Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of International Relations

CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN ZAMBIA, PAKISTAN AND SRI LANKA

Deniz Faruk ERKAN

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2025

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ABSTRACT

ERKAN, Deniz Faruk. *China's Belt and Road Initiative in Zambia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka*, Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2025.

This thesis aims to examine China's trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through an empirical focus on Pakistan, Zambia, and Sri Lanka. Launched in 2013, BRI seeks to enhance global connectivity through numerous infrastructure development projects. While it promises economic growth on a global scale through 'win-win' cooperation, critics warn of rising debt dependency and China's increasing global leverage.

This study explores how Pakistan, Zambia and Sri Lanka have experienced the BRI through primary and secondary sources, with a focus on media reports. In order to gain insight into these countries' experiences with the BRI, the thesis aims to critically examine the official BRI discourse in each national context, with a view to understand how it reflected into the mainstream and critical media outlets. The thesis then sets on to revisit the discussion through the lenses of the Realist and Neoliberal schools of thought and questions whether the BRI project prioritizes Chinese national interests or a 'win-win' scenario is possible in the long run where each actor has proportionate gains from participating in the project.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China, Pakistan, Zambia, Sri Lanka, Realism, Neoliberalism, Foreign Investment

ÖZET

ERKAN, Deniz Faruk. *Çin'in Zambiya, Pakistan ve Sri Lanka'daki Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi,* Yüksek Lisans, Ankara, 2025.

Bu tez, Çin'in trilyon dolarlık Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'ni (BRI) Pakistan, Zambiya ve Sri Lanka örnekleri üzerinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. 2013 yılında başlatılan BRI, küresel bağlantılılığı geliştirmeyi hedefleyen çok sayıda altyapı projesinden oluşmaktadır. Küresel ölçekte ekonomik büyüme ve "kazan-kazan" iş birliği vadetse de, eleştirmenler artan borç bağımlılığına ve Çin'in küresel düzeydeki etkisinin giderek artmasına dikkat çekmektedir.

Çalışma, Pakistan, Zambiya ve Sri Lanka'nın BRI projesine dahil olma süreçlerini birincil ve ikincil kaynaklar üzerinden incelemekte ve ağırlıklı olarak medya taramasına dayanmaktadır. Tez, adı geçen ülkelerin BRI projesini hayata geçirme sürecini ve tecrübesini daha derinden anlamak amacıyla, projeye ilişkin resmi söylemi ve bu söylemin ana akım ve eleştirel medya kanallarına nasıl yansıdığını incelemektedir. Tez, söz konusu tartışmaları Realist ve Neoliberal ekollerin penceresinden yeniden ele almakta ve BRI projesinin, öncelikli olarak Çin'in ulusal çıkarlarına mı hizmet ettiğini yoksa uzun vadede her katılımcı aktörün eşit oranda kazanım sağlayabileceği bir 'kazan-kazan' senaryosunun mu hayata geçeceğini tartışmaya açmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi (BRI), Çin, Pakistan, Zambiya, Sri Lanka, Realizm, Neoliberalizm, Yabancı Yatırımlar

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ABBREVIATIONS

AKD	Anura Kumara Dissanayake
AP	Associated Press
APTTA	Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BOI	Board of Investment
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BYD	Build Your Dreams (Chinese electric vehicle company)
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CHEC	China Harbour Engineering Company
CICT	Colombo International Container Terminal
CJIC	The China Jiangxi Corporation for International Economic and Technical Cooperation
CNMC	China Non-ferrous Metals Company Limited
CPC	Colombo Port City
CPEC	China–Pakistan Economic Corridor
CSCEC	China State Construction Engineering Corporation
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DCR	Development Control Regulations

EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
EPF	Employees' Provident Fund
EPL	Environmental Protection Licence
EU	European Union
EXIM	Export-Import Bank of China
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FGD	Flue-gas Desulphurizer
FM	Foreign Minister
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HIP	Hambantota International Port
HSFO	High Sulphur Fuel Oil
ICBC	Industrial and Commercial Bank of China
IMEC	India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMO	International Maritime Organization
IPP	Independent Power Producer
JCC	Joint Cooperation Committee
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KGL	Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project
KKIA	Kenneth Kaunda International Airport
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas

MOIC	Macro Ocean Investment Consortium Limited
MOIC-LN	Macro Ocean Investment Consortium Limited
NAPSA	National Pension Scheme Authority
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NFC	Non Ferrous Company Africa Mining
NFCA	Non Ferrous Company Africa Mining
NPP	National People’s Power (coalition)
ORF	Observer Research Foundation
PCC	Port City Colombo
PKR	Pakistani Rupee
PPP	Public-private Partnership
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
TAZARA	Tanzania-Zambia Railway
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIP	United National Independence Party
WCFCB	Workers Compensation Fund Control Board
WPCEA	Wayamba Provincial Council Environmental Authority
ZCCM	Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines
ZCCZ	Zambia-China Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone
ZESCO	Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation Limited
ZNBC	Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the global development has been in a transformative era by the emergence of the People's Republic of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a sweeping infrastructure and investment program unveiled in 2013 by President Xi Jinping (McBride, Berman and Chatzkgy, 2023). The initiative, comprising over 150 countries and international organizations, is presented as aiming to boost regional connectivity, alongside economic and political cooperation through projects that range from construction of and improvements on roads, ports, railways, and power plants. The BRI is accordingly presented as "one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever conceived", reaching far beyond its initial priority of connecting East Asia and Europe, to include Africa, Oceania, and Latin America, thus aiming to significantly expand China's economic and political influence (McBride et al., 2023). A centerpiece of China's foreign policy and a foundation of its economic diplomacy, the BRI has also been presented as a departure from West-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, both of which have promoted conditional lending and remained at the center of global anti-capitalist protests. Just how much this representation of the BRI fits the real situation in the field, forms the central question of this thesis.

As far as the geopolitical framework is concerned, BRI could be considered as a key for China to insert itself into the international scene as an emerging, leading power in global governance and development. It is sometimes framed as alternative to West-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank since the BRI allegedly prioritizes a South-South cooperation (McBride et al., 2023). However, it has still generated much international controversy.

This thesis aims to examine these conflicting views through a case-study approach, reviewing and analyzing how Pakistan, Zambia and Sri Lanka, three of the numerous BRI participants, have experienced and responded to the initiative. Each country has had major projects under the BRI umbrella. Zambia with the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway, Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project; Pakistan with the linchpin China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); and Sri Lanka with projects such as Hambantota

International Port and Port City Colombo. The selection of the aforementioned three countries aims to offer a diverse empirical background to to study as they project varying degrees of institutional capacities, geopolitical alignments, and different levels of dependency on Chinese investment. Pakistan plays a central role in the CPEC, Zambia offers lucrative copper mining opportunities, and Sri Lanka serves as a critical checkpoint in Sino-Middle East trade routes. Thus, these cases offer fertile ground to test the explanatory capabilities of Realism, Neorealism, and Neoliberalism.

The perspective of Neorealism, in the formulation of Waltz (1979), is that of international politics as anarchy, asymmetry of power, and state survival (Waltz, 1979). Neorealist premises are focused on state-centered, rational aims in gaining power and influence in an anarchical self-help world where cooperation is inherently unstable, and relative gains matter more than absolute gains. Through this lens, BRI could be perceived as a strategic means to pursue relative power and creating strategic footholds in areas prone to foreign debt and institutional fragility, such as Zambia and Sri Lanka (Mistreanu, 2023). Moreover, in the case of Pakistan, the close ties established with China through CPEC may provide an example of how infrastructure investment could be used as a tool of geopolitical entrenchment in an area of geopolitical importance and continuing security issues (Schwemlein, 2019).

In contrast, Neoliberalism, proponents of which are typically characterized by Robert Owen Keohane (1984) and Joseph Samuel Nye Jr. (1977; 1984), points at the possibility for cooperation despite the anarchic condition. It emphasizes the importance of international institutions, regimes and absolute gains in achieving peace and prosperity. From this perspective, the BRI could be perceived as a sphere for transnational cooperation, institutional compatibility and shared infrastructure-based growth. This understanding, therefore, may further posit that Chinese investment may still provide recipient countries with a potential to advance their own development aims so long as appropriate governance mechanisms are in place.

This thesis aims to put forth the strategic and economic aspects of the initiative in Zambia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and intends to assess the dual nature of the BRI as an economic development project and as a geopolitical instrument, as understood through the lenses of Realism and Neoliberalism.

However, the thesis also aims to touch upon the changes to Chinese and host-country depiction of BRI projects, and how these depictions have evolved over time and through a variety of political and economic contexts. Moreover, the study inquires whether such projects promote real economic growth, reinforce strategic dependence, or stand for a combination at both ends. Additional questions also inquire into the domestic determinants of BRI impacts. This includes the institutional frames in the recipient countries and their ability to handle, negotiate or even resist the external force. Finally, this thesis also explores the role of media discourse in contributing to and reflecting public and political views around the BRI's successes, challenges, and longer-term implications.

The rationale for the selection of these three countries is based on the fact that they may be considered as distinct representations in at least four dimensions: geographical diversity (South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa), differences in the quality of governance, varying levels of economic development, and differing grades of strategic importance to China. As the thesis unfolds, it aims to reveal similar patterns of domestic debate and external criticism of the aforementioned countries' BRI participation, which highlights the need for a comparative theoretical analysis.

Methodologically, this research rests on qualitative analysis, utilizing Chinese and host-country media, government publications, reports from research institutions and academic articles. Through its analysis, the thesis attempts to integrate a case-based analysis with theoretical appraisal, and intends not to merely examine the BRI project's application in the aforementioned countries, but also to unearth the manner in which they are interpreted, affirmed or challenged in different contexts.

Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical foundation and affords an overview of the basic principles, assumptions, and differences of Realist and Neoliberal theories of International Relations (IR), in order to interpret the strategic and political aspects of BRI.

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, this thesis undertakes the case studies of Pakistan, Zambia, and Sri Lanka, respectively in an effort to shed light on the practical implications of BRI. Each chapter aims to examine a number of BRI investments, in a series of chapters on the countries that lie along the BRI path, intending to demonstrate how these BRI-related investment projects have been represented in both the local and international media. In addition, these chapters will review the issues of labor and the environment, and the larger strategic implications of foreign investment, providing a medium of comparison to assess the efficacy of BRI.

Chapter 5 acts as a return to the theoretical arguments presented, and puts the empirical evidence collected into perspective by revisiting the potentials and constraints of the Realist versus Neoliberal readings of the BRI. Finally, the study in its closing remarks, will attempt to revisit some of the key take-aways of research by summarizing key findings and cross-case comparisons, as well as putting forward some of the potential future areas of research.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO REALIST AND NEOLIBERAL THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Theoretical frameworks serve not only to describe but also to find and frame overlooked issues as problem areas and to make sense of long-term trends operating in world politics. They aid scholars and practitioners in navigating complexity and identifying patterns in apparent chaos. The ultimate selection of the theoretical framework in an International Relations (IR) study, therefore, fundamentally influences the eventual conclusions to be drawn. This, in turn, highlights the need to question the way in which issues are framed by the dominant schools of thought, and to pay heed to the underlying theoretical assumptions, even, or especially when, the issue is presented as having been treated from a 'value neutral' perspective (Cox cited in Jackson and Sorensen, 2013).

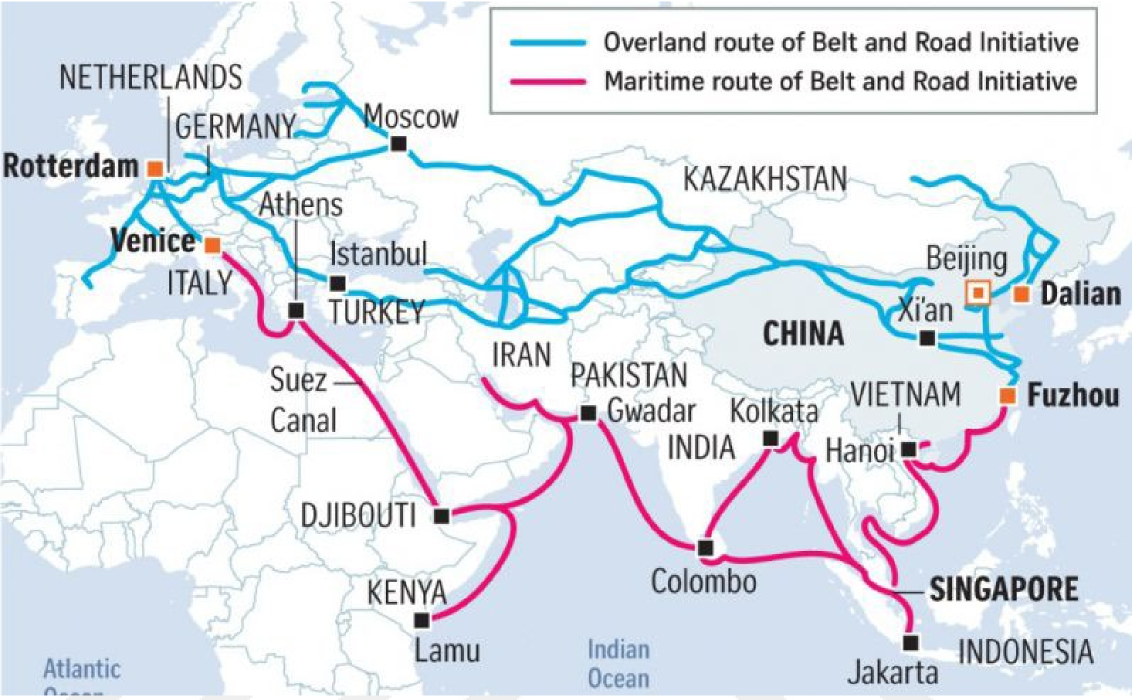
The fact that IR has evolved both as an academic field and a policy-making field with direct consequences on the evolving of global conflict and cooperation accentuates this need. It indeed, "can be both a theoretical subject and a practical or policy subject, and academic approaches to it can be either empirical or normative or both" (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013: 4).

It is with these considerations in mind that this chapter will attempt to introduce two rival readings of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' without at this point, making a marked choice for either one of them. Instead, this introductory chapter will attempt to define how those that take a 'Realist' standpoint versus those that embrace a 'Neo-liberal' standpoint differentiate in their treatment of the very birth of the project, how they radically differ in their presentation of the possible motives of the participating countries and how they frame the problem areas that must be 'solved' for the smooth running of the project.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a trillion-dollar global development project adopted by the Chinese government. It involves infrastructure development and investments in 147 countries as of 2023. It was proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping during official visits in 2013 to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, during which he introduced his idea of the

Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (McBride, Berman and Chatzky, 2023; Map 1).

Map 1. Planned routes for the Belt and Road Initiative (Asia Green R. Estate, 2018)



BRI was thus introduced as a project that seeks to improve the connectivity within and among countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and other regions by investing in transportation, energy, and information infrastructure projects. China has promoted they initiative as a “win-win” model, stressing that cooperation with participating countries is based on a relationship of mutual interests where all will reap dividends through increased trade, investment and business (Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, 2023). This depiction is consistent with China’s general foreign policy theme of promoting win-win globalization.

So far, more than 150 countries and international organizations have signed BRI cooperation agreements, and China has invested in “200 BRI cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and 30 international organizations across five continents” around the world (Xinhua, 2023a).

In other words, the very presentation of the project by China stood on a neoliberal discourse which prioritized a 'win win' strategy from the start. As the project took off, however, dissident voices from within the countries that partook in it started to appear in the press and the parliamentary debates of the said countries. In the following chapters, the dominant neoliberal presentation of the issue by politicians and the mainstream press venues of Pakistan, Zambia and Sri Lanka will be given in parallel to the dissident voices, that generally frame their arguments within a Realist perspective. The revisiting of the two dominant paradigms within this chapter therefore aims to accompany and frame the arguments that will be studied deeper in the key empirical chapters.

The foregoing introduction to the Realist versus Neo-liberal readings will aim to provide background in assessing the local and international responses to and experiences of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Following this introductory section, three empirical chapters will follow, and a concluding theoretical reassessment will aim to facilitate a structured assessment to unpack how strategic interests, institutional frameworks, and power asymmetries determine development trajectories and foreign policy alignments in the BRI milieu.

1.1. A REAPPRAISAL OF NEOREALIST AND NEOLIBERAL THEORIES

Classical Realism draws on hundreds of years of political thought and practices from the works of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and later Hans Morgenthau. Realists argue that the international system is decentralized, and that states behave mainly in a rational pursuit of survival and power. Accordingly, "[i]nternational politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power" (Morgenthau, 1948: 13).

Meanwhile, liberal approaches in IR underline the possibility for progress, cooperation, and institutional development. Liberals also underline the importance of democratic regimes for the sustainability of pacific international relations. Centrality of trade webs and the importance of free trade for the creation and maintenance of pacific interdependence and the key role of international organizations and projects are accentuated. Accordingly, projects that promote free trade tend to increase international cooperation and can mitigate aggressive state behavior. The idea of "perpetual peace" proposed by Immanuel Kant set the normative stage for liberal theory (Kant, 1795/1917;

Classical liberalism, 2025). This very understanding then became embedded in the post-World War I and post-World War II institutions as well (Colclasure, Waldron, Doyle, and Wood, 2006: xv).

Both traditions were, however, subject to significant reformulations by the late 1970s, prompted by theoretical shortcomings and geopolitical transformation. Neorealism introduced by Kenneth Waltz in Theory of International Politics in 1979, stresses the importance of the system itself, claiming that the anarchic structure and distribution of capabilities dictate behavior. As Waltz further explains, the international system limits cooperation and constrains choice (Waltz, 1979). Waltz contends that "[i]n anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power" (Waltz, 1979: 126). Waltz et al's structural realism in other words, highlights the importance of the international system's anarchical structure and the distribution of power in the system as central factors influencing state behavior. It aims to frame IR as a system of balancing, deterrence, and rivalry between rational unitary actors.

Neoliberalism, on the other hand, was developed, in part by Robert Keohane, at the beginning of the 1980s. Discontented with the Realist claim that cooperation is intrinsically fragile and exceptional, Keohane et al held that institutions matter, even in a condition of anarchy. As such, Neoliberal Theory accepted the same systemic conditions under anarchy but less so that the outcome is cooperation. According to this group of authors, "[t]he mere existence of common interests is not enough: institutions that reduce uncertainty and limit asymmetries in information must also exist" (Keohane, 1984: 12). Therefore, Neoliberal institutionalists claim that regimes and organizations bring down transaction costs, facilitate information sharing, and enhance the credibility of commitments, thus making cooperation possible despite the presence of anarchy. This also puts the focus on absolute gains and the role of institutions in pacifying conflicts and providing order.

Neorealism and Neoliberalism also remain relevant, in contemporary discussions regarding the BRI. Both provide frameworks for evaluating perennial dilemmas in international politics: power versus cooperation, relative versus absolute gains, and national interest versus collective action. As John Mearsheimer, one of the most influential realists provocatively states: “[i]nstitutions have minimal influence on state behavior, and thus hold little promise for promoting stability in the post-Cold War world.” (Mearsheimer, 1994: 7).

However, “in international relations... no single approach gives a complete picture,” and this makes it all the more important to delve deeper into the rival schools’ approaches in reading the same phenomena, such as the reflections of the BRI project in different states (Katzenstein 1996: 4). With this aim in mind, let us now revisit, below, some of the core claims of Realism, Neorealism and Neoliberalism.

1.2. CORE ASSUMPTIONS OF REALISM

Classical Realism emerged in the mid–20th century (notably with Hans J. Morgenthau’s Realism and Politics Among Nations in 1948) as a reaction to idealist or utopian views, with antecedents in earlier thinkers such as Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. Realists contend that international politics “is a struggle for power” and is characterized by competitive self-interest and a power struggle that grows from imperfections in human nature (Morgenthau, 1948: 13).

Morgenthau expanded on this view by identifying six principles of political realism (Morgenthau, 1985). His take presents politics as governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature; national interest is defined in terms of power and, while the aspects of the concept of power are conditional and contextual, its function never changes.

The starting point for realists is the assumption that world politics is governed by objective laws rooted in the unchanging nature of humanity. Morgenthau famously argues that “politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature” (Morgenthau, 1985: 4). This perspective is based on the belief that the political behavior of states reflects the common characteristics of their citizens, because their representatives (politicians) are human beings, and it simply follows the assumption that humans - and therefore the decision makers are naturally selfish and power-driven.

In the absence of overarching authority, the international system reflects Hobbes’ depiction of the ‘state of nature,’ where there is “continual fear, and danger of violent death" and "the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1651: 78). Thus, suspicion, the drive for security, and the pursuit of power are characteristic of interstate relations, rendering peace inherently fragile. Therefore, the most prominent feature of Realism is its focus on power. "The concept of interest defined as power" Morgenthau argues "infuses rational order into the subject matter of politics" (Morgenthau, 1948: 5). This highlights the idea that power is the instrument as well as the object in political action.

In addition, Classical Realists view states as unitary and rational entities. Accordingly, leaders, have to navigate through the complicated path of ethics and prudence. However, these "moral standards of conduct" according to Morgenthau were created out "of necessity of a supranational character" (Morgenthau, 1948: 186). This may suggest that while ethics play a role, prudence and the realities of political judgment often supersede idealist moralism in international politics.

It is therefore expected that politicians favor the survival and prosperity of their own political communities. However, they are also hampered by the necessity to plan and to exercise power judiciously. "National ethics" he states "has in most conflict situations proved itself to be superior to universal moral rules of conduct" (Morgenthau 1948: 192).

All in all, with a rich historical tradition, Classical Realism and Neorealism provide a comprehensive understanding of power, conflict, and the bounds of international cooperation. The optimistic belief in balance and cooperation which other theories highlight (e.g., neoliberalism) lacks in (neo)realism. Rather, it is a pragmatic framework for understanding how states navigate the enduring realities of power politics, where morality is constrained by necessity of survival. In the next section, the thesis will trace the evolution of Neorealism, examining how it refines the Classical Realist understanding of international politics by retaining its core insights while advancing a more systemic explanation of how states behave under anarchy.

1.3. CORE ASSUMPTIONS OF NEOREALISM

Neorealism, explains international politics in terms of systemic pressures that, regardless of domestic structure, tend to make states behave similarly. Following in the footsteps of classical realists like Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz's Theory of International Politics (1979) articulates a more parsimonious, scientific model of international relations built upon four basic assumptions: (1) anarchy in the international system, (2) the state as a rational unitary actor, (3) survival and security as the ultimate goals, and (4) power as the currency of international politics (Waltz, 1979).

Neorealism starts with the premise that the international system is anarchic, not in the sense of chaos, but in the absence of a central authority. This situation makes international politics very different from domestic politics. After all, "[i]nternational systems are decentralized and anarchic" (Waltz, 1979: 88). This structure creates a situation of self-help for the states: they cannot look to be secure by any other means than preparing themselves for defense. For example, Whyte follows that "[t]he structure of the anarchic system compelled states to worry about security and take adequate measures [to] achieve it" (Whyte, 2012:2). Thus, it is not anarchy that makes individual decisions but rather it is anarchy that determines the context in which states must act.

Significantly, anarchy creates a condition of widespread uncertainty. A chronic security dilemma makes conflict probable even when none of the actors actively desire it. Under the constraints of the lack of a centralized authority, "[s]tates compete for power and security" (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013: 258). In other words, realist logic contends that what really matters about international outcomes are structural constraints, rather than moral intentions or cooperative norms.

Realist theory assumes rational and unitary states. This abstraction facilitates a system-level analysis, as realists assume that all states are alike within the system; so long as domestic politics does not factor into structural incentives, theorizing about international outcomes is granted without recourse to the domestic politics providing texture to the details of state behavior. After all, "it is not possible to understand world politics simply by looking inside of states" (Waltz, 1979: 65).

> For purposes of theory building and analysis, many realists view the state as being encapsulated by a metaphorical hard shell or opaque, black box… it is usually assumed by realists to have one policy at any given time on any particular issue (Viotti and Kauppi, 2023: 199–200).

This reduces the state's inner complexity to a strategic actor concerned with survival and competition, responding rationally to systemic incentives.

As Whyte further explains, "Neorealism looks to separate the internal factors of the international political systems from the external" (Whyte, 2012: 1). The assumption of rationality is that states will do what is necessary to maximize their own interests based upon the information and capabilities available to them, particularly in terms of security and diplomacy.

In other words, from a Realist stance, the main goal is survival for the states. World politics, at its core, is anarchic, requiring self-help, thus driving states to be obsessed with security. Therefore, at the very foundation of the theory are based on "state survival and national security" (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013: 94). Considering the aforementioned foundations, it is possible to claim that every win for another state is a potential threat. The question is whether the states "are compelled to ask, '[w]ill both of us gain?' but '[w]ho will gain more?' (Waltz, 1979: 105). Then, even cooperative behavior is seen through the prism of competition. This fear affects military spending, alliances and diplomacy. According to this understanding, "the best defense is a good offense" (Mearsheimer, 2014: 28).

> For realists, survival within the anarchic international system is paramount. The intentions of states are unknown and subsequently state actors are cautious about the gains of others when cooperating; a friend may gain from cooperation one day and use it as a threat the next (Whyte, 2012: 2).

Therefore, even in cases in which mutual gain is possible when relative gains of other actors are taken into consideration this is considered as upsetting the balance of power, which in turn fuels profound skepticism toward international cooperation.

When it comes to power, in terms of military power, in the international arena, it is considered as the most important tool states use to pursue survival in an anarchic world. Indeed, "[g]reat powers... are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal" (Whyte, 2012: 25). Realists are primarily concerned with relative power: how much more or less one state has than others. This viewpoint focuses on military capabilities and military assets. Institutions, ideologies and economic development matter only to the extent that they shape a state's relative power in the system. In addition, power can be means, but it is also an end (Mearsheimer, 2014: 25). Likewise, Whyte (2012) bases his argument around this logic to explain why alliances are usually brittle, why cooperation is constrained and why international institutions are viewed as mirrors of power, and not constraints upon it.

Although Neorealism provides a powerful and parsimonious account of international conflict and competition and highlights the logic of self-help under anarchy, it implicitly downplays the potential for sustained cooperation in the absence of a central authority. It underlines, instead that despite the spread of international institutions, regimes, and norms, especially since World War II anarchy persists and states continue to exert self-help behavior.

1.4. CORE ASSUMPTIONS OF NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberal Institutionalism (hereinafter referred to as Neoliberalism) is often depicted as having developed in the last quarter of the 20th century in direct response to the structural pessimism of Neorealism, “arguing that cooperation can under some conditions develop on the basis of complementary interests, and that institutions, broadly defined, affect the patterns of cooperation that emerge” (Keohane, 1984: 9). Although accepting the primary premise of anarchy in the international system, Neoliberal theorists argue that cooperation is not just possible, but often probable. Fostering new perspectives on interdependence, institutions, and when and why states cooperate instead of competing. As aforementioned, Neoliberalism was popularized by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye. Amongst the main assumptions of the theory are that, anarchy exists, yet cooperation is possible; institutions matter; absolute gains outweigh relative gains; and interdependence decreases the chances of conflict (Keohane, 1984).

Similar to Realists, Neoliberals recognize that the international system is anarchic, as there is no global authority to enforce rules or adjudicate conflicts. However, they differ in contending that anarchy does not inevitably lead to conflict. If conditions are right, states can cooperate under anarchy. In other words, “cooperation can develop among egoists [egoist states] without a hegemon” (Keohane, 1984: 78).

Neoliberalism changes the meaning of anarchy by focusing on institutional structures, repeated interactions, and common interests. Nye notes that by 1980s “[s]ensitivity to exchange-rate fluctuations has remained high” even in a changing power dynamic, suggesting that in spite of anarchy, states were still bound together through intricate economic and financial networks (Nye, 1988: 237). This type of interdependence, thus, fosters conditions for international cooperation.

In addition, while Neoliberals recognize that anarchy exerts significant influence over state behavior, they also argue that “this process of self-help can spawn cooperative behaviour between states” (Whyte, 2012: 5). That is to say, for Neoliberals, anarchy is not a given, but a challenge that can be controlled and mitigated through institutions and rules.

A core contribution of Neoliberalism is the understanding of international institutions as engines of cooperation. Realists question the independent power of institutions, while Neoliberals contend that institutions influence state behavior through lowering uncertainty, increasing transparency, and by enforcing compliance (Whyte, 2012). Accordingly, institutions do so by creating focal points for negotiation, monitoring for compliance, and reducing transaction costs (Nye, 1988).

According to this view, institutions should not be regarded merely as passive forces; they may actually influence the preferences and identities of states. This may further result in more uniform behavior over time and across issue areas. Neoliberals, thus, view institutions not as epiphenomenal but instead as causal agents in international politics In addition, Neoliberalism moves the analytic attention from relative gains (how much a state benefits compared to others) to absolute gains (how much a state benefits overall) (Keohane, 1984: 221). This facilitates cooperation, especially in domains where there are mutual interests, such as trade, climate accords or public health. This is a significant departure from Neorealism, which concentrates on “who will gain more?” (Waltz, 1979: 105). Neoliberals, by contrast, argue that provided all parties gain, cooperation can be rational even when gains are distributionally asymmetric (Waltz, 1979: 237). This focus on reciprocity allows for more theoretical room to explain institutions, such as the World Trade Organization or climate accords, structures that Neorealism struggles to explain.

Neoliberalism also underlines the pacifying effects of economic and institutional interdependence. Accordingly, neoliberals,

> ...argue that the use of force has become increasingly costly for major states as a result of four conditions: (1) risks of nuclear escalation; (2) resistance by people in poor or weak countries; (3) uncertain and possibly negative effects on the achievement of economic goals; and (4) domestic opinion opposed to the human costs of force (Keohane and Nye, 1977: 262)

It is also assumed that the more interlinked states become, the higher are the risks and costs for waging a war. Mutual economic interdependence, as Whyte (2012) points out, is likely to transform state behavior towards co-existence rather than hostilities.

Accordingly, the more states are enmeshed in a web of trade, diplomacy and institutional commitments, the less likely they are to return to violence (Nye 1988). This line of argument underlines liberal optimism about the EU, ASEAN, and comparable regional frameworks.

In conclusion, Neoliberalism provides a potential counterpoint towards the 'pessimism' of Neorealism, suggesting that anarchy does not always lead to a lack of cooperation. Although Neoliberals recognize that there is no central authority in international relations, they also believe that institutions can play a significant role in affecting outcomes. According to this view, increasing transparency, promoting reciprocity, and enforcing rules, institutions can decrease uncertainty, and can steer states towards cooperation. By focusing the attention away from relative to absolute gains, Neoliberalism may help account for why certain states may opt to cooperate in projects like the BRI.

1.5. FUNDAMENTAL DIVIDES BETWEEN REALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM

Although there are some propositions they share, such as the notion of anarchy in the international system and states being rational actors, Realism and Neoliberalism are fundamentally opposed paradigms in International Relations theory. Baldwin (1993), Grieco (1988), Jervis (1999), Mearsheimer (1994/95), Snidal (1991), Powell (1994), and Lake (2011) elaborate further on their shared denominators. As Joseph Grieco (1988) also acknowledges, liberal institutionalism extends “a number of core realist propositions,” including the recognition that “anarchy impedes” efforts toward achieving international cooperation (Grieco, 1988: 1).

The conclusions derived from this condition are sharply different, however. Realists anticipate insecurity, competition, and balancing of power, whereas liberals envision conditions for cooperation, contingent on institutional design and mutual interests. The primary divide lies in how each theory interprets the impact of anarchy. Hence, realists ultimately focus on conflict and competition among states, while Neoliberals emphasize possibilities of cooperation.

Furthermore, although both theories view states as strategically rational actors, Waltz (1979) for instance, contends that states behave as unified actors, primarily striving to ensure their own survival but, when possible, also seeking to expand their influence as widely as possible. On the other hand, Keohane takes on a more optimistic perspective pointing out that states with “complementary interests” will be more likely to benefit from cooperation. In other words, according to both schools, states are expected to act according to calculated estimations about their interests and the international environment in which they operate (See also Baldwin, 1993).

Realists insist that states pursue their interests solely in a calculus of power, which means securing their sovereignty at the expense of others under anarchy, while Neoliberals argue that, alongside self-interest, states pursue absolute gains through cooperation and the development of institutions. Hence, despite both frameworks adopting a similar starting point in terms of an anarchical system and a rational-actor model, they fundamentally differ in their expectations.

As far as the levels of analyses, both theories carry out system-level analyses. This means, they both focus on international system overall, rather than internal characteristics of individual states. This “black box” treatment of states, taking domestic politics as uniform or irrelevant for the purposes of systemic theory, is one defining feature of both perspectives (Kapstein, 1995: 755). According to Waltz, “[i]t is not possible to understand world politics simply by looking inside of states” (Waltz, 1979: 65). In the same vein, Keohane adopts a systemic perspective to examine patterns of cooperation shaped by institutions rather than domestic policy debates, arguing “[m]y ‘outside-in’ perspective is therefore similar to that of systemic forms of Realist theory, or ‘structural Realism’” (Keohane, 1984: 26). However, this shared use of system-level analysis is aimed towards distinct explanatory goals. Where Neorealism emphasizes the constraints on cooperation in the international system, due to concerns over relative gains and security, Neoliberalism sees the important role of institutions in overcoming the uncertainty of international politics, allowing states and other actors to pursue absolute gains. Therefore, emerging out of these assumptions at the system level, in contrast with Realism, Neoliberalism certainly enshrines a more detailed understanding of state behavior as determined by internal dynamics and interdependence (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984).

Still, this thesis will maintain that Neorealism and Neoliberalism may be considered irreconcilably at odds with one another rather than simply being hypotheses within a shared epistemological and ontological framework. Neorealism and Neoliberalism differ in their accounts of international behavior. Anarchy produces general insecurity, distrust, and zero-sum competition for Realists, making sustained cooperation unlikely. Conversely, Neoliberals contend that the similar anarchic conditions can be mastered and alleviated via institutions, thus enabling mutual benefits and lasting cooperation. Their dividing line therefore seems to be on their emphases on the possibilities of order and peace under anarchy.

1.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter has aimed to revisit the main tenets of Realism, Neorealism and Neoliberalism. In so doing, it underlined the marked difference of Realism. Neorealism, likewise, construes anarchy as a state that induces insecurity, competition for power, and low levels of trust, thus making lasting cooperation unlikely and in many instances not strategically desirable. On the other hand, through Keohane’s institutionalist lens, Neoliberalism claims cooperation can not only happen, but it is also rational once institutions decrease uncertainty, advance the exchange of information, and align interests through recurring interactions. Moreover, in their stated aims, Realism expects conflict and zero-sum competition while Neoliberals’ claim is that states seek paths to achieve institutionalized cooperation which they allege increases the chances of win-win 'solutions.' These rival conceptions of the international order will be empirically discussed in Chapters 2, 3, 4 and will be revisited in Chapter 5.

All in all, the aim of this chapter has been to revisit some of the competing frameworks to assess China's Belt and Road Initiative which will be studied in depth in the coming chapters.

Moreover, these discussions around power and cooperation, relative and absolute gains, and institutional constraint versus strategic autonomy remain relevant in today's international relations, especially when it comes to BRI. This chapter attempted to critically revisit the key assumptions of Realism, Neorealism and Neoliberalism not because they possess comprehensive answers to why states behave strategically the way they do, but to eventually demonstrate how these theoretical frameworks have informed the arguments of policy makers standing for or against China's BRI initiative in Pakistan, Zambia and Sri Lanka.

The following chapters will detail three important case studies—Pakistan, Zambia and Sri Lanka—each of which illustrates a unique context within the still growing footprint of the BRI. Such cases will demonstrate how power asymmetries, institutional engagements and national strategies are being reshaped in reaction to China's global infrastructure and development ambitions.

CHAPTER 2

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

For over seven decades, Pakistan and China have fostered a broad-based and multidimensional partnership in diplomatic, economic, and cultural spheres. Their links go back to the early 1950s, and Pakistan was one of the first countries to diplomatically recognize the People's Republic of China in 1951 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, n.d.). Over the decades, cooperation between the two countries has deepened across areas such as infrastructure, defense, and trade. Certain historical events, such as the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, were also important in the evolution of closer relations, especially when seen in the context of shared strategic interests. Instead of being bound by immovable ideas of allyship, the course of China–Pakistan relations demonstrate how interstate cooperation is typically conditioned by evolving geopolitical realities. This partnership has since developed into an alleged alignment of interests and bilateral cooperation within the context of BRI.

Early on, one of Sino-Pakistani cooperation landmark achievements was the construction of the Karakoram Highway. The unprecedented project of mutual infrastructure which debuted in the 1960s, and was completed by 1978, becoming a strategic juncture joining Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) area to China's Xinjiang province (Pakistan-China Institute, 2015). Where two nations abstractly and broadly attempt to obtain mutual benefits from development, the project established ground for further cooperation, highlighting the idea that geographical challenges can be turned into leaps of opportunity following a unified vision, even being referred to as the "Eighth Wonder of the World" in the media (Akomolafe, 2024).

Through massive initiatives within the framework of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is noted as the "hope of better region of the future with peace, development and growth of economy" by the CPEC Secretariat Office, bilateral ties between China and Pakistan have expanded, particularly in terms of economic connectivity and integration, in the past few years (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, n.d.). With regard to strategic significance of Pakistan in relation to the larger regional vision of China, Xi Jinping, during a meeting with Nawaz Sharif, the Prime Minister at the time, in Ufa, Russia, emphasized that “China-Pakistan Economic Corridor concerns the long-term development of the two countries” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). This has also been reciprocated by Pakistani officials, for example, a former Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi maintained that the partnership with China is not just a political nor economic one but that it has historical roots, cultural and spiritual relations and that is a strategic necessity that extends beyond traditional alliances (China Public Diplomacy Association, 2021). These statements also symbolized a shared interest in promoting economic development and security in a growingly complex geopolitical landscape. In addition to infrastructure, Pakistan and China also work together on trade, energy and technological developments (Farooq, Rao and Shoaib, 2022: 1).

With the economic and strategic alliance between Pakistan and China, particularly its strong cooperation under the CPEC framework, both countries’ officials openly stated that both China and Pakistan have become linchpins in the regional connectivity and development initiative, showcasing their commitment to mutual growth and prosperity (Peshimam, 2024; Economic Times, 2020). Thus, beyond infrastructure, CPEC is presented as a shared vision for economic transformation and geopolitical stability, Pakistan's geographic significance carrying an important role in the undertaking. Indeed, “CPEC has elevated Pakistan-China relations to new heights, making them [each] a pivotal player in shaping the future of the region” (Ahmad, Gill, Hussian, and Ismail, 2024).

2.1. BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE COVERAGE IN CHINESE MEDIA OUTLETS

Chinese mainstream media outlets have extensively covered the Belt and Road Initiative in relation to Pakistan, mainly focusing on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. This is often done in an effort to stress shared interests between the two countries. Mainstream Chinese media outlets frequently highlight CPEC’s potential in economic terms and infrastructure development in Pakistan. For instance, in a Xinhua News Agency, it was reported that “CPEC remains central to our vision of connectivity,” highlighting its significance in positioning Pakistan as a gateway for international trade and investment (Xinhua, 2025). According to Global Times, China's semi-official newspaper, enhanced cooperation under CPEC is also “poised to foster greater economic development momentum in Pakistan,” and provide new market opportunities to Chinese firms (Global Times, 2024a). Furthermore, they have also consented to modernize Pakistan's railway networks and extend the development of Gwadar Port, which will connect them and avail new trade routes.

Gwadar Port development is often singled out as one of the most significant components of CPEC. Such a development has been the token of collaboration. The official Belt and Road Portal covered this news under the heading “China-Pakistan cooperation thrives via economic corridor” in which Executive Director of the Associated Press of Pakistan Corporation, Sabeen Usman Khattak’s full support for BRI and CPEC were highlighted (Xinhua News Agency, 2024a). According to Khattak, the Gwadar Port would serve to make the 'friendship' between the two countries much more visible (Xinhua News Agency, 2024a). In addition, according to the Global Times, citing a joint statement, China and Pakistan’s policy makers underline that they are committed to promoting the upgraded version of CPEC to a new stage. They aim to boost regional connectivity, integration, and shared prosperity, and see this as a step toward greater shared interests in the region and beyond (GT Staff Reporters, 2024).

Furthermore, Chinese mainstream media reported on the expansion beyond the initial focus on CPEC to new sectors. The Xinhua News Agency stated that “[u]nder the innovation corridor of the second phase of CPEC, Pakistan and China need to explore opportunities” (Xinhua News Agency, 2025a). The said opportunities are in various fields such as research and technology, and not limited to infrastructure and energy. According to the Global Times, Pakistan and China are also enhancing cooperation in emerging green sectors under CPEC, seeing the project of green CPEC as an allegedly win-win cooperation, which greatly promotes new energy transition and sustainable economic development (Ma, 2024).

Chinese mainstream media’s commitment to highlighting the achievements through the BRI projects has also been consistent. With CPEC, in particular, Chinese media has reported numerous milestones. Especially with the selection of words such as "dramatically," "considerable," and "high-quality" in news articles in English, Chinese media seem to aim at leaving a positive impression on the international audience regarding the BRI project in general and regarding their collaboration with Pakistan in particular (Xinhua News Agency, 2023a; Global Times, 2023a).

This is further exemplified in a Global Times article, which discussed the "upgraded version" of CPEC to make the project "a demonstration project for cooperation under the high-quality Belt and Road Initiative" (Global Times, 2024b). This version is composed of over sixty cooperation projects for reinforcing shared interests of China and Pakistan. The article states that both countries remain unfazed by obstacles and are committed to taking CPEC forward, which speaks volumes about their spirit of cooperation and strength of their relationship. In other words, the news coverage in the mainstream media in general, underline the mutual intention to promote sustainable development and regional connectivity in the region.

Another important example of the wide media coverage of BRI by the mainstream Chinese media took place during the 10th anniversary of the CPEC, with the mainstream media outlets, such as Xinhua News Agency and Global Times, celebrating its achievements and future prospects. CPEC was touted "as a transformative initiative that is reshaping Pakistan's economic landscape, shaping up industrial growth, and empowering marginalized communities" by Xinhua News Agency (Xinhua News Agency, 2024b). Likewise, the Global Times noted that CPEC greatly advanced Pakistan's energy and infrastructure landscape (GT Staff Reporters, 2023). To celebrate the occasion, Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng, as President Xi Jin Ping's special envoy, was present in Pakistan to celebrate CPEC's Decade Celebration. During his visit, the two countries "signed six agreements for the promotion of bilateral cooperation under the witness of He and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif" (GT Staff Reporters, 2023). Belt and Road Portal further published numerous news articles to mark Pakistan's state bank issuing of commemorative coins on CPEC's 10th anniversary

> The words "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" in Urdu, Chinese and English scripts are represented on the reverse side, the SBP said, adding that "celebrating 10

> years of CPEC" in English script and "the Islamic Republic of Pakistan" in Urdu script are written on the obverse side (Xinhua News Agency, 2023b).

China has also reiterated its long-term commitment to CPEC's development. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin stated: "China is willing to carry forward the past and forge ahead with Pakistan" expressing China's unwavering dedication to advancing CPEC as a cornerstone of its relationship with the country (Global Times, 2023b). Mainstream news outlets generously quoted from his speech.

Overall, Chinese mainstream media have been influential in presenting CPEC and its larger ramifications within the scope of the BRI. Through constant focus on economic transformation and mutual benefits, mainstream media platforms like Xinhua News Agency, Global Times, and Belt and Road Portal continue to underline the importance of CPEC for Pakistan's infrastructure, energy and trade sectors. Milestones, like 10th anniversary celebrations, Gwadar Port development and the upgraded version of CPEC also received much coverage. Chinese mainstream media continue to depict CPEC as one of the biggest successes of the Belt and Road Initiative, and underline a mutual partnership between the two countries.

2.2. BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE COVERAGE IN PAKISTANI AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2015, has dominated paramount economic and political discourse in Pakistan since its launch. Once projected to provide a route for rescuing Pakistan's economy, CPEC was to modernize its infrastructure, speed up economic growth and deepen regional integration. However, as the project has evolved, fears about Pakistan's ballooning debt led to criticisms in the critical Pakistani media. Pakistan's capacity to bear the financial burden of CPEC has been a matter of much conversation. Meanwhile, international press joined the critiques, Herald Magazine for example, stated "...many will question whether the country will be able to bear the debt burden resulting from it [CPEC]" (Khan and Hyder, 2019). A Pakistani e-paper Dawn also noted concerns, stating that CPEC could "push the country deeper into an already stifling debt burden, foster corruption and repatriate jobs and profits to China" (Iqbal, 2019).

Pakistani mainstream media outlets have also aimed at forming public perceptions about the CPEC and BRI. The mainstream, or state-aligned media often highlighted the economic benefits and transformative potential of the two initiatives. For instance, the Ministry of Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives stated that CPEC is “an engine for economic growth and is expected to increase Pakistan's GDP growth by 2% to 3%” (Ministry of Planning, 2025). Pakistani government officials further rejected the notion that CPEC is a major reason for Pakistan’s debt problems. The Express Tribune, a partner of the International New York Times, also covered the issue under the heading “[w]e do not have China debt problem: Umar” stating that the Federal Minister Asad Umar seemed to have no considerable concerns regarding the CPEC (Rana, 2021). Accordingly, “China was not responsible for Pakistan’s debt sustainability problems, insisting the issue was of our [Pakistan’s] own making” (Rana, 2021).

Mainstream media further included appraisals and e-books from analysts and government officials across Pakistan to support the public outlook on CPEC (CPEC Secretariat, n.d.). For instance, in an article entitled “CPEC and Pakistani Economy: An Appraisal” by Dr. Ishrat Husain, the former Dean and Director of Institute of Business Administration and former Governor stated that 50 billion US dollars worth foreign direct investment (FDI) would flow into the country via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and this had the potential to resolve most of Pakistan's economic woes.

> Out of total commitment of $ 50 billion, seventy percent or $ 35 billion would be coming to Pakistan in form of Foreign Direct Investment. The Chinese companies are following the established IPP policy of the Government which is applicable to all domestic and foreign investors under which they are allowed 17 percent return on equity in US dollar terms (Husain, 2017: 8).

Official depictions, often juxtaposed the advantages of CPEC with Western financial institutions, chiefly among them, the West-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Meanwhile, Chinese mainstream press rigorously advocated that CPEC projects are intended as investments aimed at generating economic gains for Pakistan, rather than presenting the risk of a debt-trap, which has traditionally been associated with Western institutional financing.

In the same vain, many of the Pakistani media outlets backed CPEC while international media outlets such as the Guardian, increasingly highlighted the initiative’s financial drain, security obstacles and strategic risks. Accordingly, besides the economic risks, local discontent and security issues also appeared, especially in Gwadar, a major site of the CPEC development project. The Guardian for instance, characterized both the BRI and CPEC as follows

> Starkly unfulfilled promises that Gwadar would be transformed into 'Pakistan's Dubai' have led to potent anger towards China among locals, who accuse it of turning the city into something akin to a high-security prison, with high fencing, segregated areas for Chinese workers, security checkpoints, and heavy police and military presence on the streets (Baloch and Ellish-Petersen, 2025).

Consequently, the public discontent made it to the news headings in the national mainstream media outlets. However, amidst other parallel headline news that the Chinese government allocated Zambia a grant of thirty million dollars ($30 million) for the Lusaka East Multi-Facility Economic Zone and another $30 million interest-free loan for economic cooperation to facilitate the reconstruction of Mulungushi Conference Centre in readiness for the African Union heads of state summit in 2022, positive appraisals of the expected economic gains of BRI and CPEC for Pakistan continued to be dominant in the mainstream press (Lusaka Times, 2018a).

Next section analyzes some key articles and opinion pieces from such media outlets that represent opposition in order to provide a better sense of the counter narratives that are starting to emerge around BRI's promises and risks in Pakistan.

2.2.1. Indian Media's Strong Opposition

On an international scale, media narratives surrounding the CPEC differed and reflected geopolitical priorities. Media sources affiliated with the Chinese state, like the Global Times, emphasize that CPEC is mutually advantageous for both countries and that it is a symbol of the enduring partnership between China and Pakistan (Global Times, 2024b). In contrast, Indian media outlets often express concern about CPEC and see it as part of a larger strategy by China to increase its presence in South Asia.

The Indian press tends to focus on CPEC's political and strategic dimensions and commonly points to CPEC's potential threats to regional stability (Chaudhry, 2024). When comparing the Indian media with the local Pakistani media outlets, some contend that “the Indian media perceives it as a threat, while the Pakistani media discourse focuses on the opportunities and development it may bring to the country” (Chu, Hassan, and Sikandar, 2025: 8).

Muhammad Asif and Yang Bo Ling also note that “Pakistani and Chinese newspapers praised the progress of CPEC projects,” whereas “Indian news reports raised the different issues that were presenting wrong interpretation to create hurdles in Pak-[C]hina relations” (Asif and Ling, 2019: 183). They argue that Indian media frequently portrays CPEC as a geopolitical threat rather than an economic opportunity, stating that “Indian media making an immature reporting that China is making interference in the personal affairs of Pakistan and Pakistan is not worried about Chinese interference in its internal matters” (Asif and Ling, 2019: 180).

This reflects broader concerns in Indian strategic circles about China’s expanding influence in South Asia. Reviewers further discuss the portrayal of CPEC’s legal status in Indian media with special focus on legal status of Gilgit-Baltistan. Authors note that Indian newspapers call the whole State of Jammu and Kashmir including the GB area as part of India (Asif and Ling, 2019). Gilgit-Baltistan, authors remark, has become a territory in dispute between India and Pakistan, as each claims to exercise full sovereign control over the region.

The study further underlines the security issues associated with the vicinity of CPEC and how media outlets contextualize the coverage with reference to different subparts of the project. Indian descriptions tend to mention the possibility of instability, while officials in Pakistan emphasize the project's advantages. “Baluch militants no longer a threat to CPEC, says Chinese envoy,” reinforcing the narrative that security issues also need to be addressed (Asif and Ling, 2019: 179). By contrast, Indian media reports depict a more volatile environment, as evidenced by The Times of India's assertion that “Pakistan suspects India may target CPEC installations” (Asif and Ling, 2019: 180). The coverage reflects how media narratives respond to national interests and security concerns.

In sum, Asif and Ling’s study highlights the extent to which international, specifically Indian media coverage, of CPEC is shaped by geopolitical rivalries. While CPEC is presented as an economic game-changer by Chinese and Pakistani sources, it is often framed as a strategic challenge in Indian media, rooted in security threats and territorial disputes.

Indian media criticism is largely related to the CPEC, which passes through regions of India and is administered by Pakistan. India's condemnation of CPEC projects, plus Chinese attempts to engage third countries in it, were reported by the Indian Express. The Express News Service of The Indian Express covered a news story following a speech of Ministry of External Affairs' spokesperson Arindam Bagchi, quoting an official statement: "India firmly and consistently opposes projects in the so-called CPEC, which are in Indian territory that has been illegally occupied by Pakistan" (Express News Service, 2022). In a similar vein, the Times of India reported on India's boycott of China's Belt and Road Forum for the third time, underlining concerns about an infringement of its territory. According always to the same source, India considers the CPEC to be "controversial" as it runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (The Times of India, 2023).

Meanwhile, a report from Al Jazeera raised India's fears about the $46 billion CPEC project linking China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Gwadar port. The report raised concerns that this corridor could give China a strategic foothold in the region, encircling India and changing the regional balance of power (Shah, 2017). The Observer Research Foundation of India also parallels the same view with regards to India's objections to CPEC expansion, particularly expansion involving third countries including Afghanistan. Such actions by China and Pakistan, according to the analysis, can "impact relations in the region," as India views such measures as direct assaults on its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Rajagopalan, 2022).

In addition, Indian media has raised questions about the economic viability of BRI projects, many of which it claims will land participating countries in debt-traps. According to these critics, Belt and Road Initiative loans have generally resulted in the exacerbation of existing debts. The Times of India, for instance, claimed that the project bears the risk of growing "debt traps for smaller countries like Sri Lanka," and this further bears heightened financial risks for countries like Pakistan and Zambia (The Times of India, 2023).

It should be stated, however, that India had opted not to attend the Belt and Road Forum pointing at the situation “in countries like Sri Lanka,” putting into question the financial risks of new projects through the Belt and Road Initiative (The Times of India, 2023). Thus, it would not be wrong to suggest that a majority of mainstream Indian media outlets consistently presents CPEC and the BRI as threats to India's sovereignty, regional security, and economic interests. Another common denominator across these articles is the portrayal of the project as simply one aspect of China’s alleged strategic plan to exert its influence in the region. This view highlights the political and security sensitivities in South Asia while also reflecting India's broader concerns about China's growing regional influence.

Similar to Indian media outlets, some strands of western media also extensively scrutinized the BRI and CPEC, with the predominant theme of an alleged debt-trap diplomacy, stressing the financial risks and smaller countries becoming economically dependent to their Chinese counterparts. The Wall Street Journal reported for instance, that Pakistan’s recent economic crisis has been precipitated by its reliance on Chinese-built power plants (Shah, 2024). The report followed: Pakistan is “crushed under debt and sky-high energy prices, its economy is diving” (Shah, 2024).

2.2.2. Australian Media and Concerns Over the Growing Chinese Influence

The Australian Institute of International Affairs also shared similar concerns over the mounting debt by Pakistan to China, which increased from $4 billion to as high as $30 billion because of CPEC (Boni, 2024). This escalation has prompted fears of Pakistan falling into an alleged debt-trap which, in turn, has increased China's influence over the country's economic and political policy. The article follows “[t]he initial enthusiasm for the nearly US$30bn that China injected into Pakistan has now vanished. Rather, CPEC has become entangled in Pakistani domestic politics” (Boni, 2024). This aligns with the Australian take on BRI following the country’s experience with BRI.

In October 2018, Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative with the central government’s National Development and Reform Commission (Premier of Victoria, 2019). The agreement focused on improving infrastructure cooperation and deepening economic relations between State of Victoria and China. However, the Home Affairs Minister, Peter Dutton, described the BRI as an alleged "propaganda initiative from China’” that facilitates “‘an enormous amount of foreign interference’” (Maasdorp, 2020). Morrison stated that issues involving foreign affairs and national interest are a prerogative of the federal government and suggested that Victoria's decision would not be endorsed (Walden, 2020). Then, in April 2021, Foreign Minister Marise Payne canceled Victoria's BRI agreements because they were “inconsistent with Australia's foreign policy or adverse to our foreign relations” (Payne, 2021). The federal government has been concerned with the potential economic coercion and foreign interference associated with the BRI.

Possible debt burdens generated by CPEC might have struck similar chords in Australian policy. Australian media started increasingly highlighting the disadvantages of CPEC for Pakistan. The controversy over Victoria’s participation further underpinned the federal government’s opposition to the scheme. Some Australian media outlets also portrayed CPEC and the BRI more broadly as the alleged vehicles of the expansion of Chinese global influence in Indo-Pacific and South Asia.

2.2.3. Afghan Media and Strategic Concerns

To gauge the wider geopolitical and economic impact of CPEC, it is crucial to look at how countries sharing borders with and holding strategic significance to CPEC perceive the project. The discourse in Afghanistan has been rather different. In the Afghan media too, by and large, discussions concentrated on a possible debt-trap. Afghanistan’s changing attitude toward CPEC mirrors its political shifts, ranging from skepticism during the previous government to increased enthusiasm under the Taliban. This is especially important to understand the effects of infrastructure investments in relation to broader geopolitical interests in South and Central Asia.

It had become a political discourse among Afghan officials and media outlets before the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021 that the CPEC might increase regional instability. According to a 2020 opinion article on Pajhwork Afghan News, one of the country’s leading news agencies, one major fear was that infrastructure projects would potentially ease the passage of militant groups across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, exacerbating security problems (Deshmukh, 2020). Same article continues on with how Pakistan struggled with managing cross-border traffic control through the installation of gates. Since October 2016, Pakistan made its first effort to establish a stronger closure of the 2,500 km-long Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Such a move faced strong resistance from local tribes and resulted in heavy border clashes between Pakistani and Afghan forces. According always to the same news article, the border still remains not fully demarcated in some areas (Deshmukh, 2020).

Moreover, according to the same media outlet, CPEC might tilt the regional power balance, undermining Afghanistan's strategic value. It is also considered that CPEC may be seen as an impending threat to Afghanistan's transit role and long-standing privileges in regional trade routes. Thus, it evoked concerns of economic isolation by bolstering Pakistan's economic and infrastructural capabilities. As an example, Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan Amar Sinha, regarding the Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) noted that, "[u]nfortunately, it [the APTTA] has become a hostage to political issues" (TOLOnews, 2015). This sentiment may have resonated with Afghan analysts who feared that restricted access to trade routes, coupled with CPEC's expansion, would further sideline Afghanistan from major economic corridors. This concern was further reinforced by the limitations in Afghanistan's infrastructure and its ability to accommodate large-scale trade projects like CPEC. As Suhrab Bahman, spokesman for the Ministry of Economy in 2017, explained

> Afghanistan's infrastructure cannot meet the requirements of large projects like the CPEC and large volumes of trade. But investing in additional infrastructure... is unlikely until there is mutual understanding, commitments and investments between Afghanistan, Pakistan and China (Bahman cited in Safi and Alizada, 2018: 52).

The lack of integration into CPEC, coupled with Afghanistan's limited capacity to upgrade its trade and transit systems independently, heightened concerns that Afghanistan would be excluded from major trade flows, further exacerbating its economic vulnerabilities in the region. Consequently, Kabul based Afghan news agency Khaama Press, alongside other Afghan media outlets such as Tolo News and Pajhwok Afghan News, seem to underline the possible risks associated with the BRI and CPEC. Accordingly, Khaama Press has expressed concerns over Afghanistan's exclusion from the major trade flows due to obstacles and delays faced by the China–Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC) and the other components of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In an October 2023 article titled CPEC Struggles to Deliver Promised Growth in Gwadar, Khaama Press reported about the CPEC projects in Pakistan, adding that "Gwadar's CPEC projects have come to embody the shortcomings of the BRI and have been described by analysts as 'dying a slow death'" (Katkurwar, 2025). Another report with the title Plagued with Delays, CPEC Reaches Nowhere in 10 Years, emphasized the slow implementation of CPEC projects, stating that "many of its components have been marred by slow implementation, making them infeasible and unviable" and that the project was indeed "struggling to meet its envisaged expectations" (Hossain, 2024).

All in all, it may be followed that Afghanistan's limited role in CPEC, and its relatively less practical ability to improve its trade infrastructure, serve to heighten fears of economic exclusion in the region. These concerns are, therefore, echoed by coverage from the Afghan media, particularly by Khaama Press. The agency has focused on exposing the disadvantages of CPEC, and Pakistan's role in adjusting the area's trade conditions. Afghan media has been critical of how CPEC has played out, framing it as a Pakistan-centered venture that significantly marginalizes Afghanistan from vital trade arteries. According to Khaama Press, majority of Afghans are not content with the delays, inefficiencies and unfulfilled promises of CPEC, as well as Pakistan's reluctance to give Afghanistan equitable access to regional trade networks. The agency's critical approach also reflects frustration over Afghanistan's omission from major economic corridors, as well as the growing perception that the infrastructure benefits of Pakistan's partnership with the CPEC will be evident at the cost of undermining Afghanistan's economic fortunes. Accordingly, unless Afghanistan can carve out a larger presence in regional trade networks, it will likely find its economy increasingly isolated in a landscape shaped by Chinese investment projects and Pakistan's expanding reach.

These depictions not only influence public perceptions of the project but also shape the terms and conditions of the diplomacy surrounding it. For example, a local leader in Gwadar, Hidayat-ur-Rehman also criticized the lack of transparency related to CPEC. He further discussed how media narratives have not been helping the local population, "[t]hey do not believe discussing their woes with the media can make a difference, now"

(Notezai, 2021). Similarly, the public protests targeted exclusion and economic deprivation (Notezai, 2024).

In sum, a comprehensive understanding of the broader implications of foreign investment necessitates a multilayered analysis that extends beyond considerations of geopolitical alignment and infrastructure connectivity. In light of this, the following section examines employment and labor practices associated with China-led investment projects in Pakistan, seeking to uncover the extent to which these practices reveal both the benefits and limitations of BRI, with particular emphasis on local labor conditions, socio-economic inclusion, and the sustainability of long-term economic outcomes.

2.3. CHINESE FOREIGN INVESTMENT PROJECTS AND EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR PRACTICES IN PAKISTAN

As an integral part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC has also been praised for its potential to reframe the economy of Pakistan through massive infrastructure development and industrialization, which also meant the establishment of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to trigger industrial growth and to create jobs. SEZs on the CPEC are meant to transform into manufacturing regions, attracting investment from foreign and domestic investors alike. Amongst the stated primary aims of the project are creating jobs (via technology transfers, for example) and stimulating local economies.

Therefore, it is vital to examine how both mainstream and critical media outlets have evaluated the degree to which these objectives have been met. For example, Rashakai SEZ in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Allama Iqbal Industrial City in Punjab were to transform regional development through SEZs. "Pakistan and China have finalized nine SEZs to be developed in the first phase under the auspices of CPEC" and Arsill and Allama Iqbal Industrial City top the charts of development and allotments of industrial plots, according to the official portal for the project (CPEC Secretariat, n.d.-b, Q. 11). Additionally, according to the CPEC Secretariat, Pakistan has been benefitting from this collaboration.

"Pakistan enjoys favourable conditions in natural resources, adequate manpower, quality infrastructure, access to international markets, and optimal policies for industrial development" (CPEC Secretariat, n.d.)

It is these SEZs, particularly with foreign investments primarily coming from China, that are expected to be potent drivers of Pakistan's economic development. However, in practice, the reflections of these SEZ projects seem to have posed serious risks for local industries and the labor market. Therefore, while SEZs are expected to spur foreign direct investment (FDI) and generate jobs, there are also certain reasons to be concerned about their true effect. As a common type of SEZs, the Export Processing Zones' (EPZs) contribution to economic activity is believed to be significantly low, according to a study examining SEZs in Pakistan by the World Bank "[t]he EPZs' economic contribution is considered to be low, and data show they did little to enhance export performance" (World Bank, 2020: 3).

The proliferation of SEZs has further sparked socio-economic challenges. Although their positive impacts include "the transfer of knowledge and increment in the workforce," the negative consequences such as "the increase in house rents and crimes," also had disruptive effects on local communities. The employment dynamics of SEZs have been another bone of contention. While CPEC has been touted as a job creation project, there have been private complaints that many of the workers are Chinese, undermining the local labor market. Job creation and improving the technical skills for the Pakistani youth has yet to get off the ground (Karim, Xiang, and Hameed, 2024: 10). According to the European Institute for Asian Studies:

> Despite promises of job opportunities, there have been private complaints of CPEC undercutting the labour market by hiring Chinese workers instead [of locals]. Improving skills and creating jobs for Pakistani youth have so far not materialised. Locals, if hired, are in lower positions, often suffering major salary discrepancies (Beg, 2020).

Given the aforementioned data and industry figures, whether CPEC's SEZs can spur Pakistan's industry development/job creation remains an open-ended question. These zones were intended to attract foreign investment, promote industrialization, and create jobs, however, their actual impact is particularly multi-faceted. While multiple SEZs have had positive reflections, including Rashakai SEZ and Allama Iqbal Industrial City, others have failed to get the expectations met as per reports.

According to critics, the use of foreign labor, for example the employment of Chinese workers instead of local workers, differences in wages, and persisting instability in the economy cast doubts on whether these zones are benefiting the local communities as intended. What should the adjustments be if the aim is the long-term economic development of Pakistan in particular and the region in general is a case in question.

2.4. ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Though its economic promises are ambitious, the fast-paced development witnessed through CPEC has also precipitated serious environmental and social challenges that deserve further investigation. The environmental cost of CPEC, coupled with the non-transparent process of planning, the displacement of communities, and an inequitable distribution of its benefits, run the risk of compromising the long-term sustainability of the project, critics say (Hassan, 2022). One study that examined the environmental effects of CPEC concluded that “human-induced changes in climate have affected the environment to the extent that any more economic development at the cost of the environment will be too costly” (Khalid, Ahmad, and Ullah, 2021: 159). There are two fundamental areas where these issues can be traced, the degradation of the environment, and social upheaval.

2.4.1. Environmental Challenges

The proliferation of coal-based energy projects has been one of the most serious environmental concerns linked to CPEC. Such projects, while serving to cover Pakistan's energy deficits, have immensely contributed to environmental degradation and long-term sustainability problems. Huge reliance on fossil fuels, especially coal, in many CPEC energy projects by 2030, carbon dioxide emissions from CPEC projects are projected to reach 371 metric tons, with 56% of these emissions generated by the energy sector. Moreover, CPEC forecasts 7,000 trucks a day which, over a year, could release 36.5 million tons of CO_2 a year, which would further inflate Pakistan’s carbon footprint and environmental susceptibility (Waheed, Fischer and Khan, 2021).

These projects include widespread infrastructure development like roads, railways and pipelines which are driving deforestation, habitat destruction and water pollution. All these big projects in Balochistan have led to substantial degradation of the environment. For instance, numerous articles appeared in the Morung Express, Bloomberg News, the Observer, the former reporting that “the extraction of minerals and the construction of infrastructure have led to deforestation, loss of arable land, and pollution of water sources” (Kisakye, 2022; the Morung Express, 2024).

Regulatory bodies and experts have sounded the alarm over the environmental impacts of such projects. These critics say that these developments, while intended to make a more connected and economic growth, are done without the necessary oversight and sustainable planning (Aslam, 2021). Moreover, the lack of a robust environmental protection framework has aggravated the environmental degradation, raising questions on sustainability in the long term. The Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) raised concerns about inadequate measures to counter the environmental impacts of CPEC mega projects. While the Environment Impact Assessment Report aimed to provide a comprehensive evaluation, the Pak-EPA deemed it “incomplete and insufficient,” and the Pakistani e-paper Dawn further accused it of having been “prepared by amateurs” - underscoring the growing skepticism about the project's environmental accountability (Aslam, 2021).

When it comes to water resources, several CPEC-linked industries, especially energy production, require enormous amounts of water to function. Thus, water-intensive CPEC projects in Gwadar may worsen groundwater depletion and pollution, deepening Pakistan’s catastrophic water scarcity crisis (Baloch, 2018). In Gwadar, for example, a heavy industrial footprint associated with CPEC-linked development has been reported to have increased both salinity and contamination of water, rendering potable water scarce in local communities. A report from the Friday Times highlights that “[e]xcessive groundwater extraction has also led to seawater intrusion, causing saliniation and elevation of the water table,” exacerbating the water crisis in Gwadar (Baloch, 2024).

These problems have been compounded by the absence of robust environmental planning. As a report from the New Security Beat argues,

> Pakistani analysts have argued that Chinese industries and Pakistani partners have largely ignored the environmental and social impact assessments of CPEC, creating a governance gap that threatens Pakistan's water and air quality, biodiversity, and potentially the future of CPEC (Aziz, 2022).

Degradation of natural resources, pollution and climate change is one of Pakistan's most urgent environmental issues, and if they are not dealt with, they threaten sustainable economic growth. The Express Tribune's coverage of the 2022 World Bank report stated that "Pakistan's annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is at risk of fall by 18 to 20 per cent by 2050 due to the combined risks from intensification of climate change and environmental degradation" (The Express Tribune, 2022). Therefore, it may indeed be essential for future research to concentrate on the implications of this trend when compounded by the rapid industrialization driven by CPEC's coal-based projects.

2.4.2. Social Challenges

CPEC poses major threats to environmental sustainability, and with the increasing risk, it is highly likely to move on to the social facets of communities, uprooting them, and throwing local economies out of gear. In addition, billions of dollars of investments have allegedly led to manipulation of land for CPEC projects causing close of thousands of homes. The expansion of infrastructure projects has been particularly disruptive in areas such as Balochistan, where communities depend on traditional livelihoods like fishing and farming, as reported by the Guardian, "[l]ocal fishers say they can barely survive because they are no longer allowed to freely sail, and have had their boats raided by security forces while out fishing" (Baloch and Ellis-Petersen, 2025).

Another report followed, "[m]any local communities throughout Balochistan have also been displaced as a result of land acquisitions needed for the construction of highways and thoroughfares" (Akins, 2017: 10). Indeed, the displacement caused by major construction projects has disrupted the socio-economic fabric of these areas, leading to growing discontent among ethnic Baloch populations, who feel marginalized from the benefits of CPEC.

Moreover, the perception of unbalanced benefits arising from CPEC based projects has further created social and political unrest. Local communities want a fairer share as local companies get much less of the employment opportunities and contracts than external investors, particularly Chinese companies such as China Power Hub Generation Company and Zhuhai Port Holdings Group (Rani, 2019; Wang, 2024). As also noted in a report penned by the International Crisis Group, instead of delivering promised economic prosperity, many CPEC projects, such as Gwadar Port, led to "producing a heavily militarised zone, displacing locals and depriving them of economic lifelines" (International Crisis Group, 2018: ii).

Stemming from the aforementioned issues, CPEC has faced significant opposition from local communities in various regions of Pakistan, particularly in Gwadar and Gilgit-Baltistan. Many residents argue that while CPEC has brought large-scale infrastructure projects, it has failed to address the fundamental needs of local populations. An example is the protests in Gwadar led by the Give Rights to Gwadar movement. It started in November 2021 in Balochistan, and included a diverse group composed of fishermen, students, and even business owners. Their demands mainly focused on issues related to the removal of unnecessary security posts, provision of basic facilities like potable water and power supply, and a stop to illegal fishing by large trawlers which was significantly affecting the livelihoods of local fishermen. The protests ended up appearing in international news coverage, highlighting the increasing frustration felt by the Gwadar people over the lack of inclusion in the economic opportunities offered by CPEC (Notezai, 2021).

Similarly, in January 2025, protests broke out in Gilgit-Baltistan, particularly in Aliabad city, when "[h]undreds of protesters angered by power outages have blocked a key highway [Karakoram Highway] in northern Pakistan," Pakistan and China's major trade route (Associated Press, 2025). These protests were largely fueled by ongoing power outages, with certain regions enduring as much as twenty hours of blackouts in severe winter weather. The blockade has also disrupted trade between Pakistan and China, stranding hundreds of trucks, and adding a new strain to relations between the local population and federal authorities. Protesters argued that in spite of billions of dollars' worth of investment under CPEC the basic infrastructure was missing, where there was no proper electric supply as well as no heating available for the local residents (Associated Press, 2025).

While CPEC holds the promise of economic development and regional connectivity, its environmental and social costs are significant. Long-term sustainability issues stem from the extensive deforestation, pollution and carbon emissions caused by CPEC projects, and community displacement, non-equitable economic benefits and security tensions contribute to ongoing unrest. Dealing with these issues requires more transparency in project implementation, more local involvement in decision-making and a more robust commitment to environmental protection and social inclusivity. It seems that the long-term sustainability of CPEC, will depend on these factors, and without due consideration Pakistan may increasingly find itself at a fork in the road.

2.5. GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

As well as its regional politics, Pakistan's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative, especially with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, has impacted its geostrategic framework. As a flagship project of the BRI, CPEC includes extensive investments in new infrastructure, including highways, railways, power plants, and the development of the strategically important Gwadar Port. Although these initiatives have enhanced Pakistan's connectivity and economic outlook, they have also raised questions about sovereignty concerns, debt dependency, and regional power dynamics. A report by the Guardian, for instance, underlines that Gwadar holds "[s]tarkly unfulfilled promises" (Baloch and Ellish-Petersen, 2025).

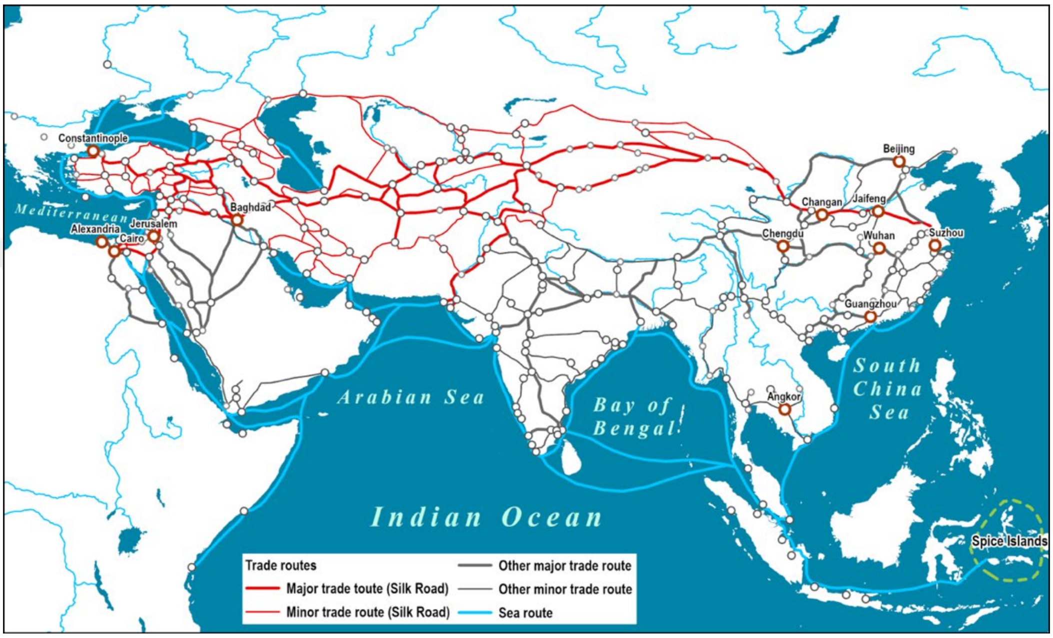
Amidst these criticisms, there is also commentary on how CPEC impacts the ongoing strategic alignment of Pakistan with China.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's historical relationship with India, as well as its complex partnership with the United States are points to consider when judging about the future of alliances in the region. According to a commentary which appeared in the Financial Express for instance, "[t]he risk is that Pakistan may find itself increasingly isolated, its foreign policy options narrowed by its dependence on Beijing" (Siddiqui, 2024).

The Gwadar Port is of particular interest to China due to its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz and the access it provides to various routes into Arabian Sea without having to traverse any maritime crossing points dominated by the United States, such as the

Malacca Strait. Thus, China’s presence in the Indian Ocean, including its first overseas military base in Djibouti that is located at the Red Sea’s entrance to secure key maritime routes, has drawn attention in both New Delhi and Washington as they receive these developments as problematic for the balance of power in the region (Tanchum, 2021).

Map 2. Trade Routes of China (*Cargo From China*, n.d.)



In addition, Pakistan’s increasing reliance on Chinese finance has raised concerns about debt sustainability. As Pakistan’s external debt has climbed, critics have cautioned that heavy dependence on Chinese loans could threaten national sovereignty (Baloch and Ellish-Petersen, 2025; Shah, 2024; Stewart, 2024). The example of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port, which was leased to China for 99 years after Sri Lanka was unable to fulfill its debt obligations, may also have deepened fears that strategic Pakistani assets could end up in the same situation (Solomon, 2018). While Pakistani officials, such as Pakistan's then-Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi in 2018, maintain that CPEC projects will bring long-term economic dividends, there are still questions pending over their financial sustainability and Pakistan’s capacity to repay the debt (Khattak, 2018).

Moreover, another upshot of CPEC has been the magnification of challenges of internal security as well. Allegedly, the restive province of Balochistan has become home to an increase in insurgent attacks against Chinese workers and infrastructure projects, whose centerpiece is the Gwadar Port. Baloch separatist groups perceive CPEC as an exploitation of local people, which would benefit Pakistan's central government and Chinese investors but ignore local populations (Jilani, 2025). In the aftermath, Pakistan has dispatched special security forces to secure Chinese assets, but the situation is still tenuous and adds to the geopolitical complexity. To this end, India Today suggested that "China has signed a private security and military contract to protect its engineers and workers engaged in various CPEC projects" (Sharma, 2025).

On the regional front, CPEC has also played a role in Pakistan's ties with India, since some sections of the Corridor run through the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which India claims is part of its territory. New Delhi has "resolutely oppose[d]" to CPEC, seeing it as a violation of its sovereignty and a way for China to expand its strategic footprint in South Asia (News Desk, 2016). This has added another layer of complications to India-Pakistan relations, marred by historical wars and territorial disputes.

As Beijing's activities and influence spread deeper into Pakistan, other international actors, the U.S. in particular, have moved to counterbalance China's expansion. Washington has strengthened its strategic partnership with India as part of the Indo-Pacific strategy and advocated for an alternative to BRI-style economic projects, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), that offer an alternative trade and a connectivity route. Meanwhile, Pakistan has also sought to strike a delicate balance by courting Gulf states, Türkiye and Russia to diversify its economic and geopolitical partners (Singh, Raja, Kumar, Uppal, and Rani, 2024).

Overall, BRI projects, albeit critical for Pakistan in facilitating the building of the direly needed infrastructure and investments, seem to have also increased its economic dependency on China, sided by the increasing frictions with India. The future of CPEC, it seems, will largely influenced by Pakistan's ability to presently grapple with its debt load, its security problem, and its changing relationships with key actors on the world stage (Aamir, 2017).

2.6. ECONOMIC GROWTH OR DEBT DEPENDENCY?

While BRI alongside CPEC have been lauded as a beneficial venture for Pakistan, some experts caution that the effort is not without challenges, as some senior economists also point out CPEC presents serious questions about economic dependency and the sustainability of debt-financed projects. As Kaiser Bengali points out, “[i]nstead of a game-changer; CPEC may signify a game over. I see the Corridor creating threats for local businesses and fear that it won’t be a win-win situation for both countries” (Ahmed, 2017).

It is further noted that "[s]ome detractors contend that Pakistan’s long-term economic viability is at risk due to the project’s financing conditions and projected debt load” (Mahmood, Sun, Abdein, Qadri, Iqbal, Abdelkader, Mahmoud, and Hewedy, 2023: 6). In addition to the financial concerns, a 2021 editorial from Dawn has also criticized the lack of transparency in CPEC projects by stating that “it is deplorable that people get information on Chinese investments from foreign sources rather than their own government” (Dawn, 2021). Echoing these concerns, Alice Wells categorizes CPEC as a “form of loans or other forms of financing, often non-concessional with sovereign guarantees or guaranteed profits for Chinese state-own enterprises that are repatriated to China” (Wells cited in Iqbal, 2019).

A major concern about CPEC is also Pakistan's growing debt to China. As State Bank of Pakistan’s 2016-2017 Annual Report states that “around 88 percent of the increase was concentrated in Q4-FY17, mainly due to borrowing from commercial banks and the bilateral loans from China” (State Bank of Pakistan, 2017: 66). A separate analysis in 2020 found that Pakistan’s debt to China had risen from $7.2 billion in 2017 to $30 billion by 2020, largely as loans financing CPEC projects. By 2022, Pakistan's Chinese debt had seen the $30 billion mark, comprising the 30% of the country's $100 billion external debt (Peshimam, 2023). For some, this has been alarm-raising over Pakistan’s economic independence and capacity to meet these loans. CPEC has even been referred to as a supposedly transformative project, which in reality, left Pakistan “economically shackled” (Bhandari, 2023).

In the same vein, many of these massive CPEC loans are linked to new infrastructure projects, whose repayment terms are difficult. For instance, a 2024 report noted that Pakistan guaranteed Chinese state companies annual dollar returns as high as 34% for power plants they built in the country, and had committed to paying for the generation capacity they installed, whether used or not, which has put considerable strain on Pakistan's economy (Shah, 2024).

Therefore, the dependency on Chinese financial aid has been alarming over a possible debt-trap situation, which some fear could cause Islamabad to be forced to hand over strategic facilities to China, and therefore grant it influence over policy matters there if repayment of loans proves difficult. Indeed, in many of the cases under scrutiny, unsustainable debt levels have forced significant concessions to Chinese interests. Therefore, it is vital that decision makers carefully consider the pros and cons of each project before contracting any long-term commitments.

2.7. CONCLUSION

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative has, perhaps, become most defining of Pakistan's economic, geopolitical and socio-environmental development. CPEC, lauded as a game-changer for regional connectivity and economic revitalization, has also sparked deep-seated concerns around debt dependency, environmental degradation, local displacement and security threats.

Economically, CPEC has enabled large-scale infrastructure development, energy initiatives, and Special Economic Zones designed to promote industrial growth and employment opportunities. However, according to economic data from the State Bank of Pakistan, the country's total external debt and liabilities increased significantly, rising from PKR 26.6 trillion in June 2023 to PKR 36.4 trillion by June 2024 (State Bank of Pakistan, 2025). Considering the pre- and post-CPEC figures, in June 2013, Pakistan's total debt accounted for 63.3% of its GDP, whereas in June 2020, the number hit 93.8% of Pakistani GDP (State Bank of Pakistan, 2025). As Pakistan's debt burden continues to grow, critical voices in the press have increasingly questioned whether these investments are sustainable in the long term. The financing arrangements under CPEC, from high-interest loans to guaranteed dollar returns for Chinese companies, have heightened anxieties about an alleged debt trap. This dynamic mirrors concerns in many other BRI participant states, where unsustainable indebtedness has resulted in strategic concessions being made to Chinese interests.

Geopolitically speaking, the projects led to Pakistan strengthening its strategic alliance with China, as CPEC emerged as a central element of regional connectivity for the country. Still, it has also heightened tensions with India, its neighbor, which alleges that the corridor infringes upon its sovereignty. In addition, Pakistan’s deepening economic dependence on China has raised alarms about potential compromises of sovereignty given the cautionary case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port.

Security is another longstanding concern, especially in places such as Balochistan where insurgent groups have attacked Chinese workers and infrastructure. As certain areas of CPEC, like Gwadar, have become militarized, accusations of economic exclusion and heavy-handed security approaches have emerged. This further aggravated local grievances. These protests, such as those in Gilgit-Baltistan and Gwadar, have been symptomatic of larger discontent felt across local populations about decades of near-total economic marginalization, and deprival of basic rights and services.

CPEC has also brought major environmental and social challenges, not just economic and security ones. Some large scale projects of CPEC have widened Pakistan’s carbon footprint, with estimates suggesting a sharp increase in emissions. On top of that, given a lack of regulatory oversight, rapid growth in infrastructure has caused deforestation, water scarcity, and habitat destruction. On the economic side, in some cases, potential local workers have been replaced by Chinese laborers in CPEC projects, leading to significant discontent.

Mainstream media outlets such as Xinhua News Agency, Dawn, and The Indian Express, alongside numerous others present widely divergent perspectives on CPEC, often shaped by the geopolitical preferences of their respective countries. Chinese and Pakistani state media have celebrated its economic potential, whereas Indian and Western media tend to portray it as a Chinese foothold for strategic dominance. Indian outlets criticize the plan primarily for reasons of sovereignty, while some Australian media outlets often make reference to an alleged 'debt-trap diplomacy'. Conversely, Afghan media has shown concern regarding foreclosures on the economy, perceiving CPEC to be a Pakistan-focused project that undermines Afghan access to regional trade corridors.

With all this in mind, one may say that CPEC is at a crossroads. Although it offers great economic possibilities, the challenges it has brought, ranging from debt accumulation to environmental devastation and local marginalization, are impossible to ignore. It seems that Pakistan will need to carefully balance its relationship with China in order to harness the long-term developmental benefits of CPEC, while also safeguarding its financial autonomy, ensuring the protection of local interests, and promoting sustainable development. As the CPEC project unfolds, its long-term impact will depend on how Pakistan navigates the challenges and opportunities it presents.

CHAPTER 3

THE REPUBLIC OF ZAMBIA AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

Dating back to 1960s, Sino-Zambian relations were established following the independence of the Republic of Zambia on October 29, 1964 (Shinn and Eisenman, 2023: 24). In 1970s, with an interest-free loan from China, Zambia took on the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway, also known as TAZARA, which further improved Sino-Zambian relations (Daily Nation Zambia, 2023). The railway not only served as a remarkable project regarded "as a Friendship Route to strengthen the new African states against the forces of imperialism" but was also a foundational collaboration effort for the future Sino-Zambian projects with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Bailey, 1976: xii).

The period from 1979 to 1999 marked the second phase of a relationship between Zambia and China, characterized by significant economic as well as political changes for both. After the United National Independence Party's (UNIP) authoritarian era ended in 1991, Zambia embarked on a pledge for multiparty democracy, responding to internal calls for political reform as it followed an African trend toward democratization (Madimutsa and Momba, 2009).

As the internal demand for political reform heightened, this shift also reflected broader trends of democratization across the African continent. At the same time, China was recovering from the socio-economic turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and, in December 1978, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, declared the "Open Door Policy" to modernize its industry and stimulate its economy by attracting foreign direct investment (BBC News, n.d.).

With the culmination of these shifts within the political and economic spheres, the foundation for the third phase in Sino-Zambian ties was set. While Zambia was in the heat of internal reforms following the wide wave of democratization in Africa, China was also reorienting itself in the world context. As its economic policy changed toward a more market-friendly direction, China continued seeking new partnerships, especially in resources-rich regions such as Africa.

The third and current period, from 1999 to the present day in Sino-Zambian relations is allegedly marked by “wealth creation or poverty reduction, peace and stability, promotion of economic development, and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals” (Mwanawina, 2008: 2). In the same vein, New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and African Unity (AU) was established to contribute to these stated goals. During this time, China had experienced rapid economic growth and taken on more international responsibilities, leading it to focus on strengthening its efforts in a world dominated by western industrialized nations. Finally, with the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCA) in 2000, Sino-Zambian relations were further reinforced (Mwanawina, 2008).

In 2007, as a precursor to their future collaboration with BRI, the Zambia-China Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone (ZCCZ) was established. This was reportedly China's first such investment in Africa. ZCCZ attracted nearly 100 enterprises, with investments reaching 2.5 billion USD. Reportedly, it gave a significant boost to local employment rates with the creation of over 10,000 local jobs since its launch (National Development and Reform Commission, 2023). In addition, a number of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects such as the establishment of Chambishi Copper Smelter in 2009 were initiated (China Nonferrous Mining Corporation Limited, 2012).

According always to the same news outlets, BRI marked a new era in Sino-Zambian ties, following decades of economic and political engagement that started with infrastructure constructions such as the TAZARA Railway. As the Chinese media presented China as a global partner for development, Zambia has been a prominent player in Beijing’s vision of infrastructure-led economic growth. Yet how the BRI is framed and understood across distinct media landscapes differed.

3.1. BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE COVERAGE IN CHINESE MEDIA OUTLETS

In mainstream, official and semi-official Chinese media outlets, the BRI is routinely depicted as a “win-win cooperation” project that fosters economic opportunities, infrastructure development, and Zambia is depicted as a key stakeholder in this vision (Luwo, 2023). President Xi Jinping has stressed this collaboration, reinforcing China’s commitment to fostering cooperation with Zambia:

> China has always viewed and developed China-Zambia relations from a strategic and long-term perspective, and stands ready to work with Zambia to transform the profound traditional friendship into a strong driving force for win-win cooperation in the new era and push bilateral relations to a new level (Xi, 2023).

Accordingly, African countries are portrayed as part of a larger vision of economic development and South-South collaboration.

Main examples of mainstream Chinese media and state coverage of BRI regarding Zambia comes from the Xinhua News Agency, which was once called by the Reporters Without Borders (2016) as, allegedly, "the world's biggest propaganda agency”. The State Council of the People's Republic of China is yet another valuable source of BRI content. Its official English-language website provides official news, policies, government updates, and information about China's economic, social, and diplomatic affairs in English. The website serves as an international communication platform for the Chinese government. As of March 1, 2025, there are 3889 results when the term “Belt and Road Initiative” is searched, whereas ‘One Belt, One Road’ returns 48 search results. Thus, while the Chinese name Yi Dai Yi Lu (一带一路) translates to ‘One Belt, One Road,’ the official designation adopted by the Chinese government is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In other words, there is a clear preference for the term "Belt and Road Initiative" in official English communications.

As a state-backed news outlet, Xinhua News Agency plays an important role in shaping a global picture of Chinese policies in the world, including Belt and Road Initiative. One prominent theme in Xinhua News Agency’s coverage of BRI in Zambia is that of the Initiative as a transformative force for speeding up infrastructure development, trade and economic progress. Xinhua regularly emphasizes the benefits of Chinese-led projects, reporting them as a key driver in Zambia's modernization and long-term development plan. The coverage consistently emphasizes that Zambian experts and officials actively support the initiative.

In one such article from Xinhua News Agency, it has been mentioned that the Belt and Road Initiative "will enable Zambia to improve on infrastructure development which will result into enhanced economic growth" (Xinhua, 2019a). The article further depicts the BRI as a sound, long-term plan, indicating that any potential positive consequences will not only benefit Zambia but, in fact, all of Africa. By specifically ascribing this perspective to Zambians, the article suggests a local embrace of the BRI's benefits, thus bolstering the depiction that the Initiative's beneficial reception is widespread. This resonates with the narrative promoted by the Chinese media at large, which often focuses on the BRI as a win-win, transformative cooperation (Xinhua, 2019a).

In addition to infrastructure, Xinhua's coverage also establishes links between the BRI and regional trade and economic integration, framing the Initiative as an enabler of broader economic frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). Yet another article by the same author also asserts that "[t]he China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has brought opportunities for Africa to accelerate the African Continental Free Trade Agreement" (Xinhua, 2019b).

By presenting the BRI as an Africa-wide economic initiative, Xinhua seeks to frame Chinese participation as conducive to African agency rather than an attempt at economic supremacy. This strategy has critical importance in the face of increasing criticism from Western media outlets. For example, Clark (2023), Flanagan (2023), and Shah (2023) all point to the BRI's structure, especially its dependency on Chinese financing and construction firms, to deny that the Chinese action leads to sustainable development. However, these disagreements are completely absent in Xinhua's depictions, which instead centers on the ways Zambia and Africa continue to pursue greater engagement with China as a means to unlock economic potential. This sentiment was reiterated in a September 2023 reported "Chinese premier meets with Zambian president" in which China's dedication to the advancement of Zambia was articulated in no uncertain terms,

> China is ready to work with Zambia to build the Belt and Road Initiative and implement the outcomes of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the China-Africa Leaders' Dialogue to continuously enhance the strategic and sustainable nature of bilateral cooperation (Xinhua, 2023b).

In framing the BRI as part of a larger diplomatic framework through existing mechanisms like FOCAC, Beijing is framed as a long-term strategic partner rather than a unilateral investor. However, once again, there’s no mention of Zambian debt levels and its inability to repay Chinese loans.

Frequent in this coverage of China-Zambia relations is also a notable emphasis on Zambia’s gratitude towards Chinese-led investments and infrastructure projects. Many articles, quote Zambian officials, civic leaders and industry representatives who express gratitude for China’s role in the country’s development. Through the amplification of these perspectives, Xinhua suggests that engagements with Zambia on behalf of China are not only auspicious, but are embraced by Zambian elites who have taken ownership of this endorsement.

Authors quote generously from state officials to further this depiction. Among those who are quoted is the Zambian civic leader Gift Mushinge, who follows “as a civic leader I'm happy that Zambia is involved in BRI programs with China” (Xinhua, 2019c). Srinivasan and Davidson also highlight the success of BRI projects (Srinivasan, 2024; Davidson, 2025).

However, the lack of dissenting viewpoints poses serious questions about the objectivity of this coverage. Critics question whether these quotes reflect the views of the broader Zambian public, or whether have been cherry-picked to create a narrative of universal acceptance. Especially Xinhua’s coverage is characterized by an overarching goodwill discourse and avoids including any dissident voices.

3.2. BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE COVERAGE IN ZAMBIAN MEDIA OUTLETS

Although the burden of debt is reflected onto the statistics, Zambian media outlets such as Daily Nation Zambia and Lusaka Times especially put out notably positive news and articles regarding the Belt and Road Initiative. While the Zambian resources are limited regarding the initial years four years of the initiative, BRI has become a staple in the Zambian media from 2018 onwards.

Notably in 2018, Lusaka Times, published extensively on the positive aspects of Chinese loans (Lusaka Times, 2018a).

> The Chinese government has given Zambia a grant of thirty million dollars ($30 million) for the Lusaka East Multi-Facility Economic Zone and another $30 million interest-free loan for economic cooperation to facilitate the reconstruction of Mulungushi Conference Centre in readiness for the African Union heads of state summit in 2022 (Lusaka Times, 2018a).

The news outlet underlined that Chinese financial support has been essential for Zambia's infrastructural development, emphasizing the country's ability to access funding that would otherwise be unavailable. Building on this aspect, Zambian media has repeatedly framed the BRI as a project offering pathways to economic prosperity, especially with regards to infrastructure, a key area of investment for Zambia's development.

As an example, the Daily Nation reported how the BRI has transformed Zambia, reporting that the initiative has helped boost the country's economy, improve infrastructure and create jobs since its introduction in 2013. In the article, Deka-Zulu states for example that "[t]hrough infrastructure development, job creation, healthcare improvements, education opportunities, and cultural exchange, the BRI has laid the foundation for a more prosperous and interconnected Zambia" (Daily Nation Zambia, 2023).

In a similar vein the Lusaka Times highlighted Zambia's strategic partnership with China embracing the BRI framework, illustrating that BRI plays a leading role in fostering connectivity. Accordingly, considering Zambia's aspirations for infrastructure development, this collaboration would be an immense help to improve trade and boost economic growth as it offered "an opportunity to Zambia to leverage its own infrastructure development ambitions" (Lusaka Times, 2018b).

Furthermore, investments on related engagements linked to BRI initiatives were reported by the Zambia Daily Mail, specifically in relation to President Hakainde Hichilema's visit to China when a series of agreements close to $3 billion worth were signed. These include sector investments in digitization, green energy, infrastructure, and environmental protection, similar to the BRI's holistic approach toward sustainable development in Zambia. In the news article, Commerce, Trade and Industry Minister, Chipoka Mulenga stressed that “Zambia is gratified with the elevation of the bilateral relations with China to a comprehensive strategic partnership as it will deliver greater increased opportunities for both parties” (Lusaka Times, 2023a).

While the BRI is portrayed positively in much of Zambia’s mass media, the coverage is not without nuance. The gap between China’s immense economic weight and Zambia’s lower income status is noted in passing by. Lusaka Times cast the bilateral relationship in partnership for mutual development, emphasizing that China’s leading investment leaves no other option but infrastructural transformation for Zambia. However, the framing of these loans portray them as “investment opportunities” instead of underlining any potential risks to stem from the incurring debt (Lusaka Times, 2015a).

However, this is not to say that there are no critical voices in the press. Only three years later, again the Lusaka Times published a compelling article titled “Why is the Zambian government selling our country to China?” underlining the growing burden of external debt and its potential to undermine the country's economic stability (Longwe, 2018).

Hence, a more critical eye is sometimes cast on the issue in Zambia’s media circles. These express concerns regarding the sustainability of the loans and question the economic dependency on China. But these reservations are often overwhelmed by the immediate benefits of infrastructure improvement and job creation that follow from the Chinese-financed projects. In other words, while there is a lot more coverage of the positives of the BRI, the negatives are usually with no deep criticism or perspectives that examine the long-term effects of fractional payments. While most articles talk about how these projects will help Zambia in the short-term (by creating jobs and improving infrastructure), they do not stress enough how these projects are associated with long-term financial commitments that could weigh down on Zambia’s economy and create long-term debt related problems.

Indeed, the massive difference between the economies of the two countries, with China having the second largest economy in the world, while Zambia is ranked 106th, it is evident (GeoRank, n.d.). While financial assistance and investments can provide unparalleled support for Zambian projects, they also raise broader discussions on the long-term effects of such loans.

3.3. CHINESE FOREIGN INVESTMENT PROJECTS IN ZAMBIA

This section will provide an overview of the main major infrastructure and development projects in Zambia that have either been funded by Chinese loans or supported through these means. Among these is the Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project, one of Zambia's largest energy projects to date and one that is intended to boost the national grid but has also raised red flags about its financial sustainability and the debt incurred by Zambia.

In a similar manner, the expansion of the Kenneth Kaunda International Airport (KKIA) was supposed to help modernize Zambia's aviation sector it has now become one of the many contentious projects. A significant presence in the mining sector is the Chambishi Copper Mine, which has received large investments by PRC interests, with additional expansions and financial commitments well into the next decade making a long-term resource ownership query. Meanwhile, the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway shows how complex financing infrastructure can be, having gone in just a few years from being entirely funded by Chinese money to being partly funded by a public-private partnership arrangement because the government simply ran out of cash. This section does not aim to provide a response on whether these projects represent economic development or the deepening of debt addiction, rather it aims to provide empirical data regarding who is paying for and executing these projects, and what the said projects mean for Zambia.

The main portion of BRI loans have been invested into the proliferation of infrastructure projects within Zambia, with the most noteworthy example being the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway, construction of which was officially launched by President Hakainde Hichilema on May 21, 2024 (Lusaka Times, 2024). The involvement of Chinese companies has, once again, been significant to the construction of the project. For example in 2023, "MOIC-LN (Macro Ocean Investment Consortium) Consortium Limited comprising of Chinese companies" had been rewarded with "the contract to upgrade the Lusaka-Ndola Road into a 327-km dual carriageway" (China.org.cn, 2024). MOIC is comprised of Chinese construction firms such as Zhenjiang Communications and China Railway Seventh Group. As the project is financed through a public-private partnership model, the Chinese consortium will recover its $650 million investment by collecting toll revenue for 22 years under a concession agreement before handing the road back to Zambia (Rogers, 2023).

As Africa's second-largest copper producer, Zambia has also been able to secure investments from Chinese companies in the mining sector, with Non Ferrous Company Africa Mining Plc (NFCA) as the holding company of Chambishi Copper Mine in the country, majority of which is owned by China Non-ferrous Metals Company Limited (CNMC) with an 85% stake, while Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines Limited (ZCCM) holds a 15% stake (ZCCM Investments Holdings, n.d.). While the NFCA "is set to create approximately 2,400 jobs" and, according to ZCCM Investments Holdings, garnered a revenue of almost US$620 million throughout the year of 2023, it has also led Zambia becoming "the first post-COVID African state to 'default on its Eurobonds," causing "renewed concern about Chinese debt-trap diplomacy" (Open Zambia, 2024; Hsiang, 2023).

In September 2023, CNMC announced its intention to invest yet another US$1.3 billion in Zambia over the next five years, through its subsidiary Zambia-China Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, to improve operations in mining, energy, education and technology, among others. This also includes a 400-million-dollar investment in the Chambishi Copper Mine to boost its annual production to 110 thousand tons. These financial commitments highlight China's strategic interest in securing copper to meet its industrial needs (China Global South, 2023).

Yet, Chinese investments have raised questions about Zambia's control over its land and resources. The case analyzes the claims and counterclaims in the context of critiques of the degree to which Chinese private and state-owned firms have become entrenched in Kafue and Zambia's mining industry. They argue that these investments weaken Zambia's negotiating power. This concern is intensified by China's consumption of much of Zambia's copper exports (Hsiang, 2023).

The concerns over Chinese control of Zambia's mineral resources also extends to conditions of work within the Chinese-owned mines. Chinese investments have no doubt played a significant part in the industrial and infrastructural developments in Zambia. However, according to Human Rights Watch, concerns regarding labor rights and corporate social responsibility are grave. This is especially mirrored in labor relationships in mines, where workers reportedly find themselves negotiating with Chinese management on relatively precarious circumstances (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Human Rights Watch (2011) further alleges that labor abuses, poor health and safety standards, and excessive working hours violate international labor standards. Accordingly, miners frequently worked 12-hour shifts in perilous conditions, with poor ventilation contributing to respiratory ailments. One miner followed, “[w]e know we’re at risk for health problems because of the conditions here” (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Hence, the rapid industrial expansion's reflection on the workers is another dimension of the said projects.

After these allegations, Chinese firms tried to improve labor conditions. This includes different steps taken by NFCA to improve safety protocols and limit working hours. Notwithstanding these advances, however, there is still room for improvement relative to Chinese firms and the multinationals in Zambia’s mining sector. Reports emphasize the importance of strict enforcement of labor laws and ongoing monitoring so that miners are kept safe (Human Rights Watch, 2011b).

3.3.1. ZESCO’s Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project and the Energy Sector

Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project (KGL), one of Zambia's largest infrastructure projects, was designed to add 750 megawatts to Zambia's power grid. The project was mainly financed with loans from China's Export-Import Bank (Exim Bank) and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), which covered 85% of the $2 billion cost of construction (Reporters Without Borders, 2016). While the initial financial planning was robust, the project encountered notable issues. In 2020, Chinese financiers halted funding, worried over Zambia’s mounting debt and Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation Limited (ZESCO)’s financial meltdown. This suspension caused construction delays as the contractor, Sinohydro, stopped work and deferred the commissioning of completed turbines (Lusaka Times, 2020).

As there were delays on the project, Chinese financiers froze financing on account of fiscal woes and fears about Zambia's ability to service its debt. Peter Kapala, Zambia’s Energy Minister, announced in June 2022: “The remaining construction works at the 2.3 billion dollars Kafue Gorge power project are being financed by ZESCO and alternative funds after EXIM Bank of China froze funding to the Kafue Gorge Lower project” (Lusaka Times, 2022).

The KGL has also been criticized by the U.S. and the IMF for its alleged disproportionate debt distribution. As one-third of the US$9.7 billion debt is tied to Chinese banks, fears have emerged that Zambia will be forced to cede ZESCO to China. However, Amos Chanda, a spokesman for the Zambian Presidency, denied the allegations voiced by U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton in 2018, stating that “it is regrettable that such information can come ... In fact, ZESCO is not within the scheme of Zambia's debt to China” (Mfula, 2018). Despite these reassurances, however, concerns persist, while supporters of ZESCO’s borrowing practices argue that the associated debt poses no risk to Zambian sovereignty.

To recap, the Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project (KGL) remains under ZESCO’s ownership and operation, there are concerns about the risk of a takeover due to Zambia’s financial vulnerability and debt obligations. Given Zambia’s dependence on Chinese loans to build up its infrastructure, some argue that this raises the chances of China getting operational control over KGL if Zambia defaults on repayments. It should be known in the absence of evidence that KGL was used as collateral, but China has been known to organize deals in Africa and elsewhere with key assets vulnerable to takeover when financially distressed. One particularly notable example is Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port, where Sri Lanka is now leasing the port to a Chinese state-owned enterprise for 99 years after Sri Lanka had difficulty repaying its loans (Parker and Chefitz, 2018).

In an effort to lessen the burden of heavy loans, Zambia has been in dialogue with its Chinese creditors for a deal to help restructure its debts as part of efforts to more sustainably meet its obligations. In June 2023, Zambia agreed to restructure $6.3 billion of bilateral debts, led by a bilateral creditor committee co-chaired by the Export-Import Bank of China (Thomas, Do Rosario, and Mfula, 2023). Such negotiations aimed to treat debts owed to the ICBC and Bank of China as commercial debts, said the Secretary to the Treasury, Felix Nkulukusa. He further explained that this is "why it has reduced to $6.3 billion from $8 billion" (Mfula, Savage, George, and MacSwan, 2023). Critics also claim that restructuring has been complicated by the opacity of China's lending terms, and China's reluctance to take part in multilateral debt relief frameworks. With the current debt crisis in Zambia, it is not considered unlikely therefore, that Chinese lenders press for asset seizures or even control of economic operations such as KGL.

3.3.2. Kenneth Kaunda International Airport

Another topic of debate is Zambia's sprawling Kenneth Kaunda International Airport (KKIA) over China's lending in Africa. Zambia had obtained a $306 million preferential buyer's credit from the China Eximbank in 2014 for the expansion of the airport, which was supposed to be used to renovate the airport, as well as to increase its capacity (AidData, 2014).

However, Zambia's mounting debt, notably to Chinese creditors, has raised alarms. As of 2020, China's loans represented a large proportion of Zambia's external debt, rising concerns that KKIA could be at risk of a takeover, if Zambia defaulted on repayments. Despite these concerns, reports of China taking KKIA as a result of defaults on its debts have been denied by the reports of agencies such as the South African Institute of International Affairs (China Africa Research Initiative, 2021). Still, other accounts such as the one offered by Brautigam and Kidane (2020) also explain, while legal agreements may allow creditors to seek enforcement through arbitration, practical challenges make outright asset seizures highly unlikely. Their research on similar cases, such as Kenya's Mombasa Port, underscores that China Eximbank has not been observed directly seizing state assets as collateral. Meanwhile, critics continue to underline the risks involved.

3.3.3. Mining Sector and Chambishi Copper Mine

Chambishi Copper Mine is among the assets under scrutiny for potential seizure by Chinese creditors. In 1998, China Nonferrous Metal Mining Corporation (CNMC) acquired an 85% stake in the Chambishi Copper Mine, with Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines (ZCCM) retaining a 15% share (Reale, 2021). Following the loan crisis, significant Chinese investment in Zambia's mining sector has led to fears that China could exert further control over these critical resources (Lusaka Times, 2018c; South China Morning Post, 2018). In 2018, several reports alleged that Zambia's state-owned power company, ZESCO, was in talks about potential repossession by a Chinese company due to debt issues. Although the Zambian government denied these allegations, the incident highlighted the vulnerability of national assets to foreign control amid financial distress (Mfula, 2018).

In 2022, Zambia canceled $1.6 billion in undisbursed Chinese loans to avoid falling into a debt trap. These funds were intended for various infrastructure projects, including the Kafue Gorge Lower (KGL) hydroelectric project (Nyabiage, 2022). These developments in return, exacerbated fears regarding Zambia's economic sovereignty and the potential for Chinese lenders to seize critical national assets, such as the Chambishi Copper Mine, if debts are not effectively managed.

The Chambishi Copper Mine, operated by CNMC's subsidiary NFC Africa Mining, has been a focal point of Chinese investment in Zambia's mining sector. In 2023, CNMC announced plans to invest an additional $400 million in the Chambishi mine, aiming to increase its output to 110,000 tons per year (van Staden, 2023). While this investment could boost Zambia's copper production, it also raised questions about the increasing influence of Chinese firms over Zambia's natural resources.

3.3.4. Lusaka-Ndola Road and Transport Infrastructure

The Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway project, a pivotal infrastructure initiative in Zambia, has undergone significant developments concerning its financing and management, particularly involving Chinese firms. In 2017, the Zambian government commissioned the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway Construction Project, which sought to upgrade the 320 kilometers between Lusaka and Ndola to a dual carriageway to improve the flow of transport along that corridor (Lusaka Times, 2017a). The China Jiangxi Corporation for International Economic and Technical Cooperation (CJIC) won the bid for the project for a cost of approximately $1.2 billion. However, this deal was criticized for high cost where its cost exceeded to approximately $3.7 million per kilometer (Lusaka Times, 2017b). Thus, in 2021, the project was suspended due to financial limitations as well as worries over increasing expenses.

To address these challenges, the Zambian government explored alternative financing models. In 2023, a new public-private partnership (PPP) agreement was signed with Chinese stakeholders and with the Macro-Ocean Investment Consortium. Under the new agreement, the project's price tag was lowered to $650 million, with a 25-year concession period - including three years for construction and 22 years for operation and maintenance. The consortium is allowed to charge toll fees from the road users to recover its investment on the PPP project (Banda, 2024). The PPP model, however, has led to controversies about whether Zambia actually retains control of its infrastructure that are crucial to its economy. The concession gives the Macro-Ocean Investment Consortium operational control of a crucial economic artery at a time when it could affect national transportation policy and revenue streams. As former Ambassador Mwamba noted: “the success of PPPs is dependent on transparency, accountability, and mutual respect between the public and private sectors”, which - according to Mwamba - was vital to ensuring that such arrangements do not undermine national sovereignty (Lusaka Times, 2023b). However, critics warned that such cooperation could result in furthering foreign control over core infrastructure in the long-term.

The evolution of the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway project reflects Zambia's efforts to modernize its infrastructure amidst financial constraints. While partnerships with foreign firms, including Chinese firms, may provide necessary capital and expertise, they also necessitate careful consideration of the terms to safeguard national interests and ensure sustainable economic development. As Zambia continues to navigate its financial challenges, the balance between welcoming foreign investment and maintaining control over its national assets remains a critical issue. Ensuring that debt agreements are transparent and sustainable is essential to safeguard Zambia's economic sovereignty and prevent the potential takeover of vital resources like the Lusaka-Ndola Road and Chambishi Copper Mine by foreign creditors.

3.4. EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR PRACTICES

Infrastructure projects in Zambia, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative, have been significant contributors to the nation's development, with Chinese-led initiatives providing the country with not only roads, railways, and other essential facilities, but also employment opportunities. However, there are concerns about how the economic benefits are being distributed, particularly around jobs. While these projects do create jobs, critics have argued that many of the managerial and technical jobs with better pay are taken up by Chinese workers, leaving Zambians only lower-wage positions and only few options to advance. “Chinese companies employ Zambians” a study reported, “but never in management positions. All the management posts are held by the Chinese” (Asada, 2023: 242).

In addition to employment worries, the prevalence of Chinese businesses winning large-scale projects has led to debates around the sustainability of Zambia’s local industries. Discrepancies in pay, unsuitable working conditions and charges of anti-union activities have kept the scrutiny up. Reports also noted that “miners in Chinese-run companies have been subject to abusive health, safety, and labor conditions and longtime government indifference” (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Critics charge that BRI investments may strengthen Zambia’s infrastructure but do so without adequately empowering the local workforce or helping to create a self-sustaining economy.

Meanwhile, yet issue is the distribution of employment opportunities within Chinese-led projects, particularly the imbalance between local and foreign workers in higher-paying positions. Despite the fact that these infrastructure projects have created jobs, there are reports that a significant proportion of high-paying positions are being awarded to Chinese citizens, with native Zambians filling the lower-wage positions. This has been a contentious issue, as it does not only mean fewer economic opportunities for the local workforce but also lacks the transfer of skills and development of this capacity in Zambia over time. In a 2023 perception survey of residents conducted in Chambishi, the overriding view was that Chinese investments and mining played a vital role in the growth of the economy but that Chinese firms favored their own nationals for managerial positions, restricting career opportunities for Zambians. As one interviewee put it, “Chinese companies employ Zambians, but never in management. Management positions are all occupied by Chinese” (Asada, 2023: 229, 241).

Furthermore, according to the aforementioned 2023 perception study, rising tension in local labor unions, as reported by local Chinese companies, has increased due to frequent conflicts related to wages, long working hours, and a lack of social protections in recent years (Longwe, 2018). Although individual enterprises have started to address concerns through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such conciliatory approaches pale in comparison to the scale of extractive resource industries and the financial incentives given to Chinese companies. In fact, Chinese companies needed to negotiate directly with local chiefs to access mining sites. However, according to reports, this process has been often evaded by Chinese companies, which chose to acquire land directly from small farmers at below-market rates, furthering socio-economic inequalities (Asada, 2023: 240).

Nonetheless, Chinese investors have defended their involvement in Zambia, saying their projects offer employment opportunities, infrastructure, and the economic benefits the country desperately needs. The broad understanding of the Chinese role in economic 'growth' on the one hand, and the locals' expressed feelings of not fully benefiting from these investments, on the other, were confirmed by the survey in Chambishi (Longwe, 2018). Consequently, there has been mounting pressure for the Zambian authorities to enforce employment laws more firmly and require foreign companies to offer more employment and skills training for local workers.

3.5. ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

In Zambia some BRI projects have sparked environmental concerns, particularly in mining and energy. Research has delivered evidence of deforestation, water pollution and land degradation related to Chinese mining endeavors. As Olsson (2023) states, all these projects' 'presence' has been "negative for the Zambian environment. The moving of mining from China to Zambia has [had] a positive impact [but] on the Chinese environment".

Though hydropower projects help fill energy shortages, they can also uproot communities and disrupt ecosystems. In other words, some Chinese investments in Zambia have been criticized for their environmental practices by both the governmental and non-governmental organizations. According to Dynamic (2016) Zambia has been a notable example "where the environmental practices of some Chinese investment" not only caused damage to the environment but "have drawn criticism from the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other commentators". This criticism is based on issues such as rainforest destruction, river contamination, and a failure to evaluate environmental impacts before projects are executed. Some Chinese-run mines and construction sites in the region have reportedly disregarded local environmental regulations, which resulted in soil erosion and the pollution of essential water resources needed for local farming (Al-Aameri, Fu, Garcia, Mak, McGill, Reynolds, and Vinze, 2012). All in all, for the most part, many China-funded projects raised concerns due to their poor environmental protection practices and critics urged for better sustainability practices (Freitas, 2023).

Following such reports, there have been attempts by some companies to reduce their environmental impact, but their efforts have been inconsistent. One possible way to improve sustainability could be through a bottom-up project flow, which emphasizes local involvement and accountability. Alternatively, long-term sustainability could also be achieved through stronger enforcement of environmental policies and stricter disciplinary measures for foreign investors who fail to comply (Freitas, 2023).

3.6. GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Zambia's deepening economic engagement with China through the Belt and Road Initiative has triggered important debates regarding national sovereignty, economic independence and strategic policy-making. China's investments have indeed aided in the construction of infrastructure, however, there remains solid apprehension regarding debt reliance and the geopolitical consequences. As far as the country's large debt from Chinese loans is concerned, critics have warned that overreliance on Chinese financing may put national assets under the control of the Chinese government. In 2018, there were reports that Zambia could give its national electricity company ZESCO to China as it faced difficulties meeting loan repayment commitments.

There were also fears that other critical assets, such as the state broadcaster, Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) and major airports, may change hands. An opposition leader, James Lukuku, even said "I want every Zambian to rise and stop the influence of China" (Lukuku quoted in Solomon, 2018). Such concerns highlight the thin line Zambia now must tread when it comes to courting foreign investment for development while wanting to preserve its sovereignty.

Meanwhile, some suggested a diversified engagement agenda as a way out of foreign influence. One notable example is the Lobito Corridor, a U.S.-backed railway project that aims to connect Zambia’s mineral areas to the Atlantic port of Lobito in Angola. According to the liberals in government, alternative trade routes might help reduce dependence on a single foreign partner, and deepen regional economic integration. In December 2024, U.S. President of the time, Joe Biden committed a further $600 million to the initiative, underlining its strategic significance by providing a competitive alternative to Chinese-financed projects (Way, 2024).

With infrastructural investments being needed in Africa, China has been able to take the lead in funding these projects through its sweeping BRI initiatives across the region. Other global powers, particularly the United States, have responded by supporting alternative infrastructure projects, such as the Lobito Corridor. As the world's political landscape continues to evolve, it is important to note the strategic significance of African countries on the world stage. As they seek to leverage partnerships with diverse nations without forsaking their independence, African states are becoming increasingly important in the global economy and geopolitics, best exemplified by the growing great power competition for influence on the continent.

3.7. ECONOMIC GROWTH OR DEBT DEPENDENCY?

While Zambia's engagement with China through the Belt and Road Initiative has brought significant economic transformation, this cooperation has not been without worry over debt sustainability and economic sovereignty. As Zambia found itself unable to repay Chinese loans that piled up to billions of dollars to finance major projects, speculations and confirmed cases emerged where important national resources, as well as key strategic assets and facilities, were leased and transferred to Chinese firms. Over the past two decades, Zambia has significantly increased its borrowing from China to finance major infrastructure projects, such as roads, power plants, and railways. By 2020, Zambia's external debt had surpassed $17 billion, with China emerging as the largest single creditor. (Clark, 2023). In November 2020, Zambia became the first African nation to default on its sovereign debt during the COVID-19 pandemic, raising concerns about potential loss of state-owned assets to Chinese control (Kessler, 2023). While the Zambian government initially downplayed fears of an alleged debt-trap diplomacy, Chinese lenders have exerted considerable influence over Zambia's economic decisions, leading also to concessions on vital national resources.

Following the official launch of BRI, Zambia has taken a large sum of loans, totaling up to 53 different loan contracts between 2010 and 2019, according to “FOCUS-BRI Country Report.” After the launch of BRI, however, these loans saw a major increase: “in 2016, Chinese loan commitments exploded, nearly tripling from ~US$750 million in 2015 to ~US$2.2 billion in 2016” (Williams, Neelakantan, Parashar, Stonecipher, and DiCarlo, 2022: 8)

The significant amount of loans led to the construction of several infrastructure and energy projects. One notable example is the Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project, which provided approximately 750 megawatts of electricity to the Zambian national grid following its fully operational state reached by March 24, 2023. The construction of this US$2 billion hydroelectric dam was mainly financed by Chinese banks, who covered 85% of the project cost, and the Zambian government, who funded the remaining 15% (Lusaka Times, 2015b).

However, the overflow of Chinese lending has raised concerns about whether Zambia can pay its debts. From 2000 to 2023, lending to Zambia came to around $6b from China, making it a key creditor (Hancock, 2022). Such financial dependence came to light when Zambia defaulted on its debt in 2020 and concerns over possible asset grabs by a number of foreign firms were raised. For example, claims that a potential takeover of Zambia's state-owned power company, ZESCO, by Chinese companies were raised, however, the Zambian government has disputed such claims (Hillman, 2019).

This debt issue has been further discussed, as Zambia owed China US$6.6 billion, which “is almost double that of the highest figure (US$ 3.4 billion) released previously by the Zambian government” (Bräutigam, 2021). This was also likened to “Western banks during the last debt crisis” (Bräutigam, 2021: 37). Indeed, the financial burden of repaying the BRI loans used for the Project’s construction weighed heavily heavy on Zambian economy.

Another worrying case of debt ensued the partnership between Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation and China's StarTimes. In 2018 ZNBC formed a joint venture with StarTimes, creating TopStar Communication Company where StarTimes held a 60% share and ZNBC held a 40% stake (Mwebantu, 2018). The arrangement raised questions of national sovereignty, and ownership of public media assets.

Worries were raised that Chinese loans could result in extreme control over national assets (Chellaney, 2017). Meanwhile, Chinese officials argue that these investments are meant for the mutual benefit of both countries economically, noting that Zambia has control over its resources. For instance, in August 2022, China's ambassador to Zambia at the time, Xiaohui Du, emphasized the importance of bilateral cooperation, stating that “friendly bilateral cooperation was the best way to deal with debt between two friends” (Du as quoted in Savage, Quin Pollard, and Lun Tian, 2022).

3.8. CONCLUSION

According to liberal accounts, Zambia has seen a transformative impact from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with new opportunities emerging for infrastructure development, industrial development, and facilitating trade. Framed this way, the BRI is seen as the latest chapter in a working relationship that dates back to the relationship between China and Zambia starting in 1960s, which has involved major investments in transportation as well as agreements in the mining, energy, and trade cooperation sectors. The long background of this relationship and landmark projects conducted, such as the TAZARA railway, laid the foundation for the gradual deepening of China’s partnership with Zambia, which ultimately resulted in a very high level of economic and political interdependence through the BRI. Chinese funded projects have brought modernization to key sectors and greatly helped create employment, but also raised issues regarding economic dependency, labor conditions and sustainability of debt.

Reports in mainstream Chinese media, especially in state-run outlets such as the Xinhua News Agency and the State Council’s English-language website, consistently frame the BRI as a ‘win-win’ model of cooperation, and emphasize how infrastructure will lead to global economic growth. This framing of the BRI also resonates well with China’s depiction of shared global development partnerships and characterizes the BRI as a joint and multilateral effort, rather than a one-sided Chinese project. Yet, this depiction often ignores thornier issues such as Zambia's increasing debt burden, the alleged opacity of loan arrangements, and questions about whether BRI projects are economically sustainable in the long term.

Likewise, Zambian newspapers, although broadly favorable in their evaluations of BRI investments, have slowly been opening the door to a more varied discourse on the disruptive side of Chinese-directed initiatives. While much of the media discussion in Zambia highlights the prospect of more economic opportunity, new jobs and modernization, there have been some reports questioning whether the country's dependence on Chinese financing and foreign contractors could compromise its economic sovereignty over time.

This has both immediate benefits and long term risks for Zambia in terms of the socioeconomic implications of the BRI. Infrastructure projects such as the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway, the Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Plant and the expansion of the Kenneth Kaunda International Airport aided the economic development of Zambia, however, debate continues over debt sustainability, local employment conditions and supplanting of Zambian industries by Chinese firms. Critics also state that workers and businesses in Zambia cannot compete while Chinese state-owned enterprises allegedly dominate contracts which leads to fragmentation of economic benefits. Consequently, all this ushered in a debate over whether the BRI is genuinely a mutually beneficial model of cooperation or rather a vehicle for foreign economic expansion. The alleged opacity of these loan agreements, as well as concerns about repossessing assets in a default scenario continue to hold the ground.

Beyond economic and labor-related demands, BRI's environmental and geopolitical implications add significant layers of complexity to Sino-Zambian relations. Chinese-funded mining and hydropower projects, for example, have laid waste to forests and contaminated land and waterways, alarming environmentalists and local communities. Although some Chinese firms have promised to become more environmentally friendly, implementation of environmental protection regulations unevenly has meant that many areas where Chinese-led development initiatives are situated continue to suffer environmental degradation. Additionally, one cannot ignore the importance of the BRI in influencing Zambia's geopolitical allegiances. Analysts suggest Zambia's growing reliance on Chinese credit and finance constitutes an economic over-reliance on China that will strip the country of the means to pursue an independent foreign policy.

The path ahead for Zambia under the BRI largely rests on the state's capacity to address the above-mentioned risks. Despite the immediate and tangible benefits of Chinese investments in Zambia a long-term strategic approach is necessary. Demanding financial transparency, stronger labor protections and the development of Zambian local industries might ease the benefits of the BRI projects to be more equitably distributed. Additionally, stricter regulation and enforcement of ecological policies will be crucial for reducing the impacts of mega infrastructure and extractive projects on the environment.

CHAPTER 4

THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

Twentieth century diplomatic relations between the two countries commenced in January 1950, when Sri Lanka, being the "first country in South Asia" to formally recognize the People's Republic of China (Embassy of Sri Lanka in Beijing, n.d.). One of the early and best-known agreements was the 1952 Rubber-Rice Pact, in which Sri Lanka supplied rubber to China in exchange for rice despite opposition from the West. The importance of this agreement was that it assisted China with trade embargoes, while Sri Lanka managed to get affordable food, becoming a good partner in economic terms. Formal diplomatic relations were established on February 7, 1957, leading to the opening of resident embassies in both capitals. Since then, relations between the two countries have become increasingly close with wide-ranging cooperation in political, economic, trade and cultural fields. Over the past decades, China's leaders, including Premier Zhou Enlai, President Li Xiannian, and Premier Wen Jiabao, have visited Sri Lanka to forge and strengthen this bilateral relationship, with high-level visits being the forefront. Sri Lankan leaders have also visited China several times, including Prime Ministers Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Ranil Wickremesinghe and President J.R. Jayewardena (Embassy of Sri Lanka in Beijing, n.d.).

"China's first infrastructure investments in Sri Lanka took place in the 1970s in the form of outright grants, which included the construction of a convention centre" (Wignaraja, Panditaratne, Kannangara and Hundlani, 2020: 4). Thus, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, China's economic influence in Sri Lanka grew quickly. Bilateral trade and investment soared within that backdrop as China, under Deng Xiaoping's economic liberalization policies dating back to 1978, and Sri Lanka, having adopted market-oriented reforms, enjoyed growing trading ties (Kobayashi, Baobo, and Sano, 1999; Department of Treasury, Sri Lanka, n.d.).

In the early 2000s, Sri Lanka began to look to China as a major financier, particularly during the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015), who actively sought Chinese loans for large-scale development projects. “In the early 2000s, grant-based relations were upgraded to a commercial model that utilized interest-bearing loans and infrastructure-related foreign direct investment (FDI)” (Wignaraja, et al., 2020: 4). These investments facilitated large-scale infrastructure projects such as the “Norocholai power station in 2006, the Hambantota port in 2007, the Mattala International Airport in 2010, the Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) at the Colombo port in 2011, and the Lotus Tower in 2012” (Wignaraja, et al., 2020: 4).

Sino-Sri Lankan ties have been deepened with the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. Sri Lanka, strategically located along key maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean, soon emerged as a key player in China’s ambitions for global connectivity, making billions of dollars in Chinese investments for ports, highways and energy projects. As the country is geographically positioned along the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), responsible for handling a majority of global shipping traffic, it has become an attractive partner in China’s conception of a Maritime Silk Road. This acts as a critical pillar of BRI, focused on rebuilding connectivity with upgraded port infrastructure and improved shipping efficiency.

These deeper economic ties, solidified through the BRI, have been consequential for Sri Lanka’s domestic politics and economic trajectory. Although successive Sri Lankan governments have courted China for investments to modernize the nation’s infrastructure and spur economic development, critics have expressed concerns about the financial viability of the projects, the terms of Chinese loans and the overall consequences for Sri Lanka’s independence (ANI, 2022; Moramudali, 2020). The BRI financing model, typically involving state-backed loans from Chinese banks rather than aid or grants, has rendered significant amounts of debt, leading to allegations of a debt diplomacy and strategic dependence.

On the other hand, China’s growing engagement with Sri Lanka under the BRI has been framed as a mutually beneficial partnership with Beijing couching infrastructure investment as an avenue through which to spur economic growth, alleviate bottlenecks in logistics, and bolster Sri Lanka’s position as a regional trade hub (Devdiscourse News

Desk, 2025). Officially, President Xi Jinping has stressed the win-win dynamics of the BRI, and described it as a framework contributing to “friendship, shared development, peace, harmony and a better future” (Xi, 2017). Meanwhile, the effects of these financial obligations have ignited intense discussions regarding economic independence, debt reliance, and the lasting impact of BRI initiatives, (Rod ,2024).

BRI for Sri Lanka, given the many challenges it has posed, centers around the debate of whether its benefits outweigh its risks. Supporters say China’s investments have given Sri Lanka the much-needed infrastructure, modernization and economic opportunities while critics have warned that unsustainable debt and growing Chinese influence may reduce the country’s economic independence.

4.1. BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE COVERAGE IN CHINESE MEDIA OUTLETS

Since its launch, aligned with Xi Jinping plan to “rejuvenate the Chinese nation on all fronts by pursuing Chinese modernization,” mainstream Chinese media coverage on the Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka constructed the project as a development transformation (Xinhua, 2023a). Chinese-funded projects are regularly shown to have positive impacts on Xinhua News Agency, China Global Television Network (CGTN) and the People's Daily, especially in infrastructure development, job creation and economic modernization.

Chinese state introduces Sri Lanka’s participation in BRI as a model of “win-win cooperation,” reflecting shared development and mutual gain (China Daily, 2023). According to this mainstream media depiction, the establishment of the Colombo Port City (CPC) and the Hambantota Port are among the major projects that show the success of this bilateral engagement, which has played an important role in promoting Sri Lanka's socio-economic development.

4.1.1. Mainstream Chinese Media Coverage of Colombo Port City

The Colombo Port City, also known as Colombo International Financial City, is a flagship BRI project to make Sri Lanka an international financial hub. Located near Colombo, this mega project aims to reclaim 269 hectares of land in a brand-new city with commercial, residential, and recreational developments. Chinese outlets highlight the project's potential to create jobs, and draw foreign investment. For example, a video shared by CGTN states that "locals ...need to find ways out of the stagnant growth" and that with the help of BRI's Port City Project "all the people will overcome all these problems" as it "will help to improve the economy in Sri Lanka" (CGTN, 2023).

On January 10, 2025, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath and Chinese Ambassador to Sri Lanka Qi Zhenhong attended the Marina Development at Port City Colombo, Ground-Breaking Ceremony for the Marina Commercial Project at Port City Colombo, with other high-profile attendees present (Xu, 2025). The project is labeled as Sri Lanka's most prestigious project to date, and it is hoped to transform the country in terms of tourism and investment. Addressing the ceremony, Foreign Minister Herath stressed the strategic significance of the development, which he described as being "not just about infrastructure. It is about creating an enhancing destination. The hub that connects people, cultures and economies" (Newsfirst English, 2024). The project which is expected to help to make Colombo a global maritime center and tourism hub with high-end amenities such as sunset bars, sea restaurants, and retail outlets, will cost a total of $120 million, and is expected to be completed by 2027 (Xu, 2025). Qiushi Journal further covered the event highlighting the Marina Commercial Project as a cutting-edge development initiative poised to bring significant progress to Sri Lanka (Qiushi Journal, 2025). CGTN also published yet another optimistic article which mentioned the project "will promote cultural and economic cooperation between Sri Lanka and China" (CGTN, 2025).

The Official Belt and Road Portal also published a feature article titled "Colombo's Port City, 'city of the future" rising from the sea'" with a focus on the Sri Lankan engineer Sanjeewa Alwis, a pivotal figure in the development of Colombo Port City (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). In the article, Alwis states "I am very proud to be working as part of a Port City project, to (help) build my home country with the knowledge I have got from China" (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). In addition, another local, Sonala Gunawardana depicted the "Port City Colombo" as "the most promising project for our country" (Xinhua News Agency, 2021).

Likewise, the BRI Portal also features videos of the city's marine ecosystem (Xinhua News Agency, 2024). Here, a notable Sri Lankan, Piyal De Silva (2024), the former Commander of Sri Lankan Navy is quoted as saying "I can see very good progress in our coral nurseries...with the help of Chinese experts" (Xinhua News Agency, 2024). All in all, Chinese media outlets, primarily disseminate optimistic and promotional coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative's leading project in Sri Lanka, emphasizing its potential benefits.

4.1.2. Chinese Media Coverage of the Hambantota International Port

Sri Lanka's Hambantota International Port under the Belt and Road Initiative has also been portrayed as a successful page in Sino-Sri Lankan cooperation by the mainstream Chinese media outlets. In a narrative both optimistic and with future potential, state-owned outlets like Xinhua have focused on infrastructure development, industrial advancement and mutual benefit while playing down geopolitical strains and controversies surrounding the project.

From the start, Chinese media presented the Hambantota project as a centerpiece of industrial modernization and bilateral cooperation. The opening of the Sri Lanka-China Logistics and Industrial Zone Office was noted as "an important milestone in the strong ties between Sri Lanka and China" demonstrating how the BRI was not just about infrastructure, but also relationships (Xinhua News Agency, 2017a). According to same article, Sri Lankan Prime Minister of the time, Ranil Wickremesinghe said the Industrial Zone would "transform Sri Lanka into an important trading and logistics hub and attract massive investments to the Hambantota area" - underlining the idea that BRI projects directly contribute to national development (Xinhua News Agency, 2017).

This portrayal repeatedly connects the Hambantota Port to some of these more expansive regional ambitions. Chinese Ambassador Yi Xianliang has also stated that China would assist Sri Lanka to achieve a more developed industrial background, seeking to position China as a developmental partner, not a geopolitical actor (Xinhua News Agency, 2017a). This fits with the affirmative rhetoric embedded in the official BRI coverage, portraying foreign investors, such as China as economic enablers that aim to develop the country as a whole.

Over the course of 2017, Chinese state media described Hambantota as a showcase of rapid development. “Hambantota... is now racing along a developmental fast-track” Xinhua (2017b) reported, with highlighting the achievements over the span of a year, including the creation of the industrial zone and joint initiation of port operations The deal was presented as visionary, transformational, if not also mutually beneficial; as a promise of a brighter future for the Sri Lankan state and its economy, with the help of a Chinese company to help make that happen. “That is the national vision of Sri Lanka and it is also our mission as an operator,” Deputy General Manager of China Merchants Port Holdings Hang Tian stated,

> [W]e strongly believe that the Hambantota Port will play a more important role in Sri Lanka's shipping industry than the Colombo Port, since the former is located closer to the international shipping route. CM Port will apply their advanced experience of running ports in Shenzhen, China, to the Port of Hambantota (Xinhua News Agency, 2017b).

This presentation of the project also runs parallel to a carefully curated narrative of modernization. Chinese companies like China Harbour Engineering Company Ltd. (CHEC), are characterized as efficient, environmentally sensitive actors. When reporting on the construction of expressways near Hambantota, for example, CHEC’s project leader Yang Senyan said: “we built two special bridges as part of our project, with the space beneath the bridges left for the animals to ramble from one side to the other” (Xinhua News Agency, 2017b). Foreign companies are thereby portrayed as technologically savvy and ecologically conscious.

The narratives around that industrial development also dominate Chinese media. The reports highlighted investments with future promise, saying the industrial zone would host “refining and sea-product processing industries” and that “more than 30 enterprises have visited the Zone and expressed their willingness,” coupled with Zhang Lianjiu, Joint Managing Director at CHEC, remarking that “more than 10 enterprises have delivered their Letter of Interest,” indicative of increased confidence among investors (Xinhua News Agency, 2017b).

As the port began its operations, Chinese media increasingly highlighted Hambantota’s role in global trade and its significance to the automotive and logistics industries. In March 2024, Xinhua reported that the port has been successful in unloading the second shipment of vehicles destined for the local market, including 462 BYD electric vehicles, adding that it was “rapidly emerging as a crucial hub in the regional automotive supply chain” (Xinhua News Agency, 2025). HIP’s General Manager Lance Zuo said in a supplied statement that the port “remains committed to enhancing its capacity and efficiency... positioning itself as a premier hub for automotive logistics in South Asia” (Xinhua News Agency, 2025).

In January 2025, another report hailed Hambantota’s continued expansion. The port recorded “a growth rate of 22 percent in 2024” and launched its “inaugural container transshipment service” in cooperation with the Mediterranean Shipping Company (Maritime Gateway, 2025). It further discusses the port’s five-pillar agenda includes logistics integration, maritime operations, harbor functions, energy infrastructure, and associated industrial activities, as a collective leadership notion.

In short, the main presentation of the project in Chinese official media is that Hambantota is a model BRI project, collaborative, transformative, and promising. The port is depicted as a developmental boon while its geopolitical importance for China is not covered much.

Repeated references to this being "the beginning of a new chapter in the Indian Ocean” and that the partners “have made arrangements for the management and long-term success of the Hambantota Port” exemplify how the mainstream media tends to cover the issue predominantly around a discourse of mutual benefit and regional integration (Xinhua News Agency, 2017a; Xinhua News Agency, 2017b). By drawing attention to the aforementioned growth numbers, infrastructure improvements, and corporate relationships, with an addition of featuring quotes from both Sri Lankan and Chinese officials, Chinese media has positioned Hambantota as a showcase success of BRI diplomacy and a model for shared prosperity.

4.2. BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE COVERAGE IN SRI LANKAN MEDIA OUTLETS

Although the mainstream Chinese media representation conveys BRI in a very positive light, Sri Lankan media outlook on BRI is mixed, with a range of views towards foreign investments in the country. Pro-government outlets highlight the positives of such projects, while others analyze the long-term financial and strategic impact. These include the Daily News, Daily FT, and Sunday Observer often cover the positive side of BRI projects, such as infrastructure development, job creation and economic development. By contrast, media and news outlets that generally publish opposing views, like the Sunday Times and Daily FT, draw attention to Sri Lanka's rising debt and to a geopolitical race.

The Daily FT's reporting on the former Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe's participation in the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in October 2023 had perhaps the most obvious supportive media framing. Highlighting the diplomatic and economic dimensions of the visit, the outlet also reported that a landmark \$1.5 billion investment agreement for the next phase of a project, the Colombo Port City, was secured by Sri Lanka (Daily FT, 2024). Another piece by Daily FT further acknowledged that former President Wickremesinghe meeting with senior officials from major Chinese firms, such as "China Communications Construction Corporation, Sinopec and BYD" illustrated his administration's assertiveness in implementing BRI projects and attracting foreign direct investment (Daily FT, 2023a). Instead of characterizing Sri Lanka as a mere beneficiary of Chinese finance, Daily FT framed the country as an assertive decision-maker pursuing investment opportunities and charting its own path of development.

This framing was subsequently echoed and reinforced by the official joint statement issued after the bilateral meeting between President Xi Jinping and President Wickremesinghe. "Sri Lanka reiterated it will continue to actively participate in the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by China" wrote the Daily FT (Daily FT, 2023b). The direct endorsement from the Sri Lankan leadership accords well with the narrative of strategic participation underlined in local media. In fact, the joint statement explicitly singled out Colombo Port City and Hambantota Port as being "signature projects of Belt and Road cooperation between the two countries" (Daily FT, 2023b). These references present the projects not as isolated or externally imposed endeavors, but as being representative of a broader, deeper long-term partnership between the two countries. The statement also reaffirmed Sri Lanka's commitment to easing Chinese investments saying that the country would accept investments made by Chinese companies by "expressing readiness to facilitate a conducive environment for investments in the Port City including necessary legislative measures" (Daily FT, 2023b).

Such state-level announcements appearing in the media with depiction of Sri Lanka's involvement in the BRI as cooperative and autonomous, corresponded to the local media's and diplomatic communications' framing of the relationship as mutual, strategically motivated and founded on common developmental objectives. The joint statement furthermore emphasized the larger trajectory of this partnership, mentioning that Sino-Sri Lankan cooperation has led to "fruitful outcomes on Belt and Road cooperation" and that both parties agreed to sign several memoranda of understanding (Daily FT, 2023b). These agreements are intended to foster "bright spots and fresh momentum for high-quality Belt and Road cooperation" for China and Sri Lanka highlighting Sri Lanka's active role in defining the form and trajectory of BRI activities (Daily FT, 2023b).

Thus, the overlap between state media framing and official diplomatic language both portray Sri Lanka as an agent of decisions in the Belt and Road Initiative. Both channels, underline foreign investment as a crucial factor for development, and build an image of Sri Lanka as a forward-thinking, investment-ready nation.

The positive narrative is supported by coverage of technical and operational milestones of Belt and Road Initiative projects, such as of the Hambantota International Port (HIP). This highlights the continued growth of the port's ongoing expansion of its fuel offerings to include high sulfur fuel oil (HSFO), thus signaling not only the growing usage capability of these refueling infrastructures but also the critical strategic effect they have on seaborne trade routes. Reportedly, "HIP is positioning as a crucial player in the future of maritime trade and fuel supply," and will "cater to a broader range of vessels navigating one of the world's busiest shipping lanes," (Sunday Observer, 2025).

The article further quotes Wilson Qu, the CEO of Hambantota International Port Group (HIPG), who emphasizes the broader relevance of the development, stating that the launch of their HSFO bunkering facility marked "a significant step" toward transforming the port into a key player in the global maritime industry (Sunday Observer, 2025). The tone in mainstream media, as depicted by these examples, generally stresses the possibility of aligning Sri Lanka's national interests with that of the BRI objectives.

By highlighting the port's partnership with Sinopec, a leading energy firm, and certifications from Lloyd's Register, the media coverage reinforces HIP's conformity with the international standards. HIP obtained its Fitness for Service certificate in 2022, further "validating its infrastructure and commitment to safety and compliance" (Sunday Observer, 2025). Such a stylized portrayal in the media results in a public perception of the Belt and Road Initiative as a vehicle of technology, globalization and national development.

Supportive media narratives have also long-depicted Chinese investments in Hambantota as integral to Sri Lanka's economic transformation and industrial modernization. A standout among the projects is the Sri Lanka-China Industrial Zone Development project in Mirijjawila, Hambantota (Daily News, 2017). Media outlets exulted over former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's announcement that "Chinese financiers are ready to invest US$ 5 billion in the Hambantota Industrial Zone in the next few years" and 55 companies had already signed up (Daily News, 2017). This projection of significant foreign investment is intended to bolster confidence in BRI-backed economic development and promote Hambantota as a future center of regional industry.

The former Prime Minister framed the initiative as part of a historic national transformation, going so far as to compare the Hambantota project to one of Sri Lanka's other iconic development efforts, saying that its stands "bigger than former President J. R. Jayewardene's Mahaweli Development Programme" (Daily News, 2017). Such comparisons continue to connect the BRI to a legacy of state-led economic advancement.

Sri Lankan media has also published articles to dispel concerns over sovereignty. Wickremesinghe, for example, followed, "we are only giving it on a 99-year lease and not selling the port fully to the Chinese company" seeking to reassure the public that national ownership was not being compromised (Daily News, 2017). Here, land for investment was framed as a coordinated effort, and thus demonstrating domestic agency.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister conceded the port had become a financial liability, the port lost Rs 983 million, and the following year Rs 449 million amidst media coverage casting the investment as fatefully pragmatic, a lifeboat from the drowning economy (Ariff, 2017). Without Chinese participation, he warned, not only "the port would have collapsed" but also "the economy will collapse due to the inability to pay loans" (Daily News, 2017). He, thus framed BRI as not simply a foreign policy success for the nation but a domestic economic lifeline, emphasizing the themes of partnership, progress, and proactive governance throughout the Sri Lankan media landscape.

The changing media depiction of Sri Lanka's political and economic trajectory under President Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) also consistently supports the positioning of BRI as being not only consistent with, but instead enhanced by, domestic political change.

Sri Lankan mainstream media has highlighted that AKD's leadership marks a historic shift, with his National People's Power (NPP) coalition winning an allegedly "unified support across traditional demographic divisions" (Cooray, 2025).

As the AKD prepared for a formal visit to China, media narratives portrayed this period as "a uniquely opportune" time in Sino-Sri Lankan relations (Cooray, 2025). The BRI is framed as a flexible paradigm that conforms with AKD's development-oriented governing paradigm. A successful partnership like CICT and HIPG "demonstrate the proven track record of Chinese-Sri Lankan cooperation," which can be referenced for future projects such as Port City and newly announced industrial zones (Cooray, 2025).

In this media coverage, therefore, BRI cooperation is construed not only as related to infrastructure and finance, but also as a collective action for the development of Sri Lanka. Frequent references invoke the long-standing diplomatic and cultural ties between the two nations, recalling Sri Lanka's description of China as "lao panyo [pengyou]" - an old friend, and reminds that their collaboration is still ongoing, and mutual learning will endure the test of time (Cooray, 2025). References are also made to the Ceylon–China Trade Agreement of 1952 and ancient trade interactions through the port of Mantota.

By focusing on its "clear protections for foreign investments" and "streamlined business processes", the trope portrays Sri Lanka as a safe and strategic investment point for Chinese investments, with a focus on the wider Indian Ocean region (Rajapaksha, 2025). The coverage, in general, promotes a positive image of BRI projects within Sri Lanka as a whole, while presenting them in such a way that they become integral to a wider narrative about South-South cooperation and global partnerships for development.

The Sri Lankan media, in sum, have produced a very favorable narrative regarding the Belt and Road Initiative. It framed such projects as the Colombo Port City, Hambantota Port and related industrial zones as strategic, mutually beneficial and an exemplar of Sri Lanka's sovereign agency in the international development arena. This said narrative, which is reflected in diplomatic language and official visits, portrays the country not as a mere recipient of Chinese investment but as an active, autonomous actor that is making use of BRI partnerships on its path of national development. This highlights such themes as infrastructure modernization, economic rebirth and geopolitical realism. However, even if this supportive framing offers a sweeping, visionary account of meaningful change, it comes at the cost of narrative coordination, selectivity, and the silencing of alternate perspectives. This, then, is why it becomes important to look to more critical readings that interrogate the imbalances and political implications of Sri Lankan media's overwhelmingly positive portrayal of the BRI.

4.3. CHINESE FOREIGN INVESTMENT PROJECTS AND EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR PRACTICES IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka has been significantly transformed by China's BRI investments in infrastructure projects like the Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City. These ventures have given rise to significant debate over employment practices, especially the proportion of skilled, technical positions, which are held more by Chinese expatriates than local Sri Lankan workers, as well as the wider effects on the labor market. According to AidData, "35% of the BRI infrastructure project portfolio has encountered major implementation problems—such as corruption scandals, labor violations, environmental hazards, and public protests" (Malik, Parks, Russell, Lin, Walsh, Solomon, Zhang, Elston, and Goodman, 2021: 1). The report further explains that the developments of the initiative are not relatively less prone to experience issues if they are carried out by the host country. These results highlight ongoing concerns over exclusion of skilled local workforce, while critics also claim that "Chinese infrastructure projects often generate short-term economic benefits", and that "their long-term risks need to be carefully managed" (Malik et al., 2021: 3).

As a matter of fact, BRI projects in Sri Lanka have typically hired a mix of Chinese and local labor by Chinese construction firms. However, concerns concentrate on the makeup of the workforce across projects. In particular, what balance of Chinese versus local labor is being utilized, and the impact this has on local job creation, skills-based training, and long-term economic benefits are discussed. Although certain initiatives have demonstrated collaboration, wider trends indicate an ongoing dependence on imported labor and a failure to sustainably build the capacity of the Sri Lankan workforce.

According to Sri Lanka's Department of Immigration and Emigration, “the number of residence visas issued to Chinese nationals rose from 4,134 in 2013 to 6,504 in 2018” running in parallel to the increased number of BRI projects and private initiatives available in the country (Wignaraja, et al., 2020: 15). The workforce composition differs based on different projects and phases. As an example of how the Sri Lankan government also participated in this process, 22% of the workers employed building the Colombo Port City project were Chinese, despite the fact that the vast majority were Sri Lankan. In comparison, the operational Hambantota Port has around 900 employees, of which less than 4% are Chinese nationals (Kannangara and Hundlani, 2020). While their numbers are small compared to Sri Lanka’s overall labor force, “only account[ing] for roughly 0.1 per cent of Sri Lanka’s labour force in 2019” (Wignaraja, et al., 2020: 15).

The Chinese-backed BRI projects have also faced criticism over closed operational systems and showing minimal interest in local capacity building. A Chatham House report follows, “Chinese construction firms tend to bring labour over from China to work on infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka” and that “most local workers lack the necessary skills to benefit from the types of job created” (Wignaraja, et al., 2020: 15, 17). In other words, while the jobs are there thanks to BRI, opportunities for the Sri Lankan workforce is limited.

It is alleged that less than one in eight local construction workers has received the necessary training, and thus foreign contractors find it challenging to recruit suitable local labor. However, critics argue that the necessary training can be given (Wignaraja, et al., 2020: 17). Critics claim that many of the BRI initiatives have been tech- and labor-intensive and so have depended primarily on Chinese workers, and have deprived Sri Lankan workers of opportunities and stifled local skill development. Critics also claim however that without long-term investment in human capital, Sri Lanka will become further locked into this cycle of dependency on foreign technical expertise and may not be able to develop the skilled labor force that is essential for BRI projects and its national development as a whole. It is also claimed that this situation runs contrary to the narrative of mutual development and shared benefits (Wignaraja, et al., 2020).

Critical accounts also underline that there are significant differences in wages and benefits for Sri Lankan and Chinese workers. Daily Mirror LK, reports that “local workers in Chinese projects often face lower wages and fewer benefits compared to their Chinese counterparts” (Daily Mirror, 2023). According to the article, there are also “communication barriers” between the Chinese workers and the local workforce as “Mandarin Chinese [is used] as the primary language on-site” (Daily Mirror, 2023). This further makes it more challenging for local workers to raise complaints or seek redress.

In conclusion, though BRI projects in Sri Lanka have brought in new job opportunities. However, according to a number of critical reports, BRI's role in uplifting local communities and building workforce capabilities remain modest. The ongoing dependence on skilled Chinese workers and lack of technical training among Sri Lankan labor indicates a continued disparity between the BRI’s development rhetoric and its practical applications. Thus, a deliberate approach to ensuring technical training and, crucially, fair labor practice regulations is crucial if Sri Lanka is to avoid being dependent on foreign experts and to find empowerment through BRI.

4.4. ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Sri Lanka's involvement in BRI has resulted in numerous infrastructure projects in the country, such as the Hambantota International Port, Colombo Port City, and a wide network of expressways. Although these projects have led to increased economic activity, concerns regarding "environmental damage and increased security risks” remain (Wignaraja, et al., 2020: 2). On a more general note, the very advent of foreign capital - in this case, Chinese capital - for infrastructure projects have raised some concerns about sustainable development (Hundlani and Kannangara, 2020).

As far as the economic implications of the projects are concerned, the Department of External Resources of Sri Lanka provide some data of bilateral loans, such as the loans taken from China for Hambantota. However, a Chatham House report for instance, extends the view that “there is no reliable estimate of cumulative Chinese infrastructure investment in Sri Lanka to date” (Wignaraja, et al., 2020: 5). To this end, Central Bank of Sri Lanka provided a certain amount of data regarding the country’s debt situation (Harischandra, 2023: 45). However, international media outlets, such as the London-based Reuters, report a concerning external debt as “Sri Lanka owed Chinese lenders $7.4 billion - nearly a fifth of its public external debt” (Do Rosario and Savage, 2022). It is further alleged that the country is experiencing “the worst economic crisis since independence from Britain in 1948 and [may] tip into default” (Do Rosario and Savage, 2022). Therefore, a detailed analysis of the environmental and socio-economic implications of BRI for Sri Lanka is necessary to further understand the implications of the initiative for Sri Lanka.

4.4.1. Environmental Challenges

BRI projects in Sri Lanka have raised environmental concerns, such as deforestation, habitat destruction, coastal erosion and pollution due to increased carbon emissions during their implementation. Since large scale projects often involves immense land clearing, they lead to deforestation and loss of biodiversity.

For example, the construction of the Norochcholai Coal Power Plant preceded the formal launch of BRI, it serves as a strong indicator of how such large scale projects in Sri Lanka can impact the environment. The plant has been identified as a significant contributor to air pollution across western Sri Lanka, with fine ash particles spreading as far as Nawalapitiya and Colombo. Accordingly, the Lakvijaya coal power plant in Norochcholai has repeatedly been guilty of very serious environmental violations, especially with regard to air quality (The Sunday Times Sri Lanka, 2019). Tests conducted during the spring of 2019 showed that “particulate matter—or dust—[was] sixteen times over the maximum permissible level in the stack emissions of unit one” (The Sunday Times Sri Lanka, 2019). In addition, the legally allowed levels of sulfur dioxide were also exceeded for both unit one and unit two (The Sunday Times Sri Lanka, 2019). Notwithstanding, the plant continued operations with the Wayamba Provincial

Council Environmental Authority (WPCEA) withholding the Environmental Protection Licence (EPL) for months, due to non-compliance. In 2018, seven researchers from the Foundation for Environment, Climate and Technology cautioned that “very fine airborne ash particulates” from Lakvijaya had reached as far as the Nawalapitiya hills and Colombo, capable of “lodg[ing] inside one's lungs” and potentially decreasing life expectancy, damaging crops, and even disrupting rainfall (The Sunday Times Sri Lanka, 2019).

The evidence linking the plant’s emissions to distant regions is striking. 2018 and 2019 data showed that pollution levels in Nawalapitiya and Colombo decreased significantly when one of the malfunctioning units at Norochcholai was temporarily removed from the grid. An article that appeared in the Sunday Times Sri Lanka, followed “the chance that the readings at Norochcholai and Nawalapitiya tracked each other due to random chance is less than 0.05 percent” (Zubair, 2019). As Zubair (2019) puts it, “if the air quality monitoring had been undertaken... then the power company and the regulators would have been clued in long ago”. Thus, the critics underline the dire need for heightened environmental oversight and monitoring to prevent chronic health and environmental harm.

The Hambantota Port, which became a jewel in the crown of China’s BRI, has also become a cautionary case of how large-scale infrastructure development can undermine the environment. Funded by a $1.4 billion loan from China and built by a Chinese multinational group, the port was portrayed by Mahinda Rajapaksa, a former president of Sri Lanka, as "a beacon for economic change" for the country’s south (Daily FT, 2016). However, from the start, the project suffered from environmental problems. One of the first being the discovery of a giant boulder blocking the port’s main channel, a geological feature that would have been detected with appropriate testing of the seabed and soil. “After nearly a year of denying the presence of an obstacle” DailyFT (2016) reported “engineers finally began a process of blasting the rock at an additional cost of $ 40 million – also borrowed from the Chinese Government”.

The construction of the Hambantota Port, has also received criticism over the devastation of the Karagan Lagoon, an important wetland haven for migratory birds. According to a 2017 report, “siting the Hambantota Port within the naturally existing Karagan Lagoon essentially destroyed the lagoon and its wetland ecosystem, as the port construction required dredging 40,000 cubic meters from the lagoon" (Friends of the Earth U.S., 2017: 19). This has also been mentioned by Divya Hundlani of the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies as an action that "essentially destroyed the entire ecosystem of the lagoon and surrounding habitats" (Hundlani, 2019: 226). The Sri Lankan government had previously recognized the Karagan Lagoon as "an important refuge" for migratory birds and as part of a critical elephant corridor linking multiple national parks (Hundlani, 2019: 226). Moreover, the port's close proximity to Bundala National Park, Sri Lanka's first Ramsar site and a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Biosphere Reserve, raised serious concerns about the port's long-term impact on local wildlife and wetland ecosystems.

"Spanning 269 hectares of reclaimed land from the sea" Colombo Port City project has been yet another cause for concern with Sri Lankan environment (Revi, 2021). From the outset, environmentalists such as Sarath Iddamalgoda and Sri Lankan fishermen have been vocal about how the project harms biodiversity and marine ecosystems (Iddamalgoda, 2016). More specifically, "there has been consistent opposition from environmentalists about the detrimental impact of rock extraction on bio-diversity and marine life" (Revi, 2021).

Local communities, particularly fishermen, have reported real-life repercussions. Fishermen of Kammalthota, for instance have "lamented that their incomes have already declined due to the depletion of fish resources as a result of sand mining" (Iddamalgoda, 2016).

In light of these concerns, the project developers have highlighted sustainability measures. Port City Colombo's official website notes that Comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) have been conducted to ensure adherence to best practices (Port City Colombo, n.d.). The proposed project Development Control Regulations (DCR) also provided incentives to promote green, renewable energy at Port City construction zones. The master plan also focuses on non-motorized transport "to reduce pollution and create highly livable city squares" (Port City Colombo, n.d.).

Skeptics however, note that the contribution of such preventive measures are minute when compared with the projects' overall impact. Critics from ORF say the EIAs have failed to tackle several environmental issues, including possible water pollution, waste dumping and discharging of ballast water from cargo ships, as well as drawing attention to the dangers of "soil pollution, acidification and acid rains" (Revi, 2021).

All in all, the project may be heralded as a major economic boost through foreign direct investment and local employment opportunities, however, the aforementioned development must not be at the expense of the environment and the livelihoods of local residents.

4.4.2. Socio-Economic Implications

BRI projects come across as promising for increasing access to foreign investments, jobs, and urban development, however, they also provoke concerns around debt-sustainability, labor rights, inequality, and national sovereignty. For example, both Colombo Port City and the Hambantota Port have brought significant investment and jobs to the country. An example can be drawn from the Colombo Port City which was said to create “343,400 jobs,” and “add a total contribution of c. USD 15bn towards the country’s GDP on an annual basis” (Port City Colombo, 2024). These projects in the short term have kept the construction industry vivid, creating a demand for labor, and boosted ancillary services, stimulating local economies.

The most high-profile of BRI-linked projects in Sri Lanka is the Colombo Port City. Originated in former President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s administration, the project represents China’s “single largest investment in Sri Lanka” at US$1.4bn (Revi, 2021). Sri Lankan government, especially under President of the time Gotabaya Rajapaksa, had faith in CPC as a channel for domestic job opportunities and inflow of foreign direct investments (Revi, 2021).

Yet the socio-economic reality has been more complicated. CPC may have been able to offer some lucrative jobs in fields such as finance and decadent real estate, however, it has marginalized the low-income groups to such extent that some critics went as far as saying that “such heavy infrastructure investment is part of a war against low-income communities" (Ranawana, 2022). As previously mentioned, Sri Lankan fishermen especially experienced loss of livelihood due to a degradation of their work environment and 1the depletion of fish resources as a result of sand mining" (Revi, 2021). This shows how a mega-infrastructure project can disproportionately disturb the traditional balances. These issues have stoked resentment in certain segments of the society and cast doubt on the sustainability of proclaimed benefits once certain phases of construction get underway.

Another line of worry is that investments are often concentrated in urban or coastal areas, especially in the Western Province, worsening regional imbalances in terms of income and infrastructure. It is feared that such disparities can exacerbate current socio-economic disparities and erode national unity. For instance, the Hambantota International Port, a major BRI project in the Southern Province was built in anticipation of promoting overall economic growth. However, the port, allegedly, has not lived up to its promise of economic benefits for the surrounding rural communities. Therefore, these ambitious, mega-projects do not automatically equalize regional development at such a large scale (Ruwanpure, Rowe, and Chan, 2020: 342). Other projects such as the CPC and CICT also exemplify this trend. While the CICT "has allowed the Colombo port to grow at a rapid pace," it has "only limited economic spillovers for Sri Lanka [at large], including knowledge transfer in the local labour force" (Chatham House, 2020). This indicates that while infrastructure expansion is visible in Colombo, rural regions, where core development services are urgently needed, are often neglected.

In sum, it is possible to say that BRI has led to significant socio-economic transformation in Sri Lanka. As infrastructure upgrades and economic growth come into play, these potential gains will be weighed against issues of debt, labor practices, regional inequality and geopolitical dependency. For Sri Lanka to realize the full socio-economic dividends of the BRI, it may need to take into account a careful reassessment of engagement strategies, greater transparency in project negotiations, and more robust protections for local communities and workers, if it is to avoid jeopardizing its sovereignty and long-term development trajectories.

4.5. GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The geopolitical implications of Sri Lanka’s involvement with the BRI are especially important since the BRI finds itself at the intersection point of power struggles in the Indian Ocean. It is worth noting that BRI faced scrutiny particularly from India and the United States, as China’s foothold in the region expands via key infrastructure initiatives, primarily via a number of ports and maritime facilities.

The Hambantota International Port especially draws much attention of the media. Built with Chinese loans and later leased to China Merchants Port Holdings for 99 years after the debt became too much for Sri Lanka to bear, Hambantota has fueled fears that China is becoming more assertive about controlling strategic maritime infrastructure (Ondaatjie and Sirimanne, 2019). Reportedly,

> In what India would associate with its own sphere of influence, China’s land grab in Sri Lanka and enhancing the military power projection of strategic rivals such as Pakistan through CPEC with planned corridors through Kashmir have India concerned with Chinese encirclement (Lindley, 2022).

India has traditionally been the dominant power in South Asia and has been wary of China’s strategic foothold in Sri Lanka. The emergence of BRI projects near Indian maritime borders has been interpreted as part of a potentially larger “String of Pearls” strategy (LaunchPad IAS, n.d.). According always to the said report, China allegedly aims to build a chain of military and commercial posts in the Indian Ocean and India, for this reason, 'responded' to the decoupling of China and Sri Lanka by deepening its own engagements in Colombo, and including “India's Adani Group in the development of the West Container Terminal at Colombo Port” (ET EnergyWorld, 2024). Meanwhile, China’s increasing strategic access to key maritime routes also draws the attention of U.S. experts. For example, Lew and Roughead (2021), in a report published by the Council on Foreign Relations claim that “BRI presents significant risks for U.S. economic, political, climate change, security, and health interests... [and, therefore] how the COVID-19 crisis, and the accompanying wave of economic distress, is reshaping BRI” remain at the center of reports on the project (Lew and Roughead, 2021).

India, with over $4 billion in aid, also stepped in to help during Sri Lanka’s “worst economic crisis in seven decades leading to deadly riots and alarming shortages of fuel, food and medicines” (Hindustan Times, 2022). This highlighted the complexity of Sri Lanka’s geopolitical entanglements and the degree to which BRI engagements can constrain its diplomatic acumen. Furthermore, there are concerns about the long-term implications of allowing a foreign power significant control over logistics and trade hubs. According to Chellaney “states caught in debt bondage to the new imperial giant risk losing both natural assets and their very sovereignty” (Chellaney cited in Heydarian, 2020: 134). Thus, this foothold, some argue, may allegedly enable future military activity under the justification of the protection of commercial enterprise. Therefore, the main concern is not solely about the port(s), but also about a risky pattern of influence that could potentially erode the sovereignty of Sri Lanka.

In response to widespread international concern, Sri Lankan officials have repeatedly stated that BRI projects are purely commercial, Prime Minister Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe stating that “there are no foreign naval bases in Sri Lanka” (Economic Times, 2018). Meanwhile, in the mainstream media, significance of the ports of Gwadar and Hambantota has also been analyzed from the point “of lessening the traveling time and cost of Chinese trade” (Jaleel, Noor, and Ahmed, 2023). The port’s position near crucial shipping lanes, which is also informally called as the “gateway to world” makes it even more strategically significant, and has led to concerns about China’s possible long-term designs to increase its power in the region (Sirimanne, 2010).

Sri Lanka’s entanglement in the geopolitical undercurrents of the Belt and Road Initiative shows the precarious line smaller states must walk in the midst of great-power rivalry. Though the BRI has been an important source of investment and infrastructure, it has also created a tangle of strategic dependencies, drawing scrutiny both in the Western and regional media. The case of the Hambantota Port is a perfect example of how strategic geography can be a double-edged sword in international relations. The strategic location of the island in the Indian Ocean, within the vicinity of important maritime trade routes, makes every infrastructure project a regional-security issue and a concern of global interest. While officials may stress the purely commercial nature of these developments, the larger geopolitical impact, such as escalated regional tensions and issues of sovereignty, point to a more layered picture. Thus, without a balanced development and collaboration strategy, China's economic development plans for Sri Lanka may come at the price of autonomy.

4.6. ECONOMIC GROWTH OR DEBT DEPENDENCY?

The involvement of Sri Lanka in China's Belt and Road Initiative has attracted considerable attention and has been the subject of notable academic debates among scholars, international community and policymakers. With a primary focus on its long-term impact, debt sustainability and even national sovereignty on the country's progress, BRI presents ample opportunities for in-depth analysis of its impact on Sri Lanka's development trajectory. Pro-BRI individuals claim that the initiative would provide Sri Lanka significant opportunities, which could be transformational for the country as an impetus for economic growth and regional integration. They further highlight mega-infrastructure projects like Hambantota International Port and the Colombo Port City serve as blueprints to turn Sri Lanka into a strategic trade center.

Critics, on the other hand, cite concerns over debt that these investments are accruing on the country's books, the allegedly opaque nature of debt agreements, and the risk of becoming trapped in a cycle of borrowing - especially when some assets, such as the Hambantota Port, have been leased to Chinese firms on controversial terms. In light of the complexity of these changes, a thorough review of both sides by studying a broad range of academic, journalistic, and policy sources available is of utmost necessity.

4.6.1. Economic Growth Through the Hambantota International Port

Supporters of BRI in Sri Lanka argue that Chinese investments have been pivotal in transforming Sri Lanka's infrastructure development, paving the way for the island nation to become a key maritime and financial hub in the Indian Ocean. As noted by the Sri Lankan Embassy in Beijing, one of the most notable examples is the Hambantota International Port, and its major modernization since being leased in 2017 to China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPort) (Embassy of Sri Lanka in Beijing, n.d.). With the help of CMPort, "an award-winning operator in the cargo logistics sector, with an international record of accomplishment for best practices and sustainable cargo transportation" Hambantota now "offers the most diversified range of services in the Port and Maritime industry in Sri Lanka" (Embassy of Sri Lanka in Beijing, n.d.).

While the lease prompted alarm in Western and Indian media, many news outlets labelling it as a 'textbook example' of a debt-trap, BRI supporters maintain that this description is a "myth" and that the port's solid contributions to the national economy cannot be ignored (Hameiri, 2020). For instance, Hameiri argues that the case of Hambantota should not be blamed on "Chinese strategy" as the main issue is "poor governance on the recipient side" (Hameiri, 2020). He further called for "Australian policymakers... [to] avoid treating the BRI as if it were being strategically directed" (Hameiri, 2020).

Mainstream media coverage also states that Hambantota Port has become a vibrant transshipment hub. Accordingly,

> The HIP became the fastest-growing ro-ro transshipment port in the region in 2023, with 700,000 transshipment vehicles handled, up 26 percent from 2022 figures. The port made an $8-million investment last year to build another 68,000 square meters of parking space to add a further 5,000 to its current approximately 28,000 slots for transshipment vehicles (Majueran, 2024).

The same outlet further notes that under Chinese control, HIP has experienced "remarkable growth" and that the collaboration between Sri Lanka and China is "bringing win-win results to both countries" (Majueran, 2024). Some even claim that the 99-year lease of the aforementioned port has been "more financially beneficial for Sri Lanka... than ... [the] International [Monetary] Fund or World Bank" programs (Ranaraja, 2020). Accordingly, within a year of CMPort management of the port, "the port focused on roll-on - roll-off (Ro-Ro) operations and doubled its business, with a 136% increase in the volume of ro-ro vessels handled by the operational staff" (Ranaraja, 2020). HIP has since expanded into areas such as container handling, general cargo, bunkering, bulk terminal operations, and gas services. Large-scale foreign investments followed these lucrative additions to the port (Ranaraja, 2020).

The location of HIP is also strategic for regional trade. As it is located only "six to ten nautical miles… to the world's busiest maritime route between the Malacca Straits and the Suez Canal", it is now capable of providing importers and exporters with faster shipment timelines (Ranaraja, 2020). In addition, its competitive labor costs, freeport facilities and, year-round dry weather boost its prospects as “a competitive regional maritime and logistics hub” (Ranaraja, 2020). Also, in the context of investments for maritime regulations towards green, renewable transportation practices, Hambantota is advertised to be the “ideal location to invest in storage tanks, refineries and LNG bunkering facilities” in accordance with the International Maritime Organization’s (IMO) decarbonization goals (Ranaraja, 2020).

4.6.2. Economic Growth Through the Colombo Port City

Proponents of the BRI also argue that the Colombo Port City (CPC) is one of Sri Lanka’s most ambitious infrastructure projects that aims to turn the country into a global financial and commercial hub in South Asia. Launched in 2014 as a partnership between the government of Sri Lanka and China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), the project has created a special economic zone across 269 hectares of maritime land reclaimed from the Indian Ocean, meant to draw high-value investments from finance, real estate, tourism and services.

Sri Lankan authorities and the proponents of the BRI argue that CPC project is a strategic lifeline for a country facing massive economic crisis, “the worst since independence in 1948” (Like, 2022). As the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism stated, CPC is a $15-billion US dollar investment project that aims to reclaim “[o]ver 450 acres of land... from the sea adjacent to downtown Colombo” (Keerthisinghe, 2014).

According to the proponents of the said BRI projects, there are also additional benefits. For example, according to Harsha Amarasekera, Chairman of the Colombo Port City Economic Commission, CPC “positions Sri Lanka to become a leading destination for luxury yachting in South Asia, attracting high-net-worth individuals and making a substantial contribution to the nation's economic growth” (News.LK, 2025). A PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report also supports Amarasekera’s projections, estimating that the CPC project could add $13.8 billion to the country’s economy once fully operational" if the "construction and operational stages proceed as planned” (Weerasooriya, 2021). CHEC Port City Colombo has thus far invested over $1.4 billion into the reclamation and infrastructure phase, and, according to PwC, the project "could progressively attract additional investments up to 12.7 billion dollars over the next 20 years" - making it one of the most substantial sources of foreign direct investment in Sri Lanka's history (Weerasooriya, 2021). Amidst such positive framing of the projects however, critics continue to underline the real time debt being incurred by Sri Lanka.

4.6.3. Debt-Trap Diplomacy Concerns

While the project is touted as a spur to economic recovery and modernization, its long-term leases and ties to Chinese state-owned enterprises have stoked fears about national sovereignty and financial dependency. As Sri Lanka struggles with high levels of debt and economic instability, questions linger whether such large-scale foreign-financed projects are sound pathways toward development or whether they risk reinforcing Sri Lanka's dependency on China. This tension is at the center of a growing international debate about debt-trap diplomacy, a phrase that is also used in connection with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

While CHEC Colombo Port City states that the development might "create 143,375 new jobs and additional economic value of $13.8bn per annum", many local observers including experts and citizens are skeptical about the contribution of the project to Sri Lankan economy (Heaver, 2023). Critics including Jayasinghe have referred to features like the artificial beach as "just greenwashing to attract international investors," and say sustainability has become a "convenient buzzword" (Heaver, 2023). Vidhura Ralapanawe, a former adviser to the PCC (Port City Colombo) Commission, agrees, arguing that "the existing sustainability plan was just not good enough, there was no serious focus on sustainability, it was just treated as the icing on the cake" (Heaver, 2023). To some observers, Sri Lankans' rush to embrace a new kind of foreign investment at a time when their country is struggling with high inflation and public debt is striking (Heaver, 2023). Still, the project is at risk of being a high-cost, isolated enclave away from the realities of the rest of the country. In Jayasinghe's words, the project, to the critics, is more of "a separate tax-free dreamland when the rest of the country is facing higher taxes" (Heaver, 2023).

Some critics maintain that Sri Lanka's alleged debt-trap crisis under the BRI may be leading the country into an economic catastrophe. The Hambantota Port agreement stands as the signifier of this relationship. As Economy writes in her book The World According to China: Sri Lanka "could not service its debt and, instead, granted China a 99-year lease on its Hambantota port" (Economy, 2021: 135). The strategic implications of this transfer are very telling, with former Sri Lankan Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena admitting that the lease could stretch indefinitely, entrenching China's presence in a critical maritime point, as he stated the lease "can go on for any number of years after 99 years or for another 99 years" (Abeyagoonasekera, 2022). Thus, the critics contend that Rajapaksa administration's aggressive borrowing and alignment with the Chinese state not only eroded Sri Lanka's historically neutral foreign policy position, but they also deepened dependency, putting the country in a "classic debt trap" (Abeyagoonasekera, 2022).

Sri Lanka's "default of $51 billion of international debt in May [2022]" has brought the allegedly opaque nature of Chinese lending into the center of debate (Abeyagoonasekera, 2022). Some also claim that this magnitude complicated efforts by the IMF to lead the restructuring of the loans. Even though China is officially credited with 10 percent of Sri Lanka's $35.1 billion in external debt, experts such as Umesh Moramudali argue the actual number "comes to about 20 percent, not 10 percent" (Abeyagoonasekera, 2022). This includes borrowing from state enterprises and commercial loans. Allegedly, the opaque nature and reluctance of Chinese institutions to negotiate debt restructurings has brought negotiations to a standstill, reflecting wider frustrations from leaders of the G20 economies (Shalal and Jones, 2022). Critics contend that China allegedly has done little more than extend new loans to pay off old ones, giving rise to the vocalized concerns over an alleged debt-trap.

In 2018, then-U.S. Vice President Mike Pence discussed Hambantota as a cautionary case about China's widening global footprint, repeatedly decrying the process that led to the lease as debt-trap diplomacy. He mentioned the port "may soon become a forward military base for China's growing blue-water navy" (Rod, 2024). Then, the term spread quickly through U.S. strategic discourse, championed by commentators such as the former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who interpreted the port's strategic position as a potential entry point for Chinese military ambitions. In other words, amidst the mainstream media's coverage on whether there will be a restructuring of Sri Lanka's debt or not, the project also rises concerns about the building tensions in the region.

4.7. CONCLUSION

A paradox of promise and peril is what becomes immediately evident in Sri Lanka's complex entanglement with China's Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI has on the one hand, undeniably changed the definition of the country's physical context through ambitious infrastructure, expressways, port facilities with Hambantota International Port, and trailblazing urban centers such as the Colombo Port City. Both Chinese and Sri Lankan officials have touted these projects as heralding modernization, prosperity, global integration, increased levels of direct foreign investment and job creation. However, beneath all this coverage lurk some uncomfortable issues, such as the amount of debt accrued, the problems encountered by the local workers and the environmental damage.

The official narrative is echoed by the mainstream media in both states. BRI is portrayed as an equal partnership rooted in centuries of allyship and shared goals of development. However, foreign media outlets report on the exploitative labor practices, limited skills transfer, and environmental degradation too. In addition to the economic consequences, the strategic implications of leasing vital shipping infrastructure to Chinese firms, notably the 99-year lease on the Hambantota Port, have led to criticisms of strategic overreach and concerns about creeping dependency. An alleged lack of transparency in financial deals and China's unwillingness to restructure Sri Lankan debt have heightened these fears.

Furthermore, the socio-economic implications and impact of these developments have been different in the urban and rural areas. While urban areas gain from such BRI investments, rural areas are still neglected, and more traditional livelihoods, such as fishing communities, face dislocation. Projects such as the Colombo Port City are spun by the political elite as a bold vision, but large segments of the public is skeptical being spurred on by debt-fueled growth's inflation, and international isolation.

As great-power competition rises and South-South cooperation is direly needed, the answer might not be found in the grandeur of ports or cities rising from the sea, but rather on how a small island nation navigates a sea of possibilities.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATING BRI IN PAKISTAN, ZAMBIA, AND SRI LANKA THROUGH THE FRAMEWORKS OF REALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM

Expanding on the theoretical underpinnings of Realism and Neoliberalism established in the preceding chapters, this chapter aims to revisit the strategic and institutional aspects of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in three major partner countries, namely Pakistan, Zambia and Sri Lanka. In this final chapter, the aim will be to use the empirical terrain to discuss the strengths and limitations of the Realist versus Neoliberal interpretation of the BRI.

In assessing the BRI, authors that seem to align with Realism emphasize power asymmetries, strategic interests, and self-help. Authors that have embraced the Neoliberal framework on the other hand, emphasize the great potential for growth through interdependency. They also stress the possibility of absolute gains for each participating state in the aforementioned BRI projects.

Each of the countries covered within the context of BRI, have different backgrounds. Pakistan stands out as the strategic base of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Sri Lanka as a maritime partner through projects such as the Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City, Zambia as a landlocked African country managing Chinese-led infrastructure investments amid debt vulnerability and resource dependence. Yet all three countries offer ample space to explore the effects of BRI as a series of foreign investment projects.

5.1. PAKISTAN: THE CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR

Pakistan is one of the most important case studies in terms of Belt and Road Initiative, given that it is home to one of BRI's most critical connectivity projects, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Owing to a combination of its technical and geopolitical importance, CPEC is known as BRI's flagship project and aims to be an integral development and connectivity corridor between the inland western region of China and Arabian Sea regions of Pakistan. With more than $60 billion in investment planned, CPEC encompasses megaprojects in areas like infrastructure, energy, ports and transport meant to enhance Pakistan's economic capacity, while also ensuring China strategic access to world markets (Mardell, 2020).

The China-Pakistan partnership is often described as an "all-weather friendship," (Mardell, 2020) sustained by decades of political and military collaboration. However, this deeper economic penetration that the BRI has ushered may also harbor certain risks. From a Realist perspective, for example, CPEC might be considered as an addition to China's strategic map of South Asia, designed to accrue influence, to constrain competitors, and to extend its geoeconomic power via asymmetric partnerships. Neoliberal interpretations, on the other hand, may put the emphasis on the possibility of shared economic interests, and the potential for long-term cooperation and regional integration.

This section analyzes CPEC from Realist and Neoliberal perspectives. It first examines the geopolitical and security aspects of the Corridor, namely, power asymmetries, strategic dependencies, and relative gains dilemmas. Then, it moves on to examining the institutional design and cooperative mechanisms underpinning CPEC, through bilateral agreements and economic planning bodies. In doing so, the analysis aims to demonstrate that each of these theoretical perspectives can aid in elucidating some of the strategic rationales, anticipated benefits, and latent risks of BRI engagement in Pakistan.

5.1.1. Early BRI Discourses on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Pakistan

Upon its launch in Pakistan in 2015, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative became a source of hope and much excitement. In both countries, officials portrayed CPEC as a game-changer and 'win-win' venture, that it would accelerate the economies of the two countries, modernize infrastructure, and enhance regional connectivity (Ma, 2024). The early discourses, were, therefore, consistent with Neoliberal theory, which stresses the possibility of absolute gains through cooperation and institutional design (Keohane, 1984).

Pakistani government officials and Chinese leaders have always touted CPEC as a project for the long-term benefit of both countries. When meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, President Xi Jinping explicitly stated that “China-Pakistan Economic Corridor concerns the long-term development of the two countries” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). In a similar fashion, the former Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi stressed that the Pakistan-China relationship was not merely economic, but a strategic choice built on mutual interests (China Public Diplomacy Association, 2021).

Official media such as the CPEC Secretariat persistently presented CPEC as “the hope of a better region of the future with peace, development and growth” (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, n.d.). Liberal authors further echoed this take, labeling CPEC as carrying Pakistan- China ties to “new heights” and making Pakistan a regional anchor (Ahmad, Gill, Hussian, and Ismail, 2024). Chinese state media including Xinhua News Agency and the Global Times amplified this positive depiction by focusing on CPEC’s ability to accelerate infrastructure and economic development in Pakistan, framing CPEC as “central to” Sino-Pakistani “vision of connectivity” (Xinhua, 2025; Global Times, 2024a).

Yet, this Neoliberal optimism would also be sided by the critiques of a strand of authors leaning towards the Realist camp since the initiation of the project. Some journalists and analysts have cautioned that CPEC would lead to Pakistan being economically bound to China, resulting in an unequal relationship. Questions were also raised on the strategic control of key assets such as the Gwadar Port and debt sustainability. As noted by the Herald Magazine at the outset, while CPEC represents “the single largest foreign investment” Pakistan has ever claimed, concerns have emerged over the “debt that the projects will incur” (Khan and Hyder, 2019). Coupled with the debt concerns, Pakistani media outlet Dawn further noted that CPEC may even “foster corruption and repatriate jobs and profits to China” (Iqbal, 2019).

These critiques indeed underline relative gains and absolute vulnerabilities associated with economic independence and political entanglement (Waltz, 1979). Therefore, although the official rhetoric remained Neoliberal optimism, a Realist skepticism was also there from the outset, paving the way for a more contested narrative as CPEC unfolded over time.

5.1.2. Implementation Phase and the Emergence of Dissident Voices

Infrastructure projects under CPEC, including the upgrade of the Karakoram Highway (linking Xinjiang's Kashgar to Gilgit-Baltistan) and the Gwadar Port development were initially and still are being pitched as instruments of trade and development. However, this was also interpreted as China seeking alternative trading routes outside of the Strait of Malacca, in case of a maritime embargo is placed by rival naval powers (Fazl-e-Haide, 2023).

Another example of China's strategic approach to CPEC was evidenced in the construction of the Gwadar Port. Although promoted as a commercial hub to aid Pakistan's underdeveloped Balochistan province, Gwadar's location gives it a unique strategic significance. To conduct a Realist analysis of Gwadar Port's strategic utility, 'Malacca Dilemma' of China must first be studied. This overcrowded waterway of the Malacca Strait serves as a lifeline for China's trade and energy imports (Storey 2006). China's reliance on this maritime crossing point also carries within the vulnerability of the strait being potentially embargoed by contending powers, which "could derail the economic growth on which the Chinese government depends to ... pursue its great power ambitions" (Storey, 2006).

Gwadar Port on Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast, provides an alternative for China by bypassing the Strait of Malacca for energy supplies. As such, the port may provide "an alternative access to the Arabian Sea in case the Strait of Malacca is blocked" (Vázquez, 2023). Therefore, from a Realist perspective, Gwadar may indeed become an instrument to shield China, from any possible disruptions to vital lines of supply.

Likewise, Karakoram Highway project as part of BRI, not only aims to boost Pakistan's economy, but may also provide China a safe land channel to the Arabian Sea, protecting its energy lifeline in case of Southeast Asia disruptions (Hillman, 2019: 1). Indeed, "[a] blockade at the Strait of Malacca would mean cutting off China's energy lifeline", which puts the emphasis on the importance of this overland route in ensuring energy security for China (Haider, 2023). Through a Realist lens, this logistical vein serves to improve China's geostrategic mobility in an anarchic international system that is riddled with crises and conflict.

Despite these apparent challenges, official representations in Pakistan maintain the optimistic rhetoric of CPEC as a game-changer. As mentioned in multiple state-backed media outlets, senior officials of Pakistan, including former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and former Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, have projected CPEC as a historical chance of economic overhaul and strategic upgrade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024; China Public Diplomacy Association, 2021). Press releases have also portrayed CPEC as beneficial for enhancing Pakistan's global connectivity and promoting industrialization, while presenting Chinese financing as benevolent when juxtaposed with the conditional financing provided by its Western counterparts (Husain, 2017; Rana, 2021).

However, as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor project advanced, the initial euphoria was soon met with increasing public criticism and dissent (Pathak and Shetty, 2025; Baloch and Ellis-Petersen, 2025). The risks involved with the CPEC project, such as sovereignty issues, and displacement of local communities, have added to critical perceptions. A good number of news articles thus echoed Realist worries about the project's unbalanced benefits to the participating states.

One major point of concern deals with Pakistan's rising debts. While the Pakistani government continued to describe CPEC as a game changer for the country's economy, some investigative journalists and analysts cast doubt on whether Pakistan could meet the financial commitments it was making. Dawn newspaper for example, emphasized Western fears that CPEC-related investments might "push the country deeper into an already stifling debt burden" (Iqbal, 2019). This account echoed previous warnings that Pakistan would be economically overdependent on China.

The fears about debt and sovereignty, which have become increasingly common in Pakistani public discussion as mentioned by Jorgic (2018) contributed to the ongoing discussions over debt trap diplomacy.

Critics maintained that while Chinese investment seems to provide a development lifeline, it may also create strategic leverage points for China. Since the financing for CPEC is based mostly on loans rather than on grants (bne IntelliNews Mumbai Bureau, 2025). Pakistan's growing indebtedness and turnover of operational control of strategic assets, such as the 40-year lease of the Gwadar Port all added to the displeasure of the local population from CPEC affected areas like Gwadar and Balochistan. According to reports, promised development advantages did not come through for local communities; instead, Chinese businesses secured major contracts and operational control of the strategically important Gwadar Port (Press Trust of India, 2017; Baloch and Ellis-Petersen, 2025). Demonstrations in Gwadar, mobilized around slogans such as 'Give Rights to Gwadar,' received much media coverage as well (Notezai, 2021).

The wider geopolitical environment also seem to have lent further support to the Realist voices. By linking CPEC projects with disputed territories such as Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan was further drawn into regional rivalries, particularly with India. Meanwhile, CPEC also led to militarization in Pakistan to protect Chinese nationals and assets in the country (Dawn.com, 2017).

Some also reported that the militarization of civilian spaces such as in Gwadar, and the social unrest Sino-Pakistani partnerships may have been adding onto the marginalization of the local populations (Khan and Hyder, 2019; Baloch and Ellish-Petersen, 2025). Media outlets like Dawn and the Guardian have widely covered the socioeconomic injustices in Balochistan where development promises have translated into ever-growing predatory economic models (Baloch and Ellish-Petersen, 2025; Iqbal, 2019). Some critics also contend that the financial terms of CPEC project — with assured dollar returns and substantial sovereign liabilities might further undermine the long-term financial independence of Pakistan (Husain, 2017; Khan and Hyder, 2019).

These mounting complaints may suggest that, regardless of the way CPEC is presented in the mainstream media as a win-win project, power asymmetries and strategic dependencies may be empirically substantiating core Realist suspicions of the true distribution of power and benefits within the partnership.

5.1.3. Critical Turning Points

A critical juncture in Pakistan's CPEC process was the operational takeover of Gwadar Port by the Chinese on a 40-year lease (Press Trust of India, 2017). This, combined with a growing set of indicators of Pakistan's deepening debt crisis, was one of the significant moments when Pakistani public opinion began to shift.

Following the Gwadar Port's operational transfer, there has also been a turn by a few previous CPEC advocates to Realist-inclined criticisms. Worries about strategic autonomy, grip over vital infrastructure, and debt sustainability rose. According to reports, Pakistani people have been becoming more concerned about China's increasing influence (Baloch and Ellis-Petersen, 2025). In addition, the commercial conditions of CPEC projects, which included offers of sovereign guarantees and guaranteed dollar returns to Chinese companies, also increased criticisms (Husain, 2017; Khan and Hyder, 2019).

Meanwhile, international media coverage also started to criticize how local populations, especially in Balochistan, were feeling excluded, economically marginalized, and forgotten from the dividends of CPEC despite the initial pledges of development (Baloch and Ellis-Petersen, 2025; Notezai, 2021). Demonstrations in Gwadar over economic marginalization added onto the general frustration with the project outcomes.

Meanwhile, amid increasing denunciations, many Pakistani and Chinese government officials continued to cast CPEC in Neoliberal terms. They argued that despite some challenges, over time economic development, connectivity, and industrialization would justify CPEC as a "win-win" project (Ministry of Planning, 2025, China Public Diplomacy Association, 2021). Such a narrative was also echoed by the Chinese media including Xinhua News Agency and the Global Times, who celebrated CPEC's successes for Sino-Pakistani cooperation (Global Times, 2023b; Xinhua, 2025).

In sum, in the early days of CPEC, it was received with a strong Neoliberal optimism, but the Gwadar Port handover and the increasing debt concerns began to feed into the Realist concerns. These developments then led to a 'Realist' turn in both public and scholarly debates. While CPEC certainly has elements of institutional engagement and mutual economic gain, the Realist critics seem to better capture its risks and relative gains. Thus, Pakistan's experience with CPEC may serve as a stark reminder that notwithstanding the language of development and cooperation, the underlying logic of Realism, in terms of survival, amassing of power, and exploitation of strategic asymmetry may be better explaining state interactions in the international arena of the present-day.

5.1.4. Key Takeaways

Before 2020, CPEC was described as a transformative, strategic opportunity both in Pakistan's and China's official media. Neoliberal voices such as those of government officials, local media, and Chinese state outlets, outweighed the Realist critics and stressed development, energy security, and mutual economic gain. Gwadar Port for example, was promoted as a token of friendship and CPEC was framed as "reshaping Pakistan's economic landscape" in the best possible way (Xinhua News Agency, 2024a; 2024b). It was hailed as "an engine for economic growth", whose spillover effects would accelerate Pakistan's GDP growth by 2 to 3% (Ministry of Planning, 2025). Chinese press consistently emphasized "high-quality development" and "shared prosperity" (Global Times, 2023a; 2024b). Even the debt related worries were brushed off by politicians. Asad Umar went as far as stating that "China was not responsible for Pakistan's debt sustainability problems" (Rana, 2021).

However, in the post-2020 period, Realist perspectives have become a staple in Pakistani and foreign media outlets. The move came in the wake of mass protests in Gwadar, local frustration and increasing debt pressure. Media started to focus on the lack of transparency in contracts, the sidelining of local communities and strategic risks. The Guardian detailed "starkly unfulfilled promises" and framed China as turning Gwadar into "a high-security prison" (Baloch & Ellish-Petersen, 2025). Hidayat-ur-Rehman, one of the many local voices who lamented an alleged lack of transparency stated that local population had lost trust in the power of media to highlight their issues (Notezai, 2021). Meanwhile, the foreign press, e.g. the Wall Street Journal pinned the problem on Chinese power plants, high electricity prices and economic hardship, while the Australian Institute of International Affairs described how Pakistan moved towards increased dependence with the said project (Shah, 2024; Boni, 2024).

Pakistani press also started to report more skeptically on CPEC deliverables as these seem to have failed to materialize on the ground. The Realist undertones were evident in journalistic investigations, as they were drawing new attention to how jobs were not being spread around and how Chinese contractors worked with little transparency. Gwadar, originally promoted as "Pakistan's Dubai," turned into a tableau of protest and resistance (Baloch & Ellish-Petersen, 2025). Meanwhile, security was ramped up with strong high fencing, zones reserved for Chinese workers and a large police presence — all of which have angered locals. The media also reported on a number o resistance movements (Notezai, 2021).

At the international front too, there was an upsurge in criticism of CPEC, especially from Indian and the Western media. The Times of India and the Indian Express, in turn, emphasized that CPEC runs through land which India believes to be its own, presenting that project as a trespass of sovereign territory, and a geopolitical challenge (The Times of India, 2022; 2023; the Indian Express, 2023). Indian critics cautioned that the corridor might allow China to have a strategic presence in the region that would encircle India and change the power balance (Shah, 2017; Rajagopalan, 2022). Western media discourses also mirrored this worry, presenting the BRI as a debt-trap as Pakistan was said to be "crushed under debt and sky-high energy prices" (Shah, 2024).

5.2. ZAMBIA: LUSAKA-NDOLA ROAD AND BROADER CHINESE INVESTMENTS

Zambia's initial engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative was more or less cast in a Neoliberal light of partnership. Meanwhile, Zambian media outlets including Lusaka Times and Times of Zambia have followed and echoed official depictions portraying Chinese investments as in line with Zambia's national development ambitions, in particular the Vision 2030 transformation plan to post Zambia as a prosperous middle-income country (Mwamba, 2018; Times of Zambia, 2015; Ministry of Finance and National Planning, n.d.). Chinese investments were often publicly celebrated as 'win-win' relationships, framed in the language of South-South solidarity and national sovereignty and consistently supported by the country's mainstream media narratives that highlighted Zambia's importance as a central player in a common development vision (Chen, 2023; Global Times, 2023a). This Neoliberal discourse was premised on the assumption that international institutions, collaborative initiatives, and cooperative regimes could transfer positive sum benefits and modernize developing countries' economies - including that of Zambia's - without the political conditions typically imposed by the Western lenders (Biglaiser and McGauvran, 2022).

5.2.1. Early Discourses on Sino-Zambian Cooperation Through the Belt and Road Initiative

In the early days of engagement with the BRI, Zambian media discourse such as Lusaka Times and Times of Zambia largely replicated a Neoliberal narrative, where Chinese investments represented an important chance for the country to advance development and modernization (Mwamba, 2018; Times of Zambia, 2015). Zambian authorities, particularly representatives of the Ministry of Finance and National Planning, saw the BRI as resonant with Zambia's very own "Vision 2030" development plan aiming to develop Zambia into a wealthier state (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, n.d.).

The early portrayal of BRI in the mainstream press focused on the promise of absolute gains through cooperation. Announcements and launch of major infrastructure projects such as the Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project (KGL), Kenneth Kaunda International Airport (KKIA) Expansion and the Lusaka–Ndola Dual Carriageway were publicly celebrated as steps towards bridging Zambia's infrastructure gap and mobilizing economic growth (Chitotela, 2016; Lusaka Times, 2024). Chinese investments were framed as being mutually beneficial, and were frequently couched in a language of South-South solidarity and Zambian sovereignty (Chen 2023).

Chinese sources also presented the BRI's effect as an engine for joint development and as a 'win-win' collaboration. State media sources positioned Zambia as a crucial partner in Africa, stressing the importance of cooperation, and a common growth vision (Global Times, 2023a). This prevalent optimism, based on a Neoliberal logic suggested that developing countries like Zambia could modernize via institutions, agreements and cooperativeness, without the well-established conditionalities of Western finance. Afterall, it was believed, that international regimes allow states to reach goals "that would otherwise be unattainable," by initiating international accords and tying related issues together in a way that creates incentives for actors to cooperate for their mutual benefit (Keohane, 1984: 97).

Meanwhile, anxieties on the Realist side also existed from the start, but in lesser degree. Some Zambian journalists, economists and parts of civil society started raising questions about increasing financial reliance on China (Susiku, 2023; Africa Press, 2023). Questions were raised over the opacity of loan contracts, strategic domination of key sectors, and the potential loss of Zambia's economic sovereignty (Africa Press, 2023; Kille and Zimba, 2025; Chulu and Mukuka, 2024). Analysts cautioned that infrastructure projects such as the Lusaka–Ndola Dual Carriageway, developed and constructed by Chinese enterprises, could result in an unsustainable debt burden while affording China excessive power over critical infrastructure (Susiku, 2023; Africa Press, 2023).

Warnings concentrated more on the financial aspects, especially on the possible usage of the National Pension Scheme Authority (NAPSA) and Workers Compensation Fund Control Board (WCFCB) as guarantees for the Chinese-initiated-projects' financing. Critics argued that Zambia could be signing away long-term autonomy for short-term infrastructure promises (Africa Press, 2023). Many commentaries also underlined the inherent power asymmetries and strategic interdependence, without necessarily using the 'Realist' terminology (Waltz, 1979).

5.2.2. Implementation Phase and the Emergence of Dissident Voices

Critical perspectives began to gain further traction as the Zambian government welcomed the BRI projects. The very structure of funding, project implementation and the response to social and economic effects continued to come under Realist scrutiny whilst the Neoliberal advocacy for BRI also continued (Longwe, 2018; Reuters, 2018).

The most controversial project at this time was the Lusaka–Ndola Dual Carriageway. Hierarchically announced with an exaggerated price tag of $1.15 billion, the project was ultimately restructured into a $577 million public-private partnership with the Macro-Ocean Investment Consortium, a China-led joint venture (AidData n.d.; InfraPPP 2023: Susiku 2023). However, the financing mechanism, which was largely dependent on Zambia's public pension funds, NAPSA and WCFCB, was harshly criticized domestically

(Africa Press, 2023). According to critics, the lack of transparency, the lengthy payback period and the wide spectrum of rights granted to Chinese companies brought about an increasing reliance on finance and eroded Zambian officials' policy elbow room.

Fears also rose at what was seen as foreign stranglehold of Zambia's natural resources. Especially in the copper and cobalt mining sectors, fears were voiced that resources were being "sold" to the highest foreign bidder (Chulu and Mukuka, 2024; Kille and Zimba, 2025). When an acid spill hit a Chinese-owned mine that polluted a major Zambian river, it triggered widespread public outrage, bringing the spotlight on the Chinese companies' environmental and labor practices (Kille and Zimba, 2025).

Meanwhile, the Neoliberals within the Zambian government continued to promote the BRI investments for nurturing future economic development. Projects such as the Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project (KGL) and the Lusaka–Ndola Dual Carriageway were justified by the officials as critical to meeting Zambia's infrastructure deficit, and as a part of the Zambian 'Vision 2030' (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, n.d.). The government and the mainstream media continued to emphasize that BRI investment had potential to spur economic growth, enhance trade, and increase regional connectivity (Lusaka Times, 2024). Officials also continued to underline that renewed Chinese funding provided Zambia with a way out of Western, conditionality-based loans (Financial Times, 2024).

Meanwhile, a middle lane criticism also arose, acknowledging the pragmatic advantages of cooperation but also cautioning the public that Zambia's mounting debt can lead to severe long-term problems.

5.2.3. Critical Turning Points

Key BRI-financed or developed infrastructure projects such as the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway, the Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project (KGL) and the Kenneth Kaunda International Airport (KKIA) are publicly marketed as levers of economic modernization (Lusaka Times, 2024; Wang, 2025; Chitotela, 2016). However, critics suggest that these investments also carry the risk of giving foreign powers strategic leverage especially when such projects are funded through opaque and high-debt deals.

The debt burden of Zambia, more than one-third of which is owed to Chinese institutions, therefore came under much scrutiny (Thomas, Do Rosario and Mfula, 2023; Brautigam, 2021).

For example, according to Lusaka Times, the KGL especially was perceived as an example of strategic leverage through investment. Portrayed as an enormous investment in Zambia's energy independence, the project's funding structure, with 85 per cent of it being covered by Chinese loans, brought Zambia to a more vulnerable state than before (Lusaka Times, 2015b). When Exim Bank of China stopped funding in 2019 after being concerned about Zambia's debt, it revealed how susceptible Zambia has become to Chinese funds (AidData, n.d.). While the Zambian government claims that KGL is still national property (Power Technology, 2020), Realist inclined readings of the KGL Project, citing the precedents elsewhere - e.g. the lease of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port - continued to underline that such critical assets could become hostage to further defaults going forward.

The Chambishi Copper Mine could also be considered as an example that demonstrates how Zambia is becoming more reliant on China over time. With China Non-ferrous Metals Company Limited owning 85%, the stakes are high for one of Zambia's most strategic assets (ZCCM Investments Holdings, n.d.). Although the development project in Chambishi predates BRI, it has been integrated into it after its launch in 2013 (Tang, 2023). The project promised job creation and investment, however, Human Rights Watch (2011) reported that continual reports against trade unionism and limited opportunities for upward mobility for Zambian labor indicate the unequal distribution of what is to be benefited.

In a similar fashion, the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway was first approved at an inflated cost and later renegotiated through a public-private partnership, ultimately placing control in the hands of Chinese actors (InfraPPP, 2023; Nasinda, 2023; Ncube, 2018). This case exemplifies how strategic transport infrastructure may be used to secure long-term leverage and influence. The 22-year tolling authority extending to the Chinese-led consortium also reflects that foreign players can wield significant economic influence over core national infrastructure, without formal seizures of assets. In the words of

Morgenthau (1948: 13),, in international politics “the struggle for power is universal in time and space and is an undeniable fact of experience”, thus, these economic practices may be interpreted as principles of gaining power rather than congenial patterns of developmental cooperation.

A key milestone of Zambia’s engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative occurred when local concerns over the funding and concessional arrangements for the Lusaka–Ndola Dual Carriageway arose. While the project has originally been promoted as a strategic infrastructure project, the fact that the new deal would be a public-private partnership that would include the Chinese Macro-Ocean Investment Consortium and rely heavily on the funds from public pensions of Zambia led to public criticism (Africa Press, 2023; Susiku, 2023). Together with another 'discovery' of investigative journalists, that a 22-year tolling concession had been awarded to Chinese firms Zambia’s increasing reliance on foreign investment came under further scrutiny (InfraPPP, 2023).

This significant event was followed by a change in conversation. Critical voices in the media, among some economists and parts of civil society, having previously tentatively backed Chinese-led infrastructure investments, now followed a Realist-inspired line of criticism (Ide and Huang, 2018). This included the then-Vice President of the United Party for National Development, Geoffrey Bwalya Mwamba, who labeled the project as a “contract scandal” (Lusaka Times, 2017b). They claimed Zambia’s independence was under threat and highlighted the potential problems of relying too much on Chinese capital (Africa Press, 2023; Kille and Zimba, 2025). They also argued that an alleged lack of transparency in contract conditions, strategic leverage in critical industries like mining and transport, and the weight of debt repayment within the framework of BRI could be structurally compounding structural vulnerabilities rather than mitigating them.

Notwithstanding public controversies however, the official account was that ventures such as the Lusaka–Ndola Dual Carriageway were still necessary to meet Zambia’s Vision 2030 vision plan (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, n.d.; Lusaka Times, 2024). Officials emphasized that there were institutional mechanisms that allowed for risk management and moves toward greater transparency were being made to safeguard the national interest (Lusaka Times, 2023).

On the one hand, Realist-leaning critics argued that rising Chinese investments entailed strategic risks that could undermine Zambia's sovereignty. On the other hand, advocates for Neoliberalism persisted in maintaining that, for all its risks, cooperation through ventures such as the Lusaka–Ndola Road and Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project would promote economic growth and improve trade.

However, this Neoliberal faith in cooperation and absolute gains would soon be challenged by the media exposure of the magnitude of debt incurred.

In sum, Zambia's engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative epitomizes the rationale of power politics in an anarchic state system. Although framed as a development cooperation, the broad scope of China's engagement in Zambia's infrastructure and extractive industries exhibit a profound asymmetry. Lusaka–Ndola Dual Carriageway financed through opaque concession agreements and guaranteed by the public pension funds is the epitome of the risks that the initiative carries. Moreover, media reports also allege that Chinese firms have increasing leverage over decision-making in critical sectors such as mining and transportation, and that Zambia might find itself increasingly incapable of independently managing its policy decisions.

5.2.4. Key Takeaways

During the early years of engagement, Neoliberal narratives took precedence in Zambia's BRI discourse. Chinese construction of roads, schools, hospitals, and airports was said to be crucial in helping Zambia achieve its development objectives as outlined in the Vision 2030 plan (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, n.d.). The discourse in Lusaka Times and Times of Zambia was that Chinese investment in infrastructure was key for the transformation of Zambia (Mwamba, 2018; Times of Zambia, 2015). Initiatives such as the Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Station, Kenneth Kaunda International Airport growth plan and the Lusaka–Ndola Dual Carriageway were presented as cures for infrastructure shortfalls (Lusaka Times, 2024; Ministry of Finance and National Planning, n.d.). The Chinese press repeated this framing: in an article headed "The Belt and Road Initiative: A Decade of Change in Zambia" BRI investments were portrayed as giving rise to "enduring economic partnerships" and "self-driven development" (Daily Nation Zambia, 2023).

Chinese state media also cast these investments as a part of a cooperation with mutual benefits. For instance, in its coverage, Global Times featured reports emphasizing that BRI activities in Zambia were helping “build resilient energy and transport infrastructure,” while Xinhua emphasized the role of Sino-Zambian cooperation in “narrowing the infrastructure gap” and delivering “green energy transformation” (Global Times, 2023; Xinhua News Agency, 2023). These commentaries, all resonated well with the Neoliberal belief that international cooperation can work for the attainment of absolute gains through interdependence.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, the public discourse, alongside the media representations slowly yet surely began to turn increasingly skeptical with Realist undertones as numerous media reports regarding escalating debt and conflicts of interests started to pile up (Lusaka Times, 2017b; Longwe, 2018; Olsson, 2023). One of the highly criticized projects was the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway, one official even describing it as a “contract scandal” (Lusaka Times, 2017b).

Realist voices grew louder as Zambia’s mounting debt to Chinese creditors increased. While the mainstream media continued to celebrate “10 years of transformation”, other news outlets revealed that Zambians were struggling with inflation and financial constraints (Daily Nation Zambia, 2023). Concerns about the scope and scale of Chinese-lending reflected a growing domestic awareness of potential dependency and vulnerability (Lusaka Times, 2018a). Thus, once presented as having “laid the foundation for a more prosperous and interconnected Zambia”, the project started to come under scrutiny. All in all, the emergence of these dissident voices in media has actively demonstrated that Zambia’s participation in BRI may no longer be considered as solely mutually beneficial in the Neoliberal sense.

5.3. SRI LANKA: COLOMBO PORT CITY AND HAMBANTOTA PORT

Sri Lanka enjoys a strategically unique position in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, especially in the Maritime Silk Road sub-component of the overall initiative, as it is located at the crossroads of major Indian Ocean trade routes, making it a key partner in

Beijing's aspirations for increased regional connectivity and maritime power (Xinhua News Agency, 2023). As Dullar (2024) argues, two of the most high-profile infrastructure investments by Chinese firms, the Colombo Port City and the Hambantota Port project in Sri Lanka, have come to epitomize BRI-led development and lie at the heart of the Sino-Sri Lankan alliance.

These projects are both opportunities and perceived as controversial. On the one hand, they hold out the promise of modernization, foreign direct investment, and regional integration. On the one hand, they have raised fears about debt sustainability, economic subservience and strategic overreach (Fernandopulle, 2025; Daily FT, 2019; Fernando, 2017; Associated Press, 2023). Sri Lanka's case thus provides fertile ground to examine how BRI's infrastructure projects operate not only as tools of economic development, but also, potentially, as part of a geopolitical strategy.

This section analyses Sri Lanka's experience with the BRI through both Realist and Neoliberal lenses. The Realist lens focuses on security aspects, power asymmetries and China's increasing footprint in the country. In contrast, Neoliberalism embraces a focus on institutional design, interdependence, and the possibility of cooperative development.

5.3.1. Early BRI Discourses on Sino-Sri Lankan Cooperation

From the outset, Sri Lanka's initial embrace of the Belt and Road Initiative was influenced by a dominant narrative that positioned one of the world's leading trading states as the gateway to modernization, economic revival and regional connectivity (Pattanaik, 2015). This narrative, which echoed the Neoliberal view, depicted China predominantly as a development actor rather than a geopolitical power. Prominent in this framing were flagship projects, the Colombo Port City and the Hambantota Port, that were cast as landmark infrastructure projects that would bring in foreign direct investment, create jobs and help Sri Lanka plug into burgeoning maritime trade routes. Senior Sri Lankan officials repeatedly stressed that these projects were in line with the country's strategic economic vision, with the Port City being portrayed as a future financial hub and the Hambantota Port as a way station to the trade routes of South Asia (Rajapaksa, 2013; Sri Lanka Ports Authority, 2014).

This official positivity was reproduced in media narratives, particularly in the pages of media outlets like Daily FT and Sunday Observer that took an almost uniformly celebratory approach to Chinese-sponsored development (Fernandopulle, 2016; Daily FT, 2017). The Strategic Development Projects Act No. 14 of 2008 conferred to the Board of Investment (BOI) to declare certain infrastructure projects such as the Colombo Port City and to grant high levels of tax exemptions and regulatory concessions to boost foreign direct investment (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2011). The BOI, together with relevant ministries, could under this model, be tasked to categorize and propose projects for SDP status. The projects were approved by the Cabinet for tax and levy concessions through the Inland Revenue Act, Value Added Tax Act and Customs Ordinance for as long as 25 years (PublicFinance.lk, 2021). According to the BOI's Annual Report 2015, inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2015 amounted to about US$ 969.659, which indicates investment inflows in line with these strategic efforts (Board of Investment of Sri Lanka, 2015). These mechanisms have been consistent with the Neoliberal belief that cooperation is possible under anarchy, as long as it is conducted within the constraints of credible institutions and by repeated exchanges (Keohane, 1984).

However, there were also voices of Realist-aligned concern early on amongst the journalists and Sri Lanka’s policy circles. For instance, ANI (2022) and Moramudali (2020) both drew attention to Sri Lanka’s deepening financial obligations to Chinese creditors, and the strategic value of its port infrastructure. This was followed by rising doubts after the government leased Hambantota Port to the Chinese state-controlled China Merchants Port Holdings for 99 years (Ondaatjie and Sirimanne, 2019). While government officials presented the lease as a pragmatic response to debt distress, it struck some observers as the yield of national assets, under conditions of unequal bargaining strength (Over 55 Chinese investors eye Hambantota Industrial Zone, 2017). The port’s proximity to critical Indian Ocean shipping lanes may have deepened fears that Chinese investment there might have been motivated not only by economic considerations but also by broader strategic ones.

Some Indian media analysts also saw China’s near-seaborne presence in Sri Lanka as a security risk and a change of the regional balance of power (Lindley, 2022; ET EnergyWorld, 2024). This embodies the Realist logic of the security dilemma, in which a state's attempt to improve its security position will necessarily provoke reactions from others. In this context, India's growing commercial and strategic interests in the island, in combination with Sri Lanka-China closeness, resulted in New Delhi stepping up its own development work and strategic outreach to the island.

Hence, two diametrically opposing viewpoints influenced the discussion on BRI in Sri Lanka from the start. On one hand, Neoliberal narratives stressed modernization, legal-institutional cooperation and long-term development driven by mutual interest. Realist voices, however, sounded early warnings about strategic overreach, financial dependence, and geopolitical encroachments. While the official framing was dominated by Neoliberal optimism, Realist challenges dominated in time as the projects developed.

5.3.2. Implementation Phase and the Emergence of Dissident Voices

As the Colombo Port City and Hambantota Port projects transitioned from their announcement to being developed on the ground, the domestic debate in Sri Lanka over the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also became more divided (Tonchev, 2018; Pattanaik, 2015). Government officials and the mainstream media were still depicting the projects as crucial to driving growth and modernization, but a chorus of dissenting voices emerged in civil society and the think tanks (Han and Anonymous, 2022). Realist-leaning dissenting voices rose, warning about the possibility of a debt trap and the strategic impingement of foreign management of vital infrastructure.

A turning point was the transfer of control of Hambantota Port to China Merchants Port Holdings on a 99-year lease, which took place in 2017 (Tonchev, 2018). Though presented as a debt-relief measure in Sri Lankan official circles and defended by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, the decision was generally seen as a relinquishing of strategic sovereignty by its critics (Shepard, 2016). Observers, such as Hillman (2018) and Carrai (2021) said the lease effectively gave control of a strategic port on the Indian Ocean to a foreign power in return for cash to ease mountains of external debt. This case also exemplified what Realist thinkers would call 'dependency-induced strategic vulnerability', indicating a weaker state being forced to offer access to national treasures in exchange for its economic wellbeing.

The Colombo Port City project was criticized on similar grounds. Concerns were raised about the legal independence granted to the reclaimed financial city under the Colombo Port City Economic Commission Act (Sultana, 2021; Colombo Telegraph, 2021). While intended to give regulatory clarity and confidence to investors, the Act also stoked a debate about whether Sri Lanka was surrendering too much control in a push to get capital in. There were warnings from the aforementioned critics that while these forms of institutional design appeared to aim at mutual cooperation, they could be leveraged over time.

Yet the dominant discourse on BRI projects in Sri Lanka continued to be situated within a context of Neoliberal optimism. Previously mentioned statements from the government officials, as well as the mainstream media overrode meagre criticisms (Daily FT and Daily News). The Colombo Port City was presented as a futuristic financial center emulating destinations as Dubai and Singapore. Hambantota Port also made out as an important logistics hub on the South Asian maritime route (Perera, 2024).

Meanwhile, China's growing strategic footprint in Sri Lanka certainly close to key Indian naval routes drew a strong reaction from India. This military base, leased by the Sri Lankan government to China for 99 years, was interpreted by the Indian policy makers as a direct threat to their traditional sphere of influence and made India drive for its own infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka as well as deepening its strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific (Jayasinghe, 2022; Associated Press, 2025).

At this stage, Sri Lanka's own narrative regarding BRI was no longer composed by a single dominant perspective. Instead, it turned into a space for active contestation between the defenders of China's investments and the critics raising the alarm about strategic dependency. The scale weighed over these conflicting interpretations would only intensify as the nation continued to face growing economic challenges and increasing international attention over its choices.

5.3.3. Critical Turning Points

A pivotal moment for the critics of Sri Lanka's BRI engagement was reached when the 99-year lease on Hambantota Port was inked with China Merchants Port Holdings in

2017. As previously discussed, it was initially presented by Sri Lankan policymakers as a pragmatic response to the country's increasing external debt. However, this decision later sparked heated national and international debate (Economy, 2022; Ranaraja, 2023). The case has become a frequently cited example of the risks of relying too much on foreign investments, making even supporters of Chinese investment think twice about giving up control of key national infrastructure (Burns cited in Economy, 2022; Gunawardena, 2017).

Within Sri Lanka, elements of the political elite, policy intellectuals and the public that had hitherto been supportive of BRI projects began to raise Realist-leaning criticisms. According to critics, Hambantota lease was not just a financial deal, but a geopolitical concession (Gunawardena, 2017; Chellaney, 2017). The port's positioning along key international shipping lanes intensified fears that the development of infrastructure could serve as a projection of geopolitical power (Lindley, 2022). For Realist theoreticians, this was the final confirmation of an underlying assumption that economic interdependence, when it occurs under the aegis of power asymmetry, limits the exercise of sovereignty of the weaker state and can perpetuate foreign interference in domestic decision making (Economy, 2022).

This reassessment was not confined to academia. Journalists and analysts began examining the broader implications of BRI projects in Sri Lanka and voicing concerns about transparency, accountability and national interests (Jayasinghe, 2022). The Colombo Port City project, with its unique legal and tax status, also came under attack for producing an economic zone of exception, leading to concerns about the unequal distribution of benefits (Ralapanawe cited in Heaver 2023; Jayasinghe, 2022). Debt-to-GDP ratio rising, and the ongoing economic crisis being intensified by high loan repayments all added strength to the Realist argument that Chinese development finance carried significant political and strategic risks (Reuters, 2022; Economy, 2022).

However, even as criticism mounted, Neoliberal promoters within the Sri Lankan government and media remained focused on the long-term gains of becoming part of the BRI. Officials argued that Hambantota Port would generate jobs and better connect the region and that the Colombo Port City would turn Sri Lanka into a global financial hub (Wickremesinghe cited in Daily FT, 2023b). The also argued that the country maintained ultimate sovereignty over its territory and had entered the agreements voluntarily and in pursuit of its own development objectives (Gunawardena, 2017). The stress on “win-win cooperation” continued to be the mainstay of official statements, as Sri Lanka attempted to communicate both to domestic constituents and to the outside world that the relationship with China was a positive sum equation, based on formality and processes designed to mitigate antagonism (Herath cited in Newsfirst English, 2024).

However, as debt visibility rose, Sri Lanka’s internal debate became more openly split into two different camps. On the one hand, Realist-aligned critics maintained that the country had fallen into a new kind of strategic dependence (Pence, 2018; Economy, 2022). On the other hand, Neoliberals argued that the institutional architecture and legal guarantees of these projects ensured that the national interest was protected, and sustainable development was possible (Wickremesinghe cited in Daily FT, 2023b; Gunawardena, 2017).

In sum, Sri Lanka’s engagement with BRI, especially in Hambantota and the Port City projects in Colombo, is characterized by a shift from an initial period of optimism to a period of political controversy.

5.3.4. Key Takeaways

Realist readings of Sri Lanka's involvement in the BRI were present but weak at the inception of the project. Later, the public criticism over the 2017 transfer of Hambantota Port, in other words the leasing of a major strategic asset to a Chinese state-owned enterprise for 99 years, made them really stand out. This arrangement was heavily portrayed as a surrender of sovereignty and as the ceding of control over Sri Lankan assets in exchange for debt relief (Jaleel, Noor and Ahmed, 2023).

In 2021, the political debates became more intense and more Realist critique appeared in domestic media. EconomyNext cautioned that the construction of Colombo Port City would “erode the legal and political sovereignty of Sri Lanka in a number of ways”, as this scheme would give the Commission unprecedented powers that would provide excessive control to unelected bodies (EconomyNext, 2021). As EconomyNext further noted, the Port City Commission was granted powers “to create new rights and obligations in disregard of national law," effectively enabling it to "override national regulatory law at will" (EconomyNext, 2021). By 2022, strategic concerns intensified. For example, Abeyagoonasekera (2022) criticized the lease, saying that it could, potentially, "go on for any number of years after 99 years or for another 99 years."

Meanwhile, mainstream media continued to maintain its Neoliberal stance, and continued to promote the idea that BRI projects, including the Colombo Port City, would be game changers. Official and semi-official news outlets also described the effort as a model for infrastructure-driven growth and foreign investment. CGTN for instance, reported that BRI "will help to improve the economy in Sri Lanka" (CGTN, 2023). Sri Lankan Foreign Minister further noted that the initiative would create a "hub that connects people, cultures and economies" (Hearth, 2024; Newsfirst English, 2024). In other words, the overriding depiction of the project stressed economic growth, commerce and win-win relations but criticisms over the lease of key strategic assets also raised concerns.

5.4. CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to assess the practical and dynamic experiences of BRI in Pakistan, Zambia, and Sri Lanka. Pakistan's commitment to CPEC, Zambia's participation in Chinese-built infrastructure and Sri Lanka's leasing of Hambantota Port have been revisited. A thorough review of the media outlets indicate that some of the projects of BRI have been the subject of competing interpretations.

Through a Neoliberal lens, BRI has often been framed as a chance for economic development, institutional partnership, absolute gains and enhanced regional connectivity. As the projects started to materialize however, a variety of issues such as debt concerns and asset leases appeared. These issues ranged from an increasing accumulation of debt to worries related to the strategic use of infrastructure by a stronger party, in this case, China.

In concluding the chapter, it should also be underlined that it was not the intent of this chapter to make a benchmark comparison of Realism and Neoliberalism, but to emphasize that both has partial explanatory powers in making sense of complex BRI situation.

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to provide further empirical insight into China's Belt and Road Initiative in Zambia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, three key geopolitical outposts that have served as the forefronts of Chinese investment. The case studies have aimed to reveal several shared patterns among the three participating countries.

Through a review of the media, it was maintained that the Chinese sources in general frame BRI as an "win-win cooperation" and as a scheme that serves as an alleged alternative to the West-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Moritsugu, 2023).

Pakistan's China–Pakistan Economic Corridor has been evaluated as a nexus between strategic and economic interests. For China, CPEC has been identified as a clear path to the Arabian Sea, which strategically decreases the dependence on the Strait of Malacca, ensuring energy security for China. For the neoliberals, the project offers massive physical development, energy security and economic resurgence. The overall representation of the project in the press is also in tune with Neoliberal ideas of interdependency and mutual gains, siding with Neoliberal expectations of absolute gains and mutual benefits (Keohane, 1984).

Meanwhile, in Zambia, Chinese investment in mining and infrastructure such as the Lusaka-Ndola Dual Carriageway and Kafue Gorge Lower Hydropower Project, garnered criticisms. Though Zambia seemed to initially prefer Chinese financing to 'Western' loans, the rising difficulties to pay back the debt, and the increasing Chinese stakes in key assets reinforced the Realist critique that economic leverage can translate into strategic influence (McMaster & Grotto, 2025: 3). Currently, Zambia continues to attempt to renegotiate the terms of payments (Thomas, Do Rosario, & Mfula, 2023).

Meanwhile Sri Lanka, in comparison to the aforementioned two states, is home to arguably the most contested project. The 99-year lease of the Hambantota International Port to China Merchants Port Holdings has received international coverage with references to a 'debt-trap diplomacy' (Hillman, 2018; Moramudali & Panduwawala, 2024). While from a Realist perspective, this move could be characterized as calculated maneuver by a rising China to establish geostrategic beachheads located near the important maritime routes, officials in China and in certain cases in Sri Lanka frame it as a business deal driven by inescapable economic imperatives (Wickremesinghe cited in Daily FT, 2023b). The construction of Colombo's Port City also adds to this list, as it is criticized for its allegedly non-transparent governance and enabling the growth of a 'new' elite (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2021; Amarasuriya, 2021; EconomyNext, 2021). On the other hand, official portrayals of the Port City depict this as fulfilling the vision of turning the island into a financial hub in the long-term (Port City Colombo, n.d.).

In all three of the cases, media narratives are divided between the portrayal of China as a benevolent partner in fostering growth and China as prioritizing its quest for naval access, resources, and political influence. Still, a more modest line of criticism extends that these need not be mutually exclusive aims and that Chinese finance can both be an enabler of development, and an instrument of soft power.

Indeed, BRI outcomes seem to depend on a mix of factors such as the host-country governance, China's changing foreign policy objectives, and the regional dynamics. Moreover, it should be underlined that the Belt and Road Initiative is not simply a bundle of physical corridors or financial flows; it is a contested sphere of meaning and power, a place where aspirations of development, national agendas, and global stories intersect. Through the empirical study of three heterogenous but strategically important cases, this thesis has sought to shed light on one of the key components of China's global rise and its impact on the global scale.

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APPENDIX 1 ORIGINALITY REPORT

	HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ	Doküman Kodu *Form No.*	FRM-YL-15
		Yayım Tarihi *Date of Pub.*	04.12.2023
	FRM-YL-15 **Yüksek Lisans Tezi Orijinallik Raporu** *Master's Thesis Dissertation Originality Report*	Revizyon No *Rev. No.*	02
		Revizyon Tarihi *Rev.Date*	25.01.2024

HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞINA

Tarih:14/07/2025

Tez Başlığı (Türkçe): **Çin'in Zambiya, Pakistan ve Sri Lanka'daki Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi**
Tez Başlığı (Almanca/Fransızca)*:……………………………………………………………………………………

Yukarıda başlığı verilen tezimin a) Kapak sayfası, b) Giriş, c) Ana bölümler ve d) Sonuç kısımlarından oluşan toplam 153 sayfalık kısmına ilişkin, 14/07/2025 tarihinde şahsım/tez danışmanım tarafından Turnitin adlı intihal tespit programından aşağıda işaretlenmiş filtrelemeler uygulanarak alınmış olan orijinallik raporuna göre, tezimin benzerlik oranı % 4 'tür.

Uygulanan filtrelemeler**:
1. ☒ Kabul/Onay ve Bildirim sayfaları hariç
2. ☒ Kaynakça hariç
3. ☒ Alıntılar hariç
4. ☐ Alıntılar dâhil
5. ☒ 5 kelimeden daha az örtüşme içeren metin kısımları hariç

Hacettepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Tez Çalışması Orijinallik Raporu Alınması ve Kullanılması Uygulama Esasları'nı inceledim ve bu Uygulama Esasları'nda belirtilen azami benzerlik oranlarına göre tezimin herhangi bir intihal içermediğini; aksinin tespit edileceği muhtemel durumlarda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğum bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederim.

Gereğini saygılarımla arz ederim.

Deniz Faruk Erkan

Öğrenci Bilgileri		
	Ad-Soyad	Deniz Faruk Erkan
	Öğrenci No	N23136602
	Enstitü Anabilim Dalı	Uluslararası İlişkiler
	Programı	Yüksek Lisans (Tezli)

DANIŞMAN ONAYI

UYGUNDUR.
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Elif Renk ÖZDEMİR

* Tez **Almanca** veya **Fransızca** yazılıyor ise bu kısımda tez başlığı **Tez Yazım Dilinde** yazılmalıdır.
**Hacettepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Tez Çalışması Orjinallik Raporu Alınması ve Kullanılması Uygulama Esasları İkinci bölüm madde (4)/3'te de belirtildiği üzere: Kaynakça hariç, Alıntılar hariç/dahil, 5 kelimeden daha az örtüşme içeren metin kısımları hariç (Limit match size to 5 words) filtreleme yapılmalıdır.

	HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ	Doküman Kodu *Form No.*	FRM-YL-15
		Yayım Tarihi *Date of Pub.*	04.12.2023
	FRM-YL-15 **Yüksek Lisans Tezi Orijinallik Raporu** *Master's Thesis Dissertation Originality Report*	Revizyon No *Rev. No.*	02
		Revizyon Tarihi *Rev.Date*	25.01.2024

TO HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Date: 14/07/2025

Thesis Title (In English): **China's Belt and Road Initiative in Zambia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka**

According to the originality report obtained by myself/my thesis advisor by using the Turnitin plagiarism detection software and by applying the filtering options checked below on 14/07/2025 for the total of 153 pages including the a) Title Page, b) Introduction, c) Main Chapters, and d) Conclusion sections of my thesis entitled above, the similarity index of my thesis is 4 %.

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I hereby declare that I have carefully read Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences Guidelines for Obtaining and Using Thesis Originality Reports that according to the maximum similarity index values specified in the Guidelines, my thesis does not include any form of plagiarism; that in any future detection of possible infringement of the regulations I accept all legal responsibility; and that all the information I have provided is correct to the best of my knowledge.

Kindly submitted for the necessary actions.

Deniz Faruk Erkan

Student Information		
	Name-Surname	Deniz Faruk Erkan
	Student Number	N23136602
	Department	International Relations
	Programme	Master of Arts with Thesis

SUPERVISOR'S APPROVAL

APPROVED
Asst. Prof. Dr. Elif Renk ÖZDEMİR

**As mentioned in the second part [article (4)/3]of the Thesis Dissertation Originality Report's Codes of Practice of Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences, filtering should be done as following: excluding refence, quotation excluded/included, Match size up to 5 words excluded.

APPENDIX 2 ETHICS COMMISSION FORM

	HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ **SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ**	Doküman Kodu *Form No.*	FRM-YL-09
		Yayım Tarihi *Date of Pub.*	22.11.2023
	FRM-YL-09 **Yüksek Lisans Tezi Etik Kurul Muafiyeti Formu** *Ethics Board Form for Master's Thesis*	Revizyon No *Rev. No.*	02
		Revizyon Tarihi *Rev.Date*	25.01.2024

HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞINA

Tarih: 14/07/2025

Tez Başlığı (Türkçe): Çin'in Zambiya, Pakistan ve Sri Lanka'daki Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi

Tez Başlığı (Almanca/Fransızca)*: ……………………………………………………………………………………
……..

Yukarıda başlığı verilen tez çalışmam:

1. İnsan ve hayvan üzerinde deney niteliği taşımamaktadır.
2. Biyolojik materyal (kan, idrar vb. biyolojik sıvılar ve numuneler) kullanılmasını gerektirmemektedir.
3. Beden bütünlüğüne veya ruh sağlığına müdahale içermemektedir.
4. Anket, ölçek (test), mülakat, odak grup çalışması, gözlem, deney, görüşme gibi teknikler kullanılarak katılımcılardan veri toplanmasını gerektiren nitel ya da nicel yaklaşımlarla yürütülen araştırma niteliğinde değildir.
5. Diğer kişi ve kurumlardan temin edilen veri kullanımını (kitap, belge vs.) gerektirmektedir. Ancak bu kullanım, diğer kişi ve kurumların izin verdiği ölçüde Kişisel Bilgilerin Korunması Kanuna riayet edilerek gerçekleştirilecektir.

Hacettepe Üniversitesi Etik Kurullarının Yönergelerini inceledim ve bunlara göre çalışmamın yürütülebilmesi için herhangi bir Etik Kuruldan izin alınmasına gerek olmadığını; aksi durumda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğum bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederim.

Gereğini saygılarımla arz ederim.

Deniz Faruk
Erkan

Öğrenci Bilgileri		
	Ad-Soyad	Deniz Faruk Erkan
	Öğrenci No	N23136602
	Enstitü Anabilim Dalı	Uluslararası İlişkiler
	Programı	Yüksek Lisans (Tezli)

DANIŞMAN ONAYI

UYGUNDUR.
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Elif Renk ÖZDEMİR

* Tez **Almanca** veya **Fransızca** yazılıyor ise bu kısımda tez başlığı **Tez Yazım Dilinde** yazılmalıdır.

	HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ	Doküman Kodu *Form No.*	FRM-YL-09
		Yayım Tarihi *Date of Pub.*	22.11.2023
	FRM-YL-09 **Yüksek Lisans Tezi Etik Kurul Muafiyeti Formu** *Ethics Board Form for Master's Thesis*	Revizyon No *Rev. No.*	02
		Revizyon Tarihi *Rev.Date*	25.01.2024

HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Date: 14/07/2025

ThesisTitle (In English): China's Belt and Road Initiative in Zambia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

My thesis work with the title given above:

1. Does not perform experimentation on people or animals.
2. Does not necessitate the use of biological material (blood, urine, biological fluids and samples, etc.).
3. Does not involve any interference of the body's integrity.
4. Is not a research conducted with qualitative or quantitative approaches that require data collection from the participants by using techniques such as survey, scale (test), interview, focus group work, observation, experiment, interview.
5. Requires the use of data (books, documents, etc.) obtained from other people and institutions. However, this use will be carried out in accordance with the Personal Information Protection Law to the extent permitted by other persons and institutions.

I hereby declare that I reviewed the Directives of Ethics Boards of Hacettepe University and in regard to these directives it is not necessary to obtain permission from any Ethics Board in order to carry out my thesis study; I accept all legal responsibilities that may arise in any infrigement of the directives and that the information I have given above is correct.

I respectfully submit this for approval.

Deniz Faruk Erkan

Student Information	**Name-Surname**	Deniz Faruk Erkan
	Student Number	N23136602
	Department	International Relations
	Programme	Master of Arts with Thesis

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