

Review Article

The Belt and Road Initiative: China's Vision for Global Connectivity and Soft Power Influence

ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, represents a pivotal framework for global connectivity, encompassing infrastructure development, cultural exchange, and economic integration. Built on the historical Silk Road, the BRI consists of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "Maritime Silk Road," spanning Asia, Africa, and Europe. Through investments in transport networks, energy grids, and maritime ports, the initiative seeks to establish a new model of international cooperation based on policy alignment, financial integration, and people-to-people exchange. While proponents view the BRI as a platform for mutual development, its implications extend beyond economic growth. The initiative is a cornerstone of China's soft power strategy, enhancing its influence by exporting its development model and reshaping global governance norms. Research underscores its impact on Africa, where infrastructure projects align with Agenda 2063, emphasizing industrial growth, trade enhancement, and regional connectivity. Despite these benefits, concerns about debt sustainability, geopolitical maneuvering, and governance challenges persist. Using qualitative methods, this paper evaluates the BRI's dual role as an economic tool and a soft power strategy. It examines the initiative's integration with Africa's development goals, highlighting theoretical insights into international cooperation. The BRI's success depends on fostering equitable partnerships and addressing geopolitical complexities. This study underscores the initiative's transformative potential in reshaping global economic dynamics while reflecting on its broader implications for governance and sustainability.

Keywords: Global leadership, Infrastructure development, international governance, Cultural influence, Power dominance, China

1. INTRODUCTION

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promises a mutually beneficial partnership. Under this framework, China provides loans and investments, while host countries contribute new markets, fostering what is described as "inclusive globalization" (Liu & Dunford, 2016; Zeng, 2016). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), often called the "New Silk Road," is a massive project aimed at building infrastructure, such as transportation networks and digital communication systems, to connect China with Eurasian and African nations. Beyond its economic objectives, the BRI serves as a critical tool in China's soft power strategy, enhancing its global influence by reshaping perceptions and promoting its strategic goals. The BRI highlights China's efforts to redefine its international identity. It positions itself as a "responsible global leader" advocating for connection and development. The initiative challenges the Western-dominated global system by proposing alternative norms of cooperation based on reciprocity, sovereignty, and non-interference. However, this optimistic narrative has faced significant scrutiny from scholars who view the BRI as a cornerstone of Beijing's ambitious geopolitical strategy (Tsui et al., 2017). Some critics argue that despite its expansive vision, the initiative represents a Sisyphean task, constrained by enduring U.S. hegemony that reinforces rather than disrupts the existing global capitalist order (Hung, 2015; Wilson, 2019). China leverages the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to project its values, strengthen bilateral ties, and enhance its international profile through cultural exchanges, strategic investments

in developing countries, and diplomatic engagement. As a strategic soft power tool, the BRI prioritizes diplomacy and cross-cultural collaboration alongside infrastructure development, such as ports, railroads, and highways. By fostering cooperation among nations with diverse political systems, the initiative bolsters China's reputation as a responsible global partner and advances its influence in international relations (Andrabi and Das, 2017; Nye, 2004). Soft power thrives on persuasion rather than coercion, relying on a nation's cultural appeal, political principles, and policies perceived as ethical and exemplary. For China, enhancing its soft power demands effective public diplomacy to dispel misconceptions and foster trust globally. While China has made substantial efforts to improve its international image, challenges persist, requiring the government to adopt more robust and integrated strategies (Wang, 2008). The BRI is aimed at enhancing global connectivity through infrastructure development, cultural exchange, and economic integration, the BRI spans continents, linking Asia, Africa, and Europe. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to evaluate how China applies the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a tool of soft power, looking at how it affects cultural diplomacy, regional dynamics, and global governance.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research approach to explore the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a soft power strategy employed by China. A descriptive analysis was conducted, synthesizing data from diverse and credible sources, including scholarly articles, books, reports, and official publications. The data were gathered from recognized databases such as Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus published articles, ensuring a comprehensive examination of the topic. Key focus areas included the "geopolitical implications of the BRI", "China's cultural diplomacy", and its "influence on international governance norms". The methodology emphasized identifying the primary mechanisms through which China projects its soft power via the BRI, analyzing both regional and global dynamics.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The BRI builds upon China's earlier "Go Out" policy, launched in 1999, which encouraged Chinese firms to invest abroad and bid for contracts in foreign markets. This policy ensured a steady supply of raw materials to China (Smaller et al., 2012) while helping Chinese companies access new markets, enhancing their global integration and competitiveness (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2012; Oliveira, 2018). The BRI continues this approach as a "spatial fix" to address China's over-accumulated capital and excess industrial capacity by channeling these resources into developing countries (Summers, 2016). This shift, driven by domestic economic restructuring, extends China's state-capitalist model globally (Yeh & Wharton, 2016). While the BRI's trillion-dollar scale is frequently highlighted (Menon, 2017), such figures often combine completed projects with speculative proposals, reflecting its evolving and expansive nature (Hillman, 2018). Politically, the initiative seeks to redefine the perception of Chinese foreign investments. Rather than being seen as profit-driven or geopolitical power plays, China presents the BRI as a mutual development strategy with "win-win" benefits (Li et al., 2015; Sidaway & Woon, 2017).

Through the BRI, China aims to bolster its diplomatic power while fostering domestic growth. This marks a departure from its traditional foreign policy of non-interference toward a more assertive approach that combines "hard power," such as military buildup in strategic regions, with "soft power," including multilateral investment banks and cultural outreach (Callahan, 2016; Winter, 2019). This dual strategy positions China to shape global norms and establish a long-term influence on international governance (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). The BRI is a comprehensive strategy designed to enhance economic growth, trade, and connectivity through six key economic corridors spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa. Linked to these corridors is the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, providing additional trade routes across the Arctic Circle to Europe and Africa (OECD, 2018). By addressing Asia's infrastructure deficits, the BRI seeks to stimulate trade and investment, expand

markets, and foster long-term economic benefits for both China and participating nations (Russel & Berger, 2019).

The "Belt" component focuses on infrastructure, promoting trade and development while enhancing China's access to resources and bolstering its energy and food security. This initiative also aims to address regional inequalities within China by relocating low-tech industries to underdeveloped areas. Additionally, free-trade zones and cultural exchanges in fields like education, health, and science further strengthen China's economic and cultural integration with partner countries (OECD, 2018). The theoretical foundation of the BRI lies in power theory, combining hard and soft power to achieve strategic goals (Nye, 2002). Through investments and trade, the BRI enhances China's soft power by projecting its culture and values internationally. While many view the initiative as a pathway to economic development, others perceive it as a geopolitical strategy to expand China's influence and challenge Western dominance (Chung & Voon, 2017). Ultimately, the BRI serves as both an economic and strategic framework, aiming to foster global interconnectivity, promote shared development, and establish China as a central figure in shaping a new international order (Nye, 2002; Lall et al., 2019).

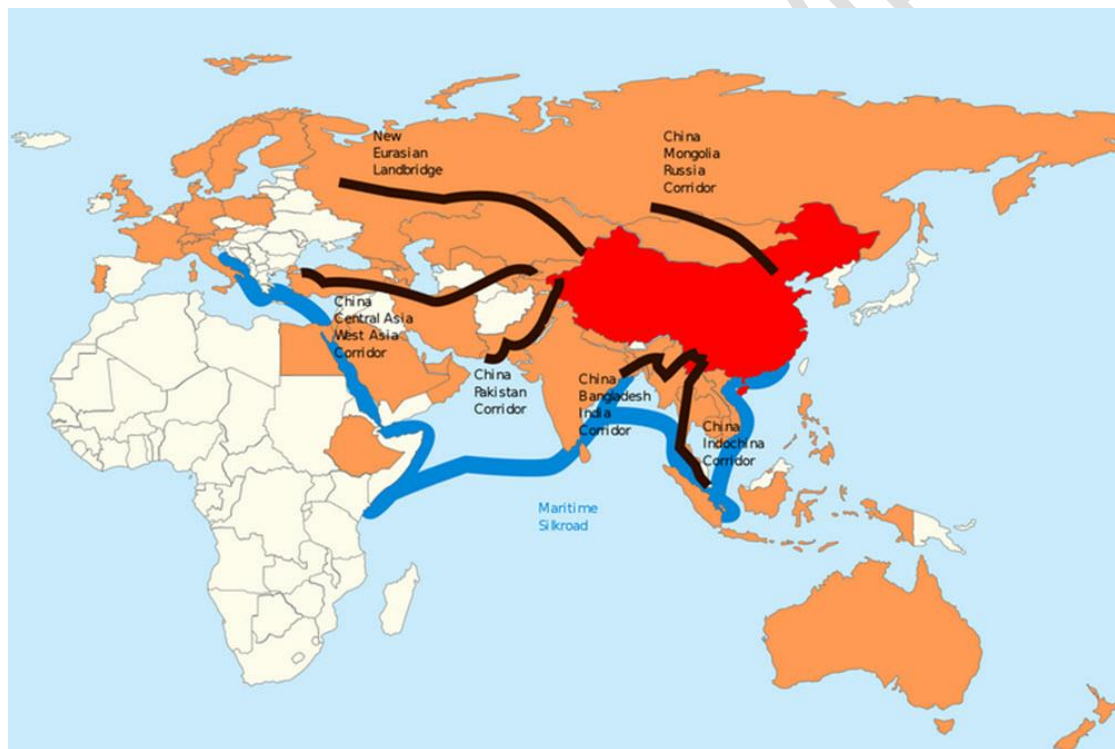


Figure 1. Map of Main Belt and Road Initiative Land and Sea Routes.

Source: <https://silk-road.com/toc/index.html>

4. THE BRI AS SOFT POWER FOR CHINA

Before exploring the BRI as a form of soft power and its role in China's broader grand strategy, it is vital to first consider the fundamental question: Is the BRI truly soft power? The answer to this query remains largely assumed, but it is essential to critically evaluate whether the BRI itself holds soft power potential or if it already embodies such power. Rahman (2019) supports the view that the BRI can indeed be categorized as a source of soft power, particularly due to its trade and exchange elements. Through the BRI, China connects with various countries, facilitating a marketplace where knowledge, ideas, and experiences are exchanged. Rahman emphasizes that goods are not merely objects of commerce; they carry style, philosophy, and identity. This interconnection of culture and mass commerce is central to understanding how the BRI may function as soft power. However, the BRI is not without potential drawbacks. Issues such as debt

traps, Chinese dominance, and governance failures could undermine its perceived benefits and, by extension, China's soft power. While the BRI is often framed as a geopolitical tool for advancing China's global position, it is crucial to understand that these shifts in global power are not solely a result of great power competition between China and the West. Instead, the BRI can be seen as a complex and contingent process, influenced by various state and non-state actors. Global initiatives like the BRI are shaped by local conditions and specific socio-material contexts, which can lead to diverse outcomes depending on where and how the initiative is implemented (Klinger & Muldavin, 2019; Sidaway et al., 2020).

Moreover, the BRI promotes cultural exchange programs, such as the expansion of Confucius Institutes, vocational training, and tourism opportunities. These initiatives contribute to fostering goodwill and understanding, advancing China's cultural influence across regions. The BRI also serves to support China's political values, notably through the concept of the "China Dream." This idea envisions a future where China's economic growth is accompanied by greater domestic equality, particularly in the underdeveloped western regions. By improving infrastructure and economic activity in these areas and connecting them to neighboring countries, the BRI contributes to raising living standards both within China and in its surrounding regions, including Central Asia (Rahman, 2019). However, this vision of development may seem contradictory from a global perspective, as some countries might view the BRI as primarily serving China's internal interests rather than promoting mutual benefits with participating nations. The legitimacy of the BRI could therefore be undermined if it is perceived as primarily benefiting China.

Foreign policy also plays a significant role in the BRI's soft power dynamics. China's financing model for BRI projects is appealing to many nations in search of alternative funding sources. Unlike the conditional aid offered by institutions such as the World Bank or the IMF, Chinese aid is often viewed as non-coercive and mutually beneficial. This type of assistance strengthens China's soft power by providing infrastructure to recipient nations while granting China access to vital resources and trade routes (Rahman, 2019). This highlights the importance of employing fieldwork and mixed methodologies to understand the local dynamics that shape the broader impact of the BRI. More so, the BRI is not a monolithic project. The various actors involved, including Chinese and foreign institutions, produce different narratives and outcomes regarding its implementation. These processes reveal the relational power structures that underlie the BRI, emphasizing that its outcomes are not simply dictated by Beijing but are co-constructed through interactions between multiple stakeholders (Oliveira & Myers, 2020). The diverse interpretations of the BRI, and the ways in which different projects are framed and contested, illustrate the complexities of China's soft power and the political geographies that emerge from these global engagements. However, while the BRI certainly possesses elements of soft power, its effectiveness and legitimacy depend on a wide range of factors. These include the strategic alignment of its initiatives with the needs and aspirations of partner countries, the management of its economic and political implications, and the broader geopolitical context in which it operates. The BRI's soft power is not a simple reflection of Chinese influence but a complex, evolving force that interacts with global power dynamics in intricate and sometimes unpredictable ways.

5. CULTURAL PROMOTION, DIPLOMACY, INSTITUTIONS, AND THE BRI

Rahman's (2019) assertion that the BRI functions as a form of soft power is further substantiated by China's strategic investments in non-military sectors such as media, education, publishing, and the arts. These areas are integral to China's broader effort to bolster its cultural influence globally, thereby enhancing its soft power. One of the key tactics used by China in this soft power campaign is diplomatic outreach or "host diplomacy," where China positions itself as a global leader through multilateral venues like the World Economic Forum and the BRI itself. This outreach includes cultural initiatives such as the creation of cultural theme parks, Xinhua News, China Global

Television Network, and an extensive social media presence by Chinese officials. These elements form part of China's "discourse war" strategy, designed to counteract anti-Chinese sentiment globally by promoting positive narratives about China (Shambaugh, 2015). Another prominent feature of China's soft power efforts is the Confucius Institutes, which were initially founded to teach Chinese language and culture. Over time, these institutes have evolved into tools for controlling the discourse abroad and silencing opposition, particularly in academic institutions. The China-United States Exchange Foundation, which supports professorships at U.S. institutions, is connected to the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department, its propaganda wing, further demonstrating how China seeks to project its ideological influence. These strategies allow China to influence educational institutions, media outlets, and international diplomatic fora, reinforcing its global cultural and political dominance.

In relation to the BRI, these cultural elements are intertwined with the infrastructure development goals of the initiative. By providing critical infrastructure such as energy, communication networks, and transportation links across nations, the BRI facilitates not only economic growth but also cultural exchange. As countries benefit from these developments through job creation, increased affluence, and economic opportunities; their populations are more likely to engage with Chinese culture. The affordability of consumer goods, such as smartphones, also becomes a medium for spreading Chinese values and culture, further cementing the BRI's role as a tool of soft power. Although the BRI itself is not directly associated with all of China's global initiatives, it works in tandem with newly established international organizations such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB). These institutions, created to provide financial support for the BRI, are also part of China's broader soft power strategy (Shambaugh, 2015).

Under President Xi Jinping, the BRI was unveiled as part of a larger plan to build China's international reputation, which began under the leadership of President Hu Jintao. China's commitment to supporting the BRI and its associated ventures with massive financial investments amounting to over \$1.41 trillion by 2025 demonstrates its dedication not only to economic growth but also to reshaping the global order by challenging the Western-dominated financial system (Markey, 2020). While these initiatives are primarily focused on economic growth, they also serve a broader geopolitical purpose: demonstrating China's model of state capitalism and economic development to the world. This approach is in line with Nye's (2004) definition of soft power, which emphasizes the ability to shape global outcomes through attraction rather than coercion. By raising other countries out of poverty through infrastructure development, China sets an example for others to emulate, demonstrating the power of its developmental model without relying on ideological justification. As Rahman (2019) suggests, the BRI's infrastructure and cultural exchanges work together to increase global interconnectedness, allowing China to advance its soft power goals of cultural dissemination and influence. Ultimately, China's strategy reflects Nye's view that soft power is rooted in attraction rather than coercion. By offering an alternative development model through the BRI and its associated cultural initiatives, China seeks to create a network of countries that are not only economically connected but also aligned with China's vision of a new global order. The BRI, therefore, represents both a strategic tool for economic growth and a powerful instrument for the spread of Chinese culture, values, and influence worldwide.

6. CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY

China's strategic vision, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), highlights its growing influence in the Asian and European regions. Introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the BRI was originally intended as a series of transport corridors based on ancient Silk Road trade routes. The "belt" refers to the land route across Central Asia, Russia, and the Middle East to Europe, while the "road" represents the maritime route passing through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean to

East Africa and the Mediterranean. While the BRI's official scope has been broadened to include Africa, the Americas, and even the Arctic, the core focus remains Eurasian, connecting China primarily with Europe (Yilmaz et al., 2018). This Eurasian focus is clear in the National Development and Reform Commission's (NDRC) 2015 publication *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, where the main routes are outlined as linking China with Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Garlick, 2020). However, this regional categorization is not without ambiguity. For example, countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan often defy neat classification into either Central Asia or South Asia, a challenge that has led Chinese scholars to adopt broader regional labels like "West Asia" to encompass these complexities (Jackson, 2018; Qian, 2016). The geographical imprecision of the BRI, often criticized by Western scholars, is intentional, as it allows the initiative to be adaptable and expansive, absorbing new elements such as China's "mask diplomacy" during the COVID-19 pandemic (Narins & Agnew, 2020; Jones & Zeng, 2019).

China's grand strategy is not limited to economic expansion but extends to shaping regional relations through a network of China-led institutions. The "17+1" forum in Central and Eastern Europe, the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are examples of institutional frameworks designed to facilitate China's engagement in these regions. Each forum serves to promote China's influence, whether through economic cooperation or security, while aligning regional norms with China's interests (Kavalski, 2009). This institutionalization of the BRI reflects China's desire to shape regional relations according to its standards, using these organizations as platforms to extend its influence and assert its strategic objectives. Xi Jinping's approach marks a departure from China's previous foreign policy under Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao. Historically, China's doctrine emphasized a low-profile strategy, focusing on internal development and avoiding global entanglements until it was ready to emerge as a major power. However, by 2012, China had transitioned into a major global power and began adopting a more assertive diplomatic stance. This shift was accelerated by China's growing economic strength, surpassing Japan in 2010 to become the second-largest economy in the world. With this new self-perception, China aimed to establish a bipolar international order, positioning itself alongside the United States as a global power (Kato, 2019).

As part of this grand strategy, China uses a combination of soft and hard power tactics to influence nations and establish a network of states that support its core interests. Economic expansion, political penetration, and the creation of friendly states are key elements of China's approach. These objectives are aligned with the 2017 Chinese Communist Party (CPC) Central Committee report, which stressed China's peaceful development, global cooperation, and mutual benefit. The Belt and Road Initiative plays a central role in this vision, serving as a tool for increasing international cooperation while positioning China as a leader in reforming global governance. Through the BRI and its associated institutions, China is actively reshaping the global order, using both economic incentives and institutional influence to align countries with its agenda. While the ultimate goal is not to dominate the world, China aims to reduce tensions, ensure national security, and secure favorable international frameworks for its long-term growth. By leveraging the BRI and expanding its reach across Eurasia, China is forging a new global order where its norms, standards, and economic interests play a central role in shaping international relations.



Figure 2: The 21st Century New Silk Road
Source: Li (2015)

7. THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE FOR GLOBAL CONNECTIVITY

The original Silk Road, established over 2,100 years ago during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–24 AD), was a vast network promoting trade and cultural exchange between China, Asia, Africa, and Europe, spanning over 7,000 kilometers (Li et al., 2015). Reviving this historical concept, President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 as the cornerstone of his foreign and economic policy. Introduced in two stages the "Silk Road Economic Belt" announced in September 2013 in Kazakhstan and the "Maritime Silk Road" unveiled in October 2013 in Indonesia the initiative represents China's most ambitious global undertaking (Verlare & Putten, 2015). First conceptualized by Chinese scholar Wang in a 2012 opinion article in the *Global Times* (Li et al., 2015; Callahan, 2016), the BRI, sometimes referred to as the "Chinese Marshall Plan," encompasses two interdependent components. The "Silk Road Economic Belt" consists of a land-based network of roads, railways, power grids, and pipelines connecting Central China to Europe through Central Asia, with major nodes in Xi'an, Moscow, Rotterdam, and Venice. Complementing this, the "Maritime Silk Road" involves the construction of seaports across the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean, linking Southeast Asia, Oceania, East Africa, and North Africa. The initiative is built upon five core pillars: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges (Varlare & Putten, 2015). Within Africa, the BRI focuses on Kenya, Djibouti, and Egypt, highlighting the continent's growing role in China's vision for global connectivity.

8. BRI AND AFRICA

The growing body of research on Africa's involvement in the BRI highlights varying perspectives. Some researchers emphasize the need for deeper African engagement with the initiative, arguing that limited involvement may hinder the continent from realizing its full potential benefits. Ehizuelen (2017) noted that initially only three African nations - Djibouti, Egypt, and Kenya were part of the BRI. However, this number has increased as more countries have signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with China. Scholars recommend African states enhance their investment

climates to attract more BRI projects. Other studies view the BRI as a continuation of China's "Going Global Strategy" from the late 1990s, which encouraged outward investment. Chen (2016) asserts that while Chinese investments in Africa have grown, they remain disproportionately low compared to the broader increase in China's global investments. He advocates for improvements in Sino-African Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) to maximize benefits. Cabestan (2019) draws parallels between the "Going Global Strategy" and the BRI, showing how the initiative has deepened China's economic and political influence in countries like Niger, even though it was not a primary BRI target. Other researchers, such as Farough (2019), explore how Chinese infrastructure projects under the BRI enhance Africa's geo-economic connectivity, increasing its significance in the global economy. Furthermore, Ndzendze and Monyae (2019) highlight the synergies between the BRI and Africa's Agenda 2063, emphasizing shared goals in infrastructure development, intra-African trade, and people-to-people exchange. This paper integrates these perspectives and examines the theoretical framework of international cooperation to analyze the partnership between China and Africa under the BRI, focusing on infrastructure connectivity and strategies for mutually beneficial outcomes.

9. GEOGRAPHICAL AND IDEATIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE BRI

The categorization of countries within the BRI regions has proven difficult for scholars like Jackson (2018) and Garlick (2020). Questions arise over how to classify nations such as Afghanistan, which could belong to either South or Central Asia, or Pakistan and Iran, which border each other but are categorized in separate regions. Such ambiguities complicate the study of regionalization under the BRI. Chinese scholars, therefore, tend to use broader labels like "West Asia" to overcome the difficulties posed by these regional classifications (Qian, 2016; Yang, 2014). The geographical imprecision of the BRI is a central feature of the initiative. The vagueness, often criticized by Western scholars, is seen as a deliberate strategy by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to maintain flexibility for future adaptations (Narins & Agnew, 2020). This lack of precision allows the BRI to absorb new elements, such as China's "mask diplomacy" during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, broadening its scope to include medical assistance and other forms of "aid" under the BRI umbrella. This flexibility makes the BRI a "policy envelope," capable of expanding as evolving needs arise (Jones & Zeng, 2019).

In various BRI regions, China has created organizations to foster engagement, including the "17+1" forum for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Central Asia. These forums have different focuses, ranging from security in the case of the SCO to economic cooperation for the 17+1 initiative. Regardless of their specific aims, they all represent China's efforts to extend its influence and shape regional cooperation according to Chinese norms and standards (Kavalski, 2009). The institutionalization of the BRI through such forums is an exercise in normative power, enabling China to influence regional relations over time (Jakóbowski, 2018). However, despite these regional groupings, bilateral relations with individual countries take precedence in China's economic foreign policy under the BRI umbrella. A notable example is the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which primarily serves to maintain the Sino–Pakistani strategic partnership rather than enhancing regional connectivity between the Indian Ocean and Central Asia. Similarly, the interactions between China and individual Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries often overshadow the broader regional goals outlined in the 17+1 summits. Thus, the BRI's regionalization is more of a strategic framework for China to establish and normalize relations with individual countries, rather than a genuine political or economic project with unified regional interests.

Furthermore, the BRI's portrayal as a revival of the ancient "Silk Roads" linking China with Europe via Central Asia is more ideational than based on the reality of contemporary Chinese foreign

policy. The "Silk Road" metaphor is part of China's soft power "charm offensive," designed to engage a global audience and promote economic opportunity, as seen in early European media responses (Kurlantzick, 2007). While the discourse surrounding the BRI emphasizes "mutually beneficial cooperation" and a "community of shared destiny," these ideals are more focused on shaping a favorable environment for China's initiative rather than reflecting practical implementation on the ground (Xi, 2014). Similarly, the idea of BRI as a network of "economic corridors" based on cross-border transportation links has faced logistical challenges. For instance, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), initially imagined as a series of cross-border railways and pipelines, shifted away from such costly projects due to the difficulties and risks involved, particularly the terrain of the Himalayas (Garlick, 2018). Instead, the priority remains on maintaining strong Sino-Pakistani relations to counterbalance India's influence, a focus that pre-dates the establishment of CPEC in 2015. More so, the BRI's geographic and ideational flexibility enables China to adapt to changing circumstances while using the initiative to extend its influence and shape regional and global relations according to its strategic interests. The initiative's broad conceptual framework, while often vague, serves as a tool for China to engage with individual countries on its terms, rather than adhering to fixed regional boundaries.

8. CONCLUSION

The BRI signifies China's ambition to redefine global economic structures through strategic investments and cooperative partnerships. Rooted in historical trade routes, the initiative combines infrastructure projects with cultural and diplomatic outreach, symbolizing a blend of hard and soft power. Its role in Africa, particularly in nations such as Kenya, Djibouti, and Egypt, underscores its significance in bridging infrastructure gaps, boosting intra-continental trade, and aligning with Agenda 2063. The BRI's transformative potential lies in its ability to enhance connectivity and economic development across participating regions. However, this ambitious undertaking is not without its challenges. Critics have raised concerns over debt dependency, unequal benefits, and geopolitical implications, viewing the initiative as a means to expand China's influence rather than fostering equitable partnerships. Furthermore, the alignment of the BRI with local development agendas requires careful navigation of governance issues and environmental sustainability. For Africa, the BRI presents an opportunity to leverage Chinese investments for long-term growth. By improving bilateral agreements such as Sino-African Bilateral Investment Treaties and fostering policy coordination, African nations can optimize the initiative's benefits. Additionally, the interplay between the BRI and frameworks like the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) highlights the potential for synergistic economic growth. In general, the BRI exemplifies a global shift towards interconnectedness, challenging traditional power structures. Its success will depend on addressing the complexities of international cooperation, ensuring mutual benefit, and managing the delicate balance between economic ambition and geopolitical strategy. As a key pillar of China's grand strategy, the BRI holds profound implications for the future of global trade, diplomacy, and governance.

9. Future Research Directions

Future research could explore the long-term sustainability of BRI projects, particularly concerning environmental impact and financial viability. Examining the initiative's influence on smaller economies, including landlocked or low-income nations, would offer nuanced perspectives on its broader implications. Additionally, investigating the role of digital infrastructure in the BRI and its capacity to transform global technological landscapes could provide fresh insights. These avenues for future study would not only enhance the academic understanding of the BRI but also offer actionable guidance for policymakers in shaping the initiative's trajectory in a more inclusive and sustainable manner.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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