of norms, and the contestation of governance (Sharma, 2023). It is being examined through discourse analysis on how Chinese infrastructure diplomacy is discursively framed by the Chinese actors themselves and the local political elites and, in turn, how framings contribute to an overall understanding of legitimacy and project outcomes (Aamir, 2021). By taking into account top-down (state-to-state) as well as bottom-up (community or civil society) encounters, the research captures the dual dynamics of projection and resistance at the heart of the political economy of the BRI. The methodology makes it possible to read the BRI as less as a monolithic geopolitical strategy but as fragmented, negotiated and sometimes contested processes that are informed by China’s institutional preferences for the corridor economies and agency from recipient states and their publics (Jones & Hameiri 2024).

Results

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Key BRI Projects in Selected Case Countries

Country	Project Name	Sector	Estimated Cost (USD Billion)	Chinese Financing (%)	Year of Launch	Status (2025)
Pakistan	China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)	Transport & Energy	62.0	80%	2015	Ongoing (Partially Delayed)
Kenya	Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway	Infrastructure	3.8	85%	2014	Completed (Underutilized)

Laos	China–Laos Railway	Transport	5.9	70%	2016	Operational (Debt Concerns)
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The comparative summary indicates that all three of these BRI projects are major infrastructure projects, but differ in terms of financial structure and progress of implementation. Pakistan’s CPEC is still semi-suspended, given the large investment, Kenya’s railway is finished but idle, and in Laos, the railway brings debt sustainability issues. This indicates that the stronger the implementing capacity of local authorities, political stability and planning functions that can be exercised; it is not just a question of input from aid coming from China factors.

Table 2: Thematic Coding of Resistance Narratives Across Cases

Theme	Pakistan (CPEC)	Kenya (SGR)	Laos (Railway)
Sovereignty Threats	High (Gwadar Port protests, land rights)	Medium (Concerns over port collateral)	High (Debt-for-influence anxiety)
Debt Sustainability	Very High (IMF warnings)	High (Public concern, IMF criticism)	Very High (External debt >60% of GDP)
Local Employment Grievances	High (Low Pakistani hires)	Medium (Imported labor from China)	Medium (Chinese labor dominance)
Transparency Issues	High (Opaque MoUs)	High (Redacted agreements)	Medium (Lack of parliamentary oversight)
Environmental Impact	Medium (Coal plants)	Low (Railway alignment minimal impact)	High (Tunnel systems through protected forests)

On the other hand, opposition to BRI initiatives in host countries takes various forms, albeit revolving around similar core themes such as concerns over sovereignty, debt reliance, employment, transparency, and the environment. Levels of perceived sovereignty, as well as debt-related threats, are highest in Pakistan and Laos, and more moderate in Kenya. The results call attention to how structural conditions, and governance contexts affect the intensity and character of local contestations.

Table 3: Stakeholder Perceptions of Chinese Infrastructure Diplomacy

Stakeholder Group	Perception of China’s Role	Major Concerns	Expressed Support/Resistance
Government Officials	Strategic partner for development	Sovereignty trade-offs, repayment	High support (especially in Pakistan)
Civil Society/NGOs	Developmental but neo-colonial risk	Employment, environment, governance	Moderate to strong resistance
Local	Mixed – job hopes	Displacement, lack	Strong resistance in

Communities	vs. displacement	of benefits	Kenya & Pakistan
Chinese Diplomats	Mutual benefit, win-win cooperation	Perceived image distortion	Strong support, narrative control
International Observers	Debt trap, geopolitical tool	Lack of conditionality, transparency	Cautious criticism

Perceptions by stakeholders mirror a divided story of Chinese-infrastructure diplomacy where government is generally positive, while CSOs and communities are skeptical or opposed. Non-state stakeholders critiques Job losses and job selection, transparency and repayment risks are the main criticisms raised by non-state stakeholders, notably in Kenya and Pakistan. This disconnect is an indicator of the difference in state-level coordination in concert with China’s objectives and the dissatisfaction at the grassroots level with the actual outcomes of practice.

Table 4: Soft Power vs. Structural Power Indicators in BRI Diplomacy

Country	Cultural Exchanges	Confucius Institutes	Military Cooperation	Economic Dependence Index (EDI)	Soft Power Score (1–10)	Structural Power Score (1–10)
Pakistan	High	5	Yes (Joint Exercises)	0.82	7.5	9.0
Kenya	Moderate	3	No	0.65	6.0	7.5
Laos	Low	1	No	0.91	5.5	8.5

Economic Dependence Index (EDI) based on trade volume + infrastructure reliance + bilateral aid

Soft and structural power in China’s BRI diplomacy It is clear that a difference exists between soft and structural power as demonstrated by China’s BRI diplomacy; where high structure power has been recorded in Pakistan and Laos as a consequence of economic dependence and military cooperation. Indicators of soft power, namely cultural exchanges and Confucius Institutes, are less pronounced, indicating that China’s engagement was weighted more on economic muscle than on cultural assimilation. These dynamics suggest that BRI projects serve as instruments of strategic influence, rather than simply diplomatic or altruistic development endeavors.

Table 5: Project Outcomes vs. Resistance Intensity

Country	Project Completion	Major Challenges	Intensity of Resistance	Institutional Adaptation	Overall Outcome Rating
Pakistan	60% (Ongoing)	Militancy, governance, delays	High	Low	Medium
Kenya	100% (Underused)	Cost recovery, ticket pricing	Moderate	Moderate	Low–Medium
Laos	95%	Debt burden,	Low	High (Debt	Medium–High

	(Operational)	environmental cost		restructuring)	
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Project results suggest even when construction is completed, the project benefit is often not high, as in Kenya's under-utilized railway even if completely implemented. Levels of resistance and institutional adaptability seem consistent with the overall performance of a project; high adaptation lead to improved performance – Laos highlights this with fears of debt. This implies that post-implementation governance and resistance management are key to the sustainability of BRI projects.

DISCUSSION

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become one of the world's most ambitious infrastructure and development programs, changing the geopolitical landscape, trade relations and the narrative on development. Yet despite its scale, and the win-win narrative harboured by advocates, case study evidence from Pakistan, Kenya, and Laos indicates a large gap between state-driven plans and local outcomes. As the evidence suggests, high level of debt reliance, local employment complains, and transparency of BRI projects have continued to erode the confidence and legitimacy of the BRI (Hurley et al., 2021; Eom, 2023). These issues indicate a complicated dance between structural power, political economy, and resistance at the macro level of China's infrastructure diplomacy.

Resistance to BRI in the example countries is not monolithic, but is influenced by local political institutions, civil society activity, and material conditions. In Pakistan, where CPEC was cast as a national strategic imperative, opposition even came from marginalized minority groups in Baluchistan protesting against both displacement of land and lack of access to development benefits (Zeng, 2022). In the case of Kenya, despite the completion of the SGR, underutilization of the line and escalating debts caused public uproar and a debate on sovereignty, notably on the Jenkins Ng'eno, Daniel, & Kinyajui guarantee of Mombasa Port Amoah & Zounmenou 2023 Revista Urvio 2021 /as part of the guarantees in the SGR (Amoah & Zounmenou, 2023). Resistance in Laos has been less vocal because of the nature of the ruling system, although concerns have been expressed about the long-term implications of external indebtedness (Camba, 2023).

The examination of stakeholder views reveals the cross-pressures of top down state enthusiasms and grass-roots skepticisms. Governments in the case study countries are generally strong supporters of BRI, motivated by pressing infrastructure needs and strategic alignment with China. Yet, civil society groups, local populations and international observers are increasingly accusing BRI projects of being opaque, disenfranchising local labor and ignoring democratic consultation (Grimmel & Li, 2022). These multi-level responses challenge the dominant narrative of China's infrastructure diplomacy being purely cooperative in nature and illustrate that host countries are not passive recipients of Chinese initiatives, but, act as independent actors who negotiate, oppose, or reinterpret Chinese power in line with domestic politics and economics (Xie & Wang, 2024).

The varying effectiveness of the three BRI projects studied, from operational success to underutilization and partial delays, shows that achieving the physical infrastructure does not suffice to determine effectiveness. Instead, meaning cannot simply be measured by the production of academic papers, but should instead consider broader academic desiderata such as institutional change, stakeholder buy-in and socio-economic impact ... (Lin & Lim, 2021) In Laos, high institutional adaptation with respect to restructuring debt terms led to better project sustainability, whereas weak governance and subnational actors' resistance stalled the operationalization CPEC in Pakistan. Even though a project like the railway was completed in Kenya, they did not recover costs in full, suggesting project planning should never end with the completion of the construction (Nordin & Weissmann, 2023).

Further, distinction between soft and structural power in BRI diplomacy, also shows that there is a favoring of economic leverage against cultural influence. Even though China invests in the Confucius Institutes and people-to-people exchanges, structural economic power represented by debt, trade dependence, and strategic investments are still the most important means of influence (Sun, 2021). This illuminates the realist influences on China's engagement policy and undermines the official narrative that BRI is purely a developmental plan. The convergence of infrastructure and geopolitical calculus elevates China's global standing as well as criticism and pushback, especially in politically pluralistic or economically weak countries (Rolland, 2022).

In sum, the findings from this study enhance the understanding that the BRI is not a homogenous initiative but a fluid and adaptable initiative that is continuously moulded by local realities. Resilience isn't just a pushback against China, but an expression of the agency of host countries, their domestic politics, and historical sensitivities. Different forms of adaptation as well as resistance at the various levels in the cases of Pakistan, Kenya and Laos converge to reconfirm the faith that effective infrastructure diplomacy hinges on each inclusive governance, transparent processes in place and the socio-political alignment with local development needs and aspirations (Zhou & Elmer, 2024).

Future Direction

Comparative BRI analysis must be extended to more countries within Africa, Latin America and eastern Europe to chart the distinctive emergent outcomes of Chinese infrastructure diplomacy. It will also be critical to include longitudinal studies to monitor the long-term effect of BRI on governance, environmental sustainability, and regional integration. Moreover, combining satellite data and real-time infrastructure observation with qualitative interviews of stakeholders may refine our appreciation of BRI's complicated political economy.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the fact that the empirical analysis is conducted for a limited sample of three country cases, which serves an illustrative purpose and may not fully reflect the universal experiences of participating in BRI in

various political and economic settings. Furthermore, use of secondary data and publicly available documents could have limited stakeholder views represented in the in-depth manner particularly of local communities maybe in more politically constrained environments. Last, the rapidly changing landscape of BRI projects and China's foreign policy calls for caution in generalizing the results over time.

CONCLUSION

This is the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, a transformative but controversial form of global infrastructure diplomacy that is reconfiguring development and geopolitical ties between states. This paper finds that while China's economic and strategic designs are quite clear, the success and legitimacy of BRI projects depend on local governance, stakeholder involvement and resistance dynamics. These are important—yet nuanced and context-dependent—dynamics that scholars, policymakers, and practitioners will need to navigate in the future of global infrastructure governance.

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