

**Challenges and Adaptability: The State of BRI Corridors and Pilot
Zones in Southeast Asia after the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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August 2024

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Abstract

My thesis project examines China's Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) progress and adaptations after the COVID-19 global pandemic, particularly focusing on pilot zones and economic corridors in Southeast Asia. The pandemic brought unprecedented challenges, including supply chain disruptions and geopolitical shifts, necessitating China's strategic reassessments and adaptations in BRI projects. Utilizing case studies of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, the Dara Sakor Pilot Zone in Cambodia, and a newly developed comprehensive BRI action plan in Nepal, my paper analyzes how these BRI infrastructural initiatives have adapted to the post-pandemic geopolitical and economic landscapes. My research employs a neorealist analytical framework, considering the international system's changing economic and geopolitical conditions since the pandemic as a structural constraint. Under the framework, I assess China's strategic recalibrations of the Belt and Road Initiative. Through comparative case analysis, my project provides a nuanced understanding of the BRI's current status and future trajectories amidst global upheavals associated with the pandemic. The findings highlight the challenges faced by ongoing projects and the emerging opportunities as China seeks to maintain and expand its influence through these strategic infrastructural investments. My thesis uniquely demonstrates China's strategic focus on BRI projects in Southeast Asia compared to suspended funding for other regions, underscoring the region's strategic importance. As a rational actor under the structural constraints of the post-pandemic international system, China is repositioning the BRI to its traditional sphere of influence—its neighboring countries and Southeast Asia to maximize gains under the structural constraints of the international system.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China, COVID-19, Infrastructure, Southeast Asia

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Literature Review.....	5
The Belt and Road Initiative from China’s Perspective.....	6
Pre-Pandemic State (2013-2019)	9
The Outbreak and Immediate Responses (Early 2020)	10
The Enduring Pandemic and Continued Adjustments (Late 2020-2021)	12
China’s Long-Term Strategic Shifts (2022-Present).....	12
Research Design.....	14
Analytical Framework	14
Case Selection.....	17
Case Analysis	20
1. Dara Sakor Pilot Zone, Cambodia	20
2. China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), Myanmar.....	25
3. 2024 Comprehensive BRI Action Plan, Nepal	29
Discussion	32
Economic Resilience and Adaptation	33
Geopolitical Risk and Project Realignment.....	34
Comparative Insights	35
Conclusion	36
Bibliography	38
Appendix.....	42

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, has been the cornerstone of China's foreign policy as the country's global development guideline. The BRI aims to connect the "middle empire" with the world through trade liberalization and infrastructure investments. In the following decade, the BRI became China's most efficient influence generator and power projector in participating countries, especially its neighbors. As of December 2023, 151 countries, of which 31 are in East and Southeast Asia, have officially announced participation in the Belt and Road Initiative.¹

According to the Chinese government, the BRI combines the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The former connects China's west to Europe through roadways and railways across the Eurasia continent, while the latter departs from coastal China, passes through the South China Sea, the Malacca Strait, the Indian Ocean, and eventually connects to East African coasts, and the Mediterranean Sea.² As Southeast Asia becomes the crossroads of the two Silk Roads, it becomes the geostrategic concentration of China's BRI projects. The most prominent BRI objectives in Southeast Asian countries include cross-border trade facilitation, transnational infrastructure construction, and legal cooperation on economic amalgamation under the China-ASEAN³ framework and with the support of ethnic Chinese

¹ Wang (2023)

² See Appendix 1 for the geographical distribution of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road

³ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is Southeast Asia's principal intergovernmental organization. For more information, see <https://asean.org/about-us/>

communities in the region. In Southeast Asian countries, economic corridors and pilot zones⁴ are China's flagship BRI projects. Of the six official economic corridors under the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC) connects China to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Cambodia through roadway and railway infrastructure (State Council 2020). Depending on China's bilateral agreements with each recipient country, the CICPEC splits into different sections. For example, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a planned infrastructure project, will connect China's inland border province of Yunnan to the Indian Ocean seaport of Kyaukpyu through new railway and roadway construction.⁵ Other than economic corridors, pilot zones are another prominent form of Chinese infrastructure projects. In Cambodia, China established the Cambodia-China Comprehensive Investment and Development Pilot Zone in Dara Sakor, a city in the country's coastal province of Koh Kong. The pilot zone includes an international airport, highway, fine resorts, and various real estate development projects.

Throughout the 2010s, Chinese investment and engagement in pilot zones and economic corridors have grown steadily. However, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic disrupted existing and projected Chinese BRI projects in Southeast Asia. Due to shrinking global supply chains, labor shortages, and increased operational costs, BRI projects faced unprecedented challenges, resulting in delays, suspensions, and cancellations. Complementing existing literature

⁴ While both economic corridors and pilot zones are clusters of large-scale infrastructure projects under the BRI, they serve different strategic purposes. Economic corridors aim to improve China's connectivity to BRI-participating countries and key strategic locations. Relying on land concessions and regulatory flexibility, Pilot Zones are de facto Chinese-owned and Chinese-operated cities within the host country.

⁵ Myers (2020)

on the topic, my study further investigates the adjustments and adaptations of China's Belt and Road projects in Southeast Asia after the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.

By examining the cases of Cambodia, Myanmar, and Nepal, I aim to contribute insights into China's immediate responses and strategic adjustments to the BRI following multitudinous economic and geopolitical complications following the pandemic. Shedding light on China's strategic recalibrations and their implications for regional development and geopolitics, my study offers a comprehensive understanding of the BRI's level of resilience and future development path. Through a thorough examination of existing literature and the case of Cambodia, Myanmar, and Nepal, my study finds that while resource limitations have been stalling existing BRI economic corridors and pilot zones since the pandemic, China sustained the initiative by prioritizing feasible and essential projects and realigning future projects with changing regional geopolitical dynamics. Compared to the massive funding cessation and suspension⁶ of BRI projects in other regions, the continuity and adjustments in Southeast Asia underline the region's strategic significance to China. Due to resource scarcity in the post-pandemic era, I regard the adaptations and realignments of the BRI as a strategic retreat from a global scale to regional concentrations that would bring China immediate rather than long-term gains.

Literature Review

The literature review section focuses on the economic corridors and pilot zones within the Belt and Road Initiative framework, examining how different factors have impacted them during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic's onset in early 2020 brought unprecedented

⁶ Lee (2020)

challenges, including disruptions in construction activities, delays in logistics, and a reevaluation of economic priorities. These challenges necessitated immediate responses and strategic adjustments from participating countries and China, the primary investor and coordinator of the initiative.

Adopting a chronological approach, this section analyzes the status and evolution of the pilot zones and economic corridors from before through the various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, I constructed a structured way to understand how these projects adapted to the constraints imposed by the pandemic and how they are positioned in the broader geopolitical context that continues to evolve rapidly. The review traces the pre-pandemic developments, the immediate impacts of the pandemic, empirical changes during and after the pandemic, subsequent adaptations, and the ongoing strategic shifts shaping the future of the pilot zones and economic corridors.

The section focuses on economic corridors and pilot zones to illuminate the infrastructure and development aspects crucial for regional connectivity, economic growth, and China's geostrategic demands. The focused analysis is essential for identifying these projects' vulnerabilities and resilience during regional and global shocks.

The Belt and Road Initiative from China's Perspective

Chinese history is crucial for understanding China's motives and expectations for the Belt and Road Initiative. Since the Opium Wars in the 1840s, China has been a declining power that suffered from domestic turbulences and internal invasions. Before the invasion by Western powers and Japan, China has been positing itself in the center of the world as the "Middle

Kingdom” for thousands of years.⁷ The Sinocentric and xenophobic Confucianist convention isolated the late Qing Dynasty⁸ from the outside world, creating an insurmountable technological and institutional gap between China and the colonial powers in Europe. From the 1840s to the 1940s, the Chinese government conceded massive territories to colonial powers and failed to protect millions of Chinese people from being killed in warfare.⁹

Despite reluctant regime changes after the Qing Dynasty’s collapse, the Chinese government almost always desired to flush China’s historical humiliation into its modern history. In *China’s Political System*, June Teufel Dreyer introduced various theoretical models attempting to explain China’s development and political actions, including the Strategic Interaction Model, which attributes China’s power struggle and expansion to its historical humiliation.¹⁰ The model suggests that China seeks to economically acquire maximum political and military power to obliterate its ignominy in the 19th Century.¹¹ In this sense, it is theoretically binding that the Belt and Road Initiative may be China’s effectual shortcut for attaining deterrent political and military power and the capability to project them globally. The massive infrastructure development and Chinese economic input in BRI participating countries may serve as China’s stepping stone towards its desired hegemonic status in the Indo-Pacific region, thus expunging historical humiliation. However, the strategic interaction model is often criticized for overemphasizing the corporate personality and disregarding the impacts of contemporary culture and ideologies.

⁷ Independence Hall Association (2008)

⁸ Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) is the last imperial dynasty in Chinese history

⁹ See Fairbank & Goldman (1992), “China: A New History” and Spence (1999), “The Search for Modern China” for detailed explanations of China’s “one hundred years of humiliation.”

¹⁰ Dreyer (2008), 12-14

¹¹ Ibid

Besides the strategic interaction model, the China-is-China-is-China (Historical) model is another reputable academic explanation ascribing China's actions and behaviors to its imperial history. In *China's Political System*, Dreyer argues that today's communist China resembles the imperial or feudal China by the landscape, people's psychological characteristics, and bureaucracy. China's current paramount leader, Dreyer points out, is precisely like the emperor of imperial China since both positions are endowed with unquestionable power and authority. By structurally comparing the characteristics of the communist regime to imperial dynasties, the historical model would regard the Belt and Road Initiative, China's current global development strategy, as an epitome of China's ambition to restore the deterrent power it had in the imperial era. This model aligns with perspectives that view China's actions as part of a long-term strategy to reassert regional power and influence.¹² Kissinger (2012), a scholar and former secretary of state, emphasizes the importance of historical experiences in today's Chinese policy regarding its participation in the international community. However, a critique of the historical model is that it intentionally ignores the differences between communist China and imperial China. Wang (2014) opines that China's contemporary political culture intakes substantial influence from Marxist-Leninist ideologies, thus, is inherently different from the country's imperial history. Similarly, Ren (2017) argues that the historical model overlooks the communist revolution's structural and ideological implications in China's contemporary top decision-making body.

Overall, both models imply that the Belt and Road Initiative is China's realist approach to magnifying its power and influence overseas, thus restoring its hegemonic deterrence on the global stage. Callahan (2016) sees the BRI as a tool for extending China's regional and

¹² Jacques (2012)

international power projection capabilities. Meanwhile, Rolland (2017) asserts that the initiative's growth signals China's expanding ambition to lead the setting of international norms and standards, especially regarding infrastructure development.

Pre-Pandemic State (2013-2019)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Belt and Road Initiative was scrutinized by existing literature for China's geostrategic deployments in Southeast Asia through pilot zones and economic corridors, two prominent collections of Chinese infrastructure projects. Though intended to boost economic integration and development, the projects have often been critiqued as China's tools for projecting regional influence and control. Cambodia's Dara Sakor pilot zone is a poignant example of this dynamic, where economic development initiatives have been closely intertwined with significant territorial and strategic considerations.

In 2008, the Union Development Group, a company with deep ties to the Chinese state, obtained a 99-year lease over a 45,000-hectare tract in Koh Kong province, Cambodia. This area, designated as the Dara Sakor pilot zone, was planned as a Chinese-operated port-industrial-city complex.¹³ The scale and nature of this project exemplify the Belt and Road Initiative's emphasis on economic development and infrastructure construction. However, the acquisition process raised significant concerns about sovereignty and local governance because it circumvented Cambodia's ban on conceding lands to foreign entities. Before the lease, China transferred the land's ownership back to a Cambodian entity to sidestep legal barriers against such extensive foreign-controlled land concessions.¹⁴ Dara Sakor is not merely an infrastructural project but also

¹³ Mobley (2019), 60

¹⁴ Mobley (2019), 61

a strategic establishment that grants China significant control over a critical part of Cambodian territory. In the name of developing pilot zones, zooming out from Dara Sakor, China, had acquired over 4.6 million hectares of land with abundant natural and agricultural resources through exclusive concession agreements with Cambodia.¹⁵

Massively acquiring land resources in the name of pilot zones serves China's strategic interests in securing influential footholds. However, it raises concerns about the participating country's long-term economic and environmental sustainability. Domestic critics, such as Ouch Leng from the Cambodia Center for Human Rights, argue that these concessions have deprived local communities of valuable economic opportunities that could have been better leveraged by indigenous agricultural development rather than external industrial projects.¹⁶ The Dara Sakor pilot zone thus clearly illustrates how BRI pilot zones, while ostensibly created to foster economic development, served China's geostrategic expansion in Southeast Asia in the pre-pandemic era.

The Outbreak and Immediate Responses (Early 2020)

As COVID-19 spread rapidly all over the globe, unprecedented disruptions to global supply chains and operations occurred in the early months of 2020. The disruptions led to severe delays and skyrocketed operational costs for BRI projects, including pilot zones and economic corridors. Mouritz (2020) notes that the pandemic's effect on global trade logistics directly impacted the progress of infrastructure projects under the BRI, which is heavily reliant on cross-border supplies and labor. Besides logistical difficulties, the pandemic exacerbated existing

¹⁵ Titthara (2012)

¹⁶ Palatino (2012)

resource limitations and introduced new economic strains on the Belt and Road Initiative.

Buckley (2020) delves into the financial repercussions for BRI projects, emphasizing that the infrastructural and funding hurdles intensified during the pandemic. The financial challenges brought up by the pandemic necessitated a reevaluation of financial models and support mechanisms to sustain existing BRI projects. Despite operational standstills and resource limitations, the BRI network remained resilient to international challenges. Akmadi (2021) finds that BRI projects in Central Asia maintained continuity through adaptive strategies and short-term realignments. The resilience under crisis conditions proves the strategic flexibility of the BRI.

The interruptive pandemic also implicated China's foreign policy in implementing and evolving the BRI. By examining China's immediate foreign policy response to the pandemic's impacts, Aryodiguno (2022) opines that the pandemic necessitated substantive BRI project adjustments, reflecting the immediate need for managing the crisis and sustaining long-term strategic interests. For example, the Chinese government introduced the Health Silk Road, a BRI component aiming to improve global health infrastructure and facilitate international cooperation in disease control.¹⁷ By proposing the Health Silk Road, China addressed the immediate health challenges posed by the pandemic and positioned the BRI as an efficient development tool capable of responding to various global challenges. While the pandemic's imminent impacts on BRI projects were disruptive, China's immediate response highlighted the initiative's resilience and adaptability.

¹⁷ Arsentyeva (2022)

The Enduring Pandemic and Continued Adjustments (Late 2020-2021)

Zooming out from the immediate pandemic impacts on pilot zones and economic corridors, the pandemic's endurance necessitated strategic adjustments in the Belt and Road Initiative by China and participating countries. The adjustments ensured the BRI's development during a period of global uncertainty. Pyzhikov and Gushchin (2021) highlighted the BRI's adaptability during the pandemic by noting a strategic pivot towards more essential and cost-effective projects. In Southeast Asia, China recalibrated infrastructure projects within the economic corridors to prioritize developments benefiting immediate economic resilience, such as transport and logistics networks, which was crucial for patching up the interrupted supply chains. Moreover, the BRI's shift towards sectors including digital technology, health, and environmental sustainability following the pandemic. Ye (2021) suggests that investments in digital infrastructure and health facilities in pilot zones and economic corridors have increased dramatically. The emphasis on digital infrastructure was significant in maintaining connectivity and economic activity during pandemic-related lockdowns and travel restrictions. Although the transformation towards digital infrastructure and cost-effective projects secures the overall development of the BRI, critical infrastructure projects continue to face challenges. Serafimov et al. (2021) argue that seaport development under the BRI faced various challenges, including regulatory restrictions, health protocols, and changing political environments. Restrictive policies regarding seaports, a critical infrastructural joint of the BRI, stalled the progress of pilot zones and economic corridors.

China's Long-Term Strategic Shifts (2022-Present)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has undergone significant strategic shifts since 2022 to enhance its resilience and adaptability in a highly unpredictable global environment. The transformations focus on developing and optimizing existing BRI projects' connectivity and sustainability. In South Asia, where the strategic significance of BRI corridors is critical, China has adjusted its policies to strengthen economic ties and improve infrastructural connectivity. According to Rashid et al. (2023), these corridors continue to serve as crucial channels for trade and energy in the post-pandemic era and enable China to solidify its geopolitical influence in the region. Complementing this perspective, Chen et al. (2022) propose the standard of "high-quality development" of the BRI, which weaves cultural, economic, and political perspectives to increase local support. By improving the local-friendliness of BRI projects, China can enhance its soft power projection through the initiative.

Moreover, China has further consolidated the BRI's inclusion of sustainable development in critical infrastructure projects. Upadhyay (2023) argues that the initiative is on a trend to incorporate innovative digital technologies to facilitate sustainable practices on project sites. Wang and Wu (2023) state that sustainable energy infrastructure allows the BRI to serve the long-term development of ASEAN countries better, thus bolstering the initiative's reputation. With an emphasis on sustainability, China excels in environmental protection and continues to fulfill the BRI's inherent strategic goal to secure the country's energy supply through economic corridors and pilot zones. Overall, the BRI's long-term strategic shifts in the post-pandemic era are transforming the pilot zones and economic corridors to be more adaptive, sustainable, and strategically integrated into the regional economies they serve. China's strategic recalibration ensures the continued popularity of the BRI and meets China's changing strategic needs.

Building on existing literature, my thesis further investigates how China's post-pandemic responses and adjustments have influenced the long-term progress of BRI projects in Southeast Asia. Unlike Mouritz's and Buckley's works, which concentrate on the pandemic's direct impacts and financial implications, my study aims to examine China's attempts to evolve its pilot zones and economic corridors through strategic realignment and project adjustments, offering new insights into the strategic endurance and adaptability of overseas Chinese infrastructure projects.

Research Design

Analytical Framework

I developed a neorealist analytical framework to thoroughly assess the progress and challenges of BRI pilot zones and economic corridors in Southeast Asia and China's strategic realignment since the COVID-19 pandemic. Neorealism, an international relations theory, emphasizes the influence of structural constraints of states and the anarchic international system on state behaviors.¹⁸ For analyzing BRI's post-pandemic shifts, my neorealist framework concentrates on empirical changes in the international environment for China's strategic expansion, particularly the new dynamics of the great power competition between China and the United States. Under the framework, I consider two key indicators: 1) economic resilience and adaptation and 2) geopolitical risk and strategic realignment to measure the post-pandemic progress and adjustments of BRI pilot zones and economic corridors in Southeast Asia. Under the framework, the interaction between the two indicators facilitates my investigation of BRI

¹⁸ Sagan (2004). "Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction".

projects' progress and challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the initiative's inherent economic attributes, China has to reappropriate limited resources to prioritize projects that maximize its economic gains in the face of the pandemic. Meanwhile, as a rational actor within the anarchic international system, the Chinese government considers the pandemic's strategic implications in Southeast Asia by adjusting to existing BRI projects to minimize geostrategic risks.

The first indicator, economic resilience and adaptation, examines how Southeast Asian BRI projects have managed to sustain, adapt, and evolve in response to the economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Key sub-indicators include supply chain continuity, infrastructure adaptability, and flows of Chinese investment. The pandemic's disruption of global supply chains and labor availability necessitated significant adjustments in BRI projects. For example, as the stability of supply chains has become a critical concern, China prioritized maintenance and restructuring over expansion in its strategic decisions related to BRI projects. Furthermore, analyzing changes in China's investment strategies in BRI projects also provides insights into how economic constraints and opportunities post-pandemic have influenced investment flows. The first indicator highlights how the Chinese government has navigated economic constraints and opportunities, ensuring the continuity and relevance of BRI projects in a post-pandemic world. By focusing on the economic sustainability and flexibility of the BRI initiatives, I plan to gain a deeper understanding of how overseas infrastructure projects adapt and evolve in response to unprecedented disruptions.

Besides economic resilience and adaptation, I choose geopolitical risk and strategic realignment as the second indicator, focusing on the geopolitical and strategic variations of the

BRI corridors and pilot zones since the pandemic. By assessing the infrastructure projects' strategic significance, regional political shift since the pandemic, and the great power competition between China and the United States, this indicator helps examine how regional geopolitics and global power dynamics shifts influence the progress of BRI corridors and pilot areas. The geopolitical landscape in Southeast Asia has undergone significant changes since the pandemic, perplexing the development of BRI pilot zones and economic corridors. For instance, concerns about the potential military applications of BRI infrastructure projects, such as the dual-use facilities in Cambodia's Dara Sakor pilot zone, underscore the significance of geopolitical dynamics in assessing the BRI's progress. In this case, post-pandemic variations of the projects' geopolitical impact in the region can be a crucial factor behind China's project adjustments and adaptations. Furthermore, the great power competition between China and the United States is crucial in shaping the future of pilot zones and corridors. The deterioration of U.S.-China relations since the pandemic can result in China's strategic realignments and, thus, changes to existing BRI projects in Southeast Asia. It is essential to explore the United States' new strategic engagements in the Indo-Pacific region and their effects on China's BRI projects, particularly in Southeast Asia, as the BRI plays a critical role in China's efforts to counter U.S. influence and reshape the global balance of power. In this sense, exploring geopolitical uncertainties and strategic recalibrations shape the BRI's development and prospects is irreplaceable to my study.

Zooming out from a neorealist lens about China's power projection through the Belt and Road Initiative, my analytical framework offers an innovative perspective on COVID-19's economic constraints to pilot zones and economic corridors and the subsequent geopolitical variations in Southeast Asia. The framework can benefit future investigations of the impacts of labor, logistics, and regional security competitions on BRI projects.

Case Selection

Grappling on China's interest and security imperatives, Southeast Asia's geopolitical condition, and the bigger picture of the U.S.-China competition, I selected Cambodia's Dara Sakor Pilot Zone and Myanmar's China-Myanmar Economic Corridor for case analysis. In addition to the two Southeast Asian cases, I introduced Nepal as a unique epitome of China's post-pandemic BRI action plan.

Cambodia's historical ties with China, the pro-China stance of the incumbent administration, and the state's resilience to pandemic implications make it a valuable subject for case analysis. Since the Khmer Rouge era, Cambodia has been China's "close friend" for decades. During the Cambodian-Vietnamese War in the 1970s, China offered Cambodia generous military and political support, while the Chinese invasion of Vietnam also largely alleviated Cambodia's strategic burden. As a payback for Chinese support, Cambodia has maintained a friendly relationship with China and is often considered a "satellite state" of the latter. Since the 1990s, Cambodia has received ample investments from Chinese state-owned enterprises and signed a series of bilateral agreements with China in various areas, including infrastructure development and land franchising. The Cambodia-China Comprehensive Investment and Development Pilot Zone in Dara Sakor, one of the most prominent Chinese projects in the country, is part of a century-long land concession agreement between the Cambodian state and the Chinese Union Development Group in 2008.¹⁹ Global Times (2022) states that the Dara Sakor pilot zone project includes high-end residential districts, industrial parks, luxury resorts, a deep-water seaport, and an international airport. Since the COVID-19

¹⁹ Mobley (2019)

pandemic, a series of BRI projects have been delayed in Dara Sakor, including the seaport and the international airport. Other than the delays, there is no sign of other changes to the projects. As Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen passed the throne to his son in 2023, it is also valuable to explore the new administration's influences on Dara Sakor. Based on the above characteristics, I find the Dara Sakor case worth investigating.

Compared to Cambodia, Myanmar has a close but more complex relationship with China. Since the 1990s, China has significantly deepened its relationship with Myanmar through comprehensive support, ranging from economic investments to military supplies, even when Myanmar was undergoing international scrutiny for human rights concerns. A critical joint in the Belt and Road Initiative, Myanmar has abundant natural resources and strategic maritime access to the Indian Ocean. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, a collection of BRI infrastructure projects connecting the state's border with China to its Indian Ocean coast, is central to the two country's bilateral relations. The corridor incorporates ports, high-speed railways, and oil pipelines.²⁰ While the Burmese state supports the CMEC, civilian objections have emerged regarding the projects' environmental hazards and security implications. In 2021, the Burmese military overthrew the democratic government and established a military dictatorship under Senior General Min Aung Hlain. As the junta takeover exacerbated the central government's conflicts with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) in border regions, the future of the CMEC became uncertain. Investigating the case of CMEC facilitates my analysis of how domestic conflicts in BRI recipient countries influence the development of pilot zones and economic corridors in the post-pandemic era.

²⁰ Radio Free Asia (2020)

Unlike Cambodia and Myanmar, Nepal is neither a Southeast Asian country nor a host of an economic corridor or a pilot zone. I introduce Nepal as the third case study due to its distinct geopolitical position and the recent development of a comprehensive Belt and Road Initiative action plan between the Nepalese and Chinese governments. Nepal's landlocked status in the middle of China and India's great power competition adds a unique dimension to this analysis. In a meeting in March between the Nepalese Deputy Prime Minister and China's foreign minister, the two countries agreed to sign a comprehensive deal regarding the BRI's implementation and financing in Nepal.²¹ If formally signed, the deal would become the first new comprehensive country action plan of the Belt and Road Initiative in the post-pandemic era. According to Deputy Prime Minister Shrestha, the deal would officially launch a series of infrastructure projects, including roadways and energy projects, detailed in the preliminary bilateral agreement signed in 2017.²²

Studying Nepal's involvement in the BRI is significant for the field of international relations for several reasons. First, it offers insights into China's strategic maneuvering within the context of the China-India rivalry, highlighting how China leverages the BRI to strengthen its influence in a geopolitically contested region. Second, it provides a comparative perspective on how China's BRI strategy adapts to different regional dynamics and political contexts, especially in a landlocked country. Third, it reveals the evolving implementation strategies of the BRI, particularly how China negotiates and finalizes infrastructure projects in a post-pandemic world. Even if there are no signs in the action plan of either a pilot zone or an economic corridor, the Nepal deal's concentration on transportation infrastructure matches the nature of pilot zones and

²¹ Giri (2024)

²² PTI (2024)

economic corridors in Southeast Asian countries. In this case, engaging the Nepal case comparatively with the former two enables me to investigate China's changing geostrategic concentration and the evolving implementation strategies of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Case Analysis

1. Dara Sakor Pilot Zone, Cambodia

The Dara Sakor Pilot Zone is a flagship Belt and Road infrastructure project along the coastline of the Cambodian province of Koh Kong. The pilot zone is under the development and management of Union Development Group (UDG), a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE). The Dara Sakor blueprint includes a deep-water seaport, an international airport, industrial parks, and luxury resorts, making it one of Cambodia's most significant infrastructure projects.²³ The strategic location of Dara Sakor, adjacent to the Gulf of Thailand and close to the South China Sea, has raised both economic expectations and security concerns.²⁴ The Cambodian government's pro-China stance under Prime Minister Hun Sen underscores the geostrategic intricacies of Dara Sakor, especially infrastructure projects with military use or dual-use potentials.²⁵

Pre-Pandemic Status

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dara Sakor Pilot Zone progressed steadily, with substantial Chinese investments transforming the region. The Union Development Group's acquisition of a 99-year lease for a 45,000-hectare area facilitated the development of various

²³ Global Times (2022)

²⁴ Beech and Dean (2019)

²⁵ Nachemson (2019)

infrastructure components. However, the Cambodian authority lacks meaningful oversight and participation in Dara Sakor's development due to the Chinese company's exclusive rights granted by the century-long land concession.²⁶ By 2019, the construction of the Dara Sakor International Airport had advanced considerably. The airport, designed to handle long-haul international flights, features a runway length of 3300 meters, comparable to those used by major Chinese military aircraft, far exceeding the immediate civilian needs of the region. The discrepancy in the airport's capacity has led to speculations about potential military uses despite official denials from both Cambodian and Chinese authorities.²⁷ Another critical component, the deep-water seaport, with an official objective to enhance Cambodia's logistical capabilities and integrate it more closely with global trade routes, was also under development before the pandemic hit.²⁸ However, concerns over the project's environmental and social impacts emerged, particularly regarding the displacement of local communities and potential ecological degradation.²⁹ Zooming out from Dara Sakor, Cambodia became increasingly reliant on Chinese investments, with China accounting for a significant portion of Cambodia's foreign direct investment. Economic dependency was evident in the extensive land concessions granted to Chinese companies, often circumventing the legal prohibition of foreign land ownership in Cambodia by establishing local subsidiaries.³⁰

Post-Pandemic Progress

²⁶ Mobley (2019)

²⁷ Beech and Dean (2019)

²⁸ Global Times (2022)

²⁹ Lum (2021)

³⁰ Nachemson (2019)

In 2020, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic heavily disrupted the progress of BRI infrastructure projects worldwide, of which Dara Sakor is no exception. Construction delays, supply chain interruptions, and labor shortages significantly delayed the pilot zone's development timeline. For instance, according to Cambodia's civil aviation authority, Dara Sakor International Airport's scheduled completion time changed from 2021 to 2023.³¹ Besides, the pandemic also amplified concerns about Cambodia's economic over-reliance on China, as the reduced global economic activity affected the inflow of investments and the viability of large-scale infrastructure projects.³² Furthermore, political changes within Cambodia complicated the project's landscape. In August 2023, Prime Minister Hun Sen passed his throne to his son, Hun Manet.³³ The transition of power brought uncertainties regarding the continuity of the pro-China policies that had facilitated the BRI project. In the meantime, international critiques regarding China's exploitative behaviors in Dara Sakor have been springing up in the post-pandemic era. In September 2020, the U.S. Department of Treasury invoked the Glo Magnitsky Act and announced a series of sanctions on Union Development Group for corruption, human rights abuses, and aiding the construction of Chinese military facilities.³⁴ Corresponding to international criticism, activists in Cambodia and regional scholars have called for harsher sanctions against the UDG and the Cambodian government.³⁵ Despite global economic disruptions, China's continued investment and development in the Dara Sakor highlight the pilot zone's strategic importance in China's post-pandemic adjustments to the BRI. Despite delays, the

³¹ Kunmakara (2023)

³² Neak and Sok (2021)

³³ Guardian (2023)

³⁴ U.S. Treasury (2020)

³⁵ Bismonte (2020)

continuing construction of the international airport and the seaport recommences a potential Chinese military presence.

Challenges and Future Trajectories

Before the pandemic, Dara Sakor represented a cornerstone of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia. The rapid construction of crucial infrastructure, such as the international airport and deep-water seaport, underscored China's capacity to mobilize substantial financial and technical resources. The developments generated significant economic benefits for Cambodia, potentially transforming it into a critical hub for international trade and logistics. Economically, Dara Sakor, in expectation, will boost Cambodia's GDP and create numerous jobs, integrating the country more closely with global trade routes. Strategically, the project enhanced China's influence in Southeast Asia, further embedding Cambodia within China's geopolitical sphere. The development activities highlighted the potential for increased connectivity and economic integration under the BRI framework.

However, even before the pandemic, Dara Sakor was widely considered a potential military outpost for China, raising significant security concerns. The extended runway at Dara Sakor International Airport, suitable for military aircraft, and the development of a deep-water seaport capable of accommodating large naval vessels intensified suspicions about the project's military implications. These concerns were further fueled by the strategic location of Dara Sakor near the Gulf of Thailand and close to the South China Sea, an area of considerable geopolitical tension. Despite official denials from both Cambodian and Chinese authorities, the dual-use potential of the developed infrastructure at Dara Sakor remained a point of contention and speculation among international observers and regional powers.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted Dara Sakor's momentum, causing significant construction delays due to supply chain interruptions and labor shortages. The completion timeline for critical projects like the Dara Sakor International Airport was pushed back, exposing vulnerabilities in relying on continuous, large-scale investment flows.³⁶ Additionally, the pandemic uncovers the risks associated with Cambodia's economic over-reliance on China, as global economic downturns affected the inflow of investments and the viability of large-scale infrastructure projects. From a strategic perspective, the pandemic amplified existing security concerns. The U.S. sanctions against UDG under the Global Magnitsky Act further complicated the geopolitical landscape, reflecting broader tensions between China and the United States. These sanctions and criticisms from international actors spotlighted the project's controversial aspects, transforming Dara Sakor from a symbol of economic promise to a focal point of geopolitical contention in Southeast Asia.

China's strategy primarily focused on leveraging economic investments to expand its influence in Cambodia before the pandemic. The rapid development of Dara Sakor showcased China's ability to implement large-scale projects that align with its long-term strategic expansion in Southeast Asia. China has had to adapt its strategies to respond to the pandemic-induced disruptions and increased geopolitical scrutiny. This includes reassessing project timelines, addressing international criticisms, and potentially recalibrating its approach to ensure the sustainability of its investments. The political transition in Cambodia, with Hun Manet succeeding Hun Sen, adds another layer of complexity, potentially affecting the continuity of the

³⁶ Johnson (2021)

pro-China policies that have facilitated BRI projects. China's strategies need to adapt to the new dynamics to best serve its national interests in the event of uncertainty.

Before the pandemic, international attention on Dara Sakor was limited, primarily focusing on its economic potential and China's military ambitions. However, concerns about environmental and social impacts, including the displacement of local communities, were beginning to emerge. The U.S. sanctions against UDG and increased international criticism brought the project's controversial aspects to the forefront. Activists and regional scholars have called for harsher sanctions against both UDG and the Cambodian government, reflecting broader concerns about China's exploitative practices in Dara Sakor. The actions underline the project's shift from a developmental asset to a geopolitical liability, rendering the BRI's significant position in China's regional power projection.

Dara Sakor's evolution from a pre-pandemic symbol of economic promise to a post-pandemic focal point of geopolitical scrutiny exemplifies the complexities of China's BRI projects in Southeast Asia. The pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in the developmental model and intensified geopolitical tensions, necessitating adaptive strategies from China. The project highlights the dual-edged nature of large-scale infrastructure investments under the BRI framework, balancing economic benefits against strategic and security concerns. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for assessing the future trajectory of BRI projects and their implications for regional stability and international relations.

2. China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), Myanmar

The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor is another pivotal infrastructure project in Southeast Asia under the Belt and Road Initiative, designed to enhance connectivity between

China and Myanmar. The corridor spans approximately 1,700 kilometers and links Kunming in China's Yunnan province with three major economic hubs in Myanmar: Mandalay, Yangon, and the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone.³⁷ Launched in 2017, the corridor aims to facilitate the movement of goods, services, and resources, promoting Myanmar's domestic economic growth.³⁸ Strategically, the CMEC provides China direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Malacca Strait, the primary route for Chinese oil and gas imports, and the South China Sea, where ongoing territorial disputes occur.³⁹ The political and economic relationship between China and Myanmar is marked by intertwining strategic and economic interests. China views Myanmar as a crucial partner for securing energy routes and expanding its influence in Southeast Asia. At the same time, Myanmar sees Chinese investments as vital for economic development and infrastructure modernization. Chinese investments became more valuable after the 2021 coup. Chinese investment spiked from 11% to 73% of all foreign investments in Myanmar.⁴⁰ However, this relationship has faced challenges, including armed confrontations between the military regime, the democratic government, and EAOs along the Chinese-Burmese border.

Pre-Pandemic Status

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor exhibited mixed progress, with specific projects advancing while others encountered notable challenges. Among all BRI projects in the country, projects along the border region embraced the most significant progress between 2017 and 2020. The Muse-Ruili Cross-Border Economic

³⁷ Ahmad (2023). See Appendix 2 for a visual illustration of the CMEC's geographical span

³⁸ Xinhua (2017),

³⁹ See Appendix 3 for a visual illustration of the CMEC's strategic location

⁴⁰ ISP-Myanmar (2022)

Cooperation Zone (CBECZ), a critical part of the CMEC, has been approved by the Burmese authority as a pilot project.⁴¹ In the pre-pandemic era, the CMEC symbolized Myanmar's promising economic cooperation with China under the NLD leadership. Under the CMEC umbrella, flagship infrastructure projects, including the Kyauk Phyu deep seaport and Kyauk Phyu-Kunming oil and gas pipelines, were progressing stunningly toward completion. These projects were pivotal for China to secure an alternative energy route and reduce dependency on the Malacca Strait. Despite partial progress, most CMEC projects remained in the planning phase before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Post-Pandemic Progress

Due to COVID-19's implications, most CMEC projects faced significant stalls since 2020. The pandemic caused significant delays in construction and logistical challenges. One year after the pandemic hit, the Burmese military led by Senior General Min Aung Hliang overthrew the democratic NLD government and declared a military dictatorship.⁴² Heightening political instability and inducing international sanctions, the military coup exacerbates the stalls of CMEC projects. However, the military regime soon announced its intention to cooperate with China on existing infrastructure projects. For example, the junta reorganized the management committees for CMEC projects and pledged to move forward with development.⁴³ In the meantime, China signaled its willingness to proceed with the construction of CMEC projects through rounds of negotiations with the military regime.⁴⁴ As an epitome, the Muse-Ruili Cross-Border Special

⁴¹ Inclusive Development International (2023)

⁴² McKenna (2024)

⁴³ Inclusive Development International (2023)

⁴⁴ Millar (2023)

Economic Zone, which had fruitful progress pre-pandemic but experienced significant stalls since 2020, resumed development through bilateral management meetings in November 2022, in which issues such as regular communication mechanisms, site selection, dimensions, and timeline were delineated.⁴⁵

Public skepticism and resistance from local communities in Myanmar intensified during the pandemic, particularly concerning the negative impacts of infrastructure projects on the environment and residents' livelihoods. For example, villagers in Kachin State pushed back against Chinese rare earth mining operations, and communities in Kyaukphyu used environmental regulations to challenge the development of the oil terminal on Maday Island.⁴⁶ The CMEC's development amidst political turmoil and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates its status as a critical joint in China's post-pandemic strategic initiatives. Focusing on projects in relatively stable areas and cooperating with the military regime, China adapts to geopolitical risks to minimize potential threats to the CMEC projects.

Challenges and Future Trajectories

Pre-pandemic, the CMEC symbolized promising economic cooperation between Myanmar and China, benefitting Myanmar's economic growth and critical infrastructure development. The completion of key components and critical progress before 2020 highlighted CMEC's potential for generating broader development opportunities for the country, envisioning creating numerous jobs, boosting trade logistics, and integrating Myanmar more closely with global trade routes, thereby fostering economic development. However, the pandemic and the

⁴⁵ Inclusive Development International (2023)

⁴⁶ Millar (2023)

military coup exposed the CMEC's vulnerabilities in politically and socially unstable environments. China's response to these challenges involved a cautious recalibration of its strategies by cooperating with the junta and resource adjustments to focus on peripheral projects in relatively stable regions and adjusting timelines to accommodate possible delays due to political instabilities. However, increased public skepticism and resistance from local communities complicated these efforts as environmental and social concerns became more prominent. The heightened awareness of the environmental and livelihood impacts of the CMEC projects has led to greater scrutiny and opposition from affected communities, further complicating the CMEC's future. The CMEC illustrates the ambitious scope and complex challenges of China's BRI projects in Southeast Asia. The corridor's evolution from a symbol of economic promise to a focal point of geopolitical and social contention underlines China's need to adjust its BRI development strategies.

3. 2024 Comprehensive BRI Action Plan, Nepal

The BRI Action Plan in Nepal focuses on various infrastructure projects to enhance connectivity and boost economic development. The strategic projects include the Kathmandu-Kerung Railway, the Rasuwagadhi-Kathmandu road upgrade, and various hydropower projects such as the Upper Trishuli and Tamor Hydropower Projects.⁴⁷ These projects aim to facilitate China's trade and investment partnership with Nepal while reducing the country's dependency on India. Nepal's geopolitical significance is heightened by its landlocked status between China and India. This unique position makes Nepal a focal point in the regional power dynamics between

⁴⁷ Shekhawat (2024)

its two powerful neighbors. The BRI projects can serve as crucial opportunities for Chinese power projection amidst the strategic competition between China and India.

Pre-Pandemic Status

The preliminary BRI agreement between Nepal and China was signed on May 12, 2017. Initially, Nepal proposed 35 projects under the BRI framework, but later, it was streamlined to nine key projects, including railways, roadways, and hydropower.⁴⁸ According to Xinhua, China's state media, the projects will significantly boost Nepal's infrastructure capabilities, enhance its connectivity with China, fostering foreign direct investment and ties with China. Economically, the BRI was anticipated to transform Nepal's infrastructure landscape, improve trade logistics, increase transportation efficiency, and stimulate economic activities. For instance, the Kathmandu-Kerung Railway was projected to reduce transportation costs and time for goods moving between Nepal and China, thereby increasing trade volumes and economic interdependence between the two countries.⁴⁹

Post-Pandemic Progress

Unlike the other two cases, BRI projects in Nepal have entered the development phase. In this case, the COVID-19 pandemic has not impaired the progress of BRI infrastructure development in Nepal. Instead, the pandemic prolonged China and Nepal's bilateral negotiations regarding implementing the 2017 deal. Following a dialogue between the Nepalese deputy prime minister and China's foreign minister in Beijing this March, both sides have agreed to formally

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Xinhua (2017)

execute the planned BRI infrastructure projects shortly by signing a proposed action plan.⁵⁰ On July 12, 2024, Nepalese Prime Minister Prachanda gave his official approval to this action plan.⁵¹ The plan includes agreements to develop infrastructure projects such as roadways, energy projects, and educational institutions.⁵² The implications of this agreement will address critical gaps in Nepal's development landscape by enhancing connectivity and energy infrastructure, producing profound economic outcomes. Additionally, the action plan's expansion to include educational projects like the Madan Bhandari Science and Technology University highlights a new focus on long-term capacity building and human resource development, an unusual sector for previous BRI projects. The initiation of the comprehensive BRI action plan, the first major BRI advancement in the post-pandemic era, illustrates China's renewed geopolitical interest in its southern border with India, a major regional rivalry. In contrast to the stalled Gwadar Port project in Pakistan, a less-contingent location to the confrontation between India and China, China's increasing economic and strategic presence in Nepal denotes China's strategic contraction to its border region.

Challenges and Future Trajectories

Unlike the other two cases, the COVID-19 pandemic did not severely impair BRI infrastructure development in Nepal. As mentioned, the pandemic delayed the bilateral negotiations between China and Nepal regarding implementing the 2017 BRI agreement. This delay allowed both nations to reassess and refine their strategies. Following high-level dialogues,

⁵⁰ Giri (2024), <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2024/03/27/nepal-china-renew-pledge-to-sign-bri-execution-plan-soon>

⁵¹ PTI (2024)

⁵² Ibid

both sides agreed to move forward with the planned infrastructure projects despite the skyrocketing international critiques of the BRI's coercive aspects. The formal execution of the BRI action plan, which includes agreements to develop roadways, energy projects, and educational institutions, marks China's renewed commitment to the Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, the plan's inclusion of higher education cooperation highlights a unique aspect of the BRI in the post-pandemic era. Focusing on long-term capacity building and human resource development differentiates Nepal's BRI projects from Cambodia's and Myanmar's more traditional infrastructure and connectivity projects.

In contrast to the delays and geopolitical challenges faced by the Dara Sakor Pilot Zone in Cambodia and the CMEC in Myanmar, the BRI projects in Nepal have demonstrated a different kind of resilience. The prolonged negotiations and the eventual formalization of the action plan indicate strategic patience and adaptability from both China and Nepal. This approach has allowed for a more considered and potentially more sustainable implementation of BRI projects in Nepal. Furthermore, the BRI's geopolitical implications in Nepal remain significant for China, especially amidst the increasingly fierce confrontation along the China-India border in the past five years. Nepal's strategic location between China and India is at the heart of the region's geostrategic competition. Enhancing Nepal's connectivity and economic ties with China could shift the regional balance of power, offering China a strategic gateway to South Asia.

Discussion

The analysis of the three cases reveals China's adjustment and adaptation of its Belt and Road pilot zones and economic corridors, particularly in Southeast Asia. The Dara Sakor Pilot

Zone faced significant delays and increased scrutiny over its military use potential, while it continued using a low-profile approach since the pandemic. Similarly, the CMEC encountered severe disruptions due to the pandemic and the subsequent military coup in Myanmar, whereas it continued with shifted concentration and at a slower pace. Unlike these two cases, the 2024 Nepal Action Plan signaled the BRI's renewed commitment to transnational infrastructure development and expanded focus on higher education cooperation. The three cases illustrate China's resilience and adaptation to the changing global economic environment and geopolitical risks in the post-pandemic era.

Economic Resilience and Adaptation

Each case demonstrates varying degrees of China's Economic resilience and adaptability post-pandemic. The Dara Sakor Pilot Zone in Cambodia faced construction delays and supply chain interruptions. However, China's strategy of prioritizing feasible and essential projects and maintaining limited investment flows in the face of resource scarcity helped sustain the pilot zone's continuing development. Dara Sakor International Airport's extended project timeline exemplifies China's strategy to prioritize feasible projects over large-scale infrastructure projects that require tremendous material and human resources amidst a dire global disruption.

The CMEC faced compounded difficulties due to the pandemic and political instability following the 2021 military coup. Despite significant logistical and construction delays, China started cooperating with the military regime and focusing on peripheral projects in comparatively stable regions near the China-Myanmar border. This move shows China's strategic pivot to maintain project continuity and influence projection, underscoring the importance of flexibility

in managing economic disruptions and adapting investment strategies to evolving geopolitical conditions.

Although delayed by the pandemic, Nepal's BRI projects, which had never entered the development phase, were reinvigorated by the 2024 comprehensive deal. Although questions and doubts arose during the pandemic, Nepal continued participating and negotiated a more comprehensive action plan with China. The deal shows the BRI's resilience, emphasizing adaptability through restructured agreements and focused investments in critical infrastructure and educational programs. By addressing gaps in connectivity and energy infrastructure, the BRI in Nepal showcases China's strategic adjustment to maintain long-term development goals amidst global economic uncertainties.

Geopolitical Risk and Project Realignment

The changing geopolitical landscape during the pandemic also influences China's realignment of its BRI pilot zones and economic corridors. In Cambodia, Dara Sakor's strategic location near the South China Sea raised concerns about its potential as a navy and air force outpost for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), attracting international scrutiny and sanctions. These geopolitical tensions transformed Dara Sakor from an economic asset to a focal point of contention, reflecting broader U.S.-China rivalries. The need for strategic realignment became evident as China reassessed project timelines and addressed international criticisms to sustain its interests and power in Cambodia coercively.

In Myanmar, the CMEC's provision of strategic maritime access to the Indian Ocean for China made it a critical component of the BRI before the pandemic. However, the 2021 military coup and subsequent international sanctions complicated the corridor's development, forcing

China to reevaluate the feasibility of reaching the Indian Ocean. China's recalibrated strategy of focusing on stable border regions and maintaining support for the military regime illustrated an adaptive response to varying geopolitical risks and strategic considerations.

Moreover, Nepal's status as a landlocked nation between China and India is a primary factor in China's 2024 comprehensive deal, underscoring China's commitment to strengthening its influence in a geopolitically contested region. The renewed agreements reflect China's strategic realignment to enhance its logistical and infrastructural connectivity to Nepal while navigating the great power competition with India, exacerbated during the pandemic.

Comparative Insights

Comparing the three cases reveals significant similarities and differences in their responses to economic and geopolitical variations during the COVID-19 pandemic. All three projects demonstrated resilience and adaptability, but each country's political, economic, and social contexts influenced their outcomes. In Cambodia and Myanmar, geopolitical tensions and internal political instability posed significant challenges, whereas Nepal's strategic location required careful navigation of regional dynamics. Dara Sakor and CMEC faced heightened scrutiny and delays, illustrating the vulnerabilities of the BRI to political and economic complications and the adaptations and adjustments needed for China to overcome the challenges. In contrast, the Nepal deal delivers China's newest policies and strategies regarding implementing the BRI in the post-pandemic era, highlighting the importance of strategic realignments in the face of geostrategic constraints and uncertainties. The findings align with neorealist theories emphasizing structural constraints' influences on state behavior. As the case studies indicate, economic declines and geopolitical contentions since the pandemic have limited

China's resource and mobilization capacities in producing a global-scale Belt and Road Initiative in the short term. In this case, China reapproached the BRI by concentrating on more affordable projects with immediate returns and strategic needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my paper investigates the challenges and adaptations of China's Belt and Road Initiative after the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on pilot zones and economic corridors in Southeast Asia. Through detailed case studies of the Dara Sakor Pilot Zone in Cambodia, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and a proposed comprehensive BRI action plan in Nepal, I have explored how these projects have adapted to the post-pandemic geopolitical and economic landscapes. Utilizing a neorealist analytical framework, I gained insights into China's strategic recalibrations in response to the evolving global context. My thesis contributes to the literature on the BRI by providing a nuanced understanding of the initiative's resilience and adaptability in the face of global challenges. By employing a neorealist analytical framework, I have highlighted the balance of power, geopolitical strategies, and national interests that shape the progress and challenges of BRI projects. The detailed case studies offer valuable insights into the complexities of implementing large-scale infrastructure projects in diverse geopolitical contexts, enriching the broader discourse on international development and global infrastructure initiatives. China's adaptation and realignment of the three BRI projects reaffirm its strategic concentration in Southeast Asia and along its borders. By allocating limited resources to BRI projects in its "backyard," China is transforming the Belt and Road Initiative to secure more immediate economic gains and geopolitical interests.

Despite the valuable insights gained, my study has several limitations. Data availability was challenging, particularly in obtaining comprehensive and up-to-date information on specific BRI projects. Additionally, while illustrative, focusing on three case studies may not fully capture the broader spectrum of BRI projects across different regions. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a more comprehensive range of case studies and utilizing more diverse data sources to include a broader spectrum of analysis. Building on my findings, future research could explore several areas. A comparative analysis of BRI projects in other regions, such as Central Asia or Africa, would provide a broader understanding of the initiative's global impact. Investigating the long-term socio-economic impacts of BRI projects on local communities would offer deeper insights into the benefits and challenges of these infrastructure investments. Additionally, examining the role of digital and sustainable infrastructure within the BRI framework could shed light on how China adapts to new global trends and priorities. The case studies of Cambodia, Myanmar, and Nepal illustrate the BRI's multifaceted impacts on regional development and international relations. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the future trajectory of BRI projects and their implications for regional stability and global geopolitics. In the meantime, addressing economic, geopolitical, and social challenges is vital for China's adaptations to its Belt and Road projects in the post-pandemic era.

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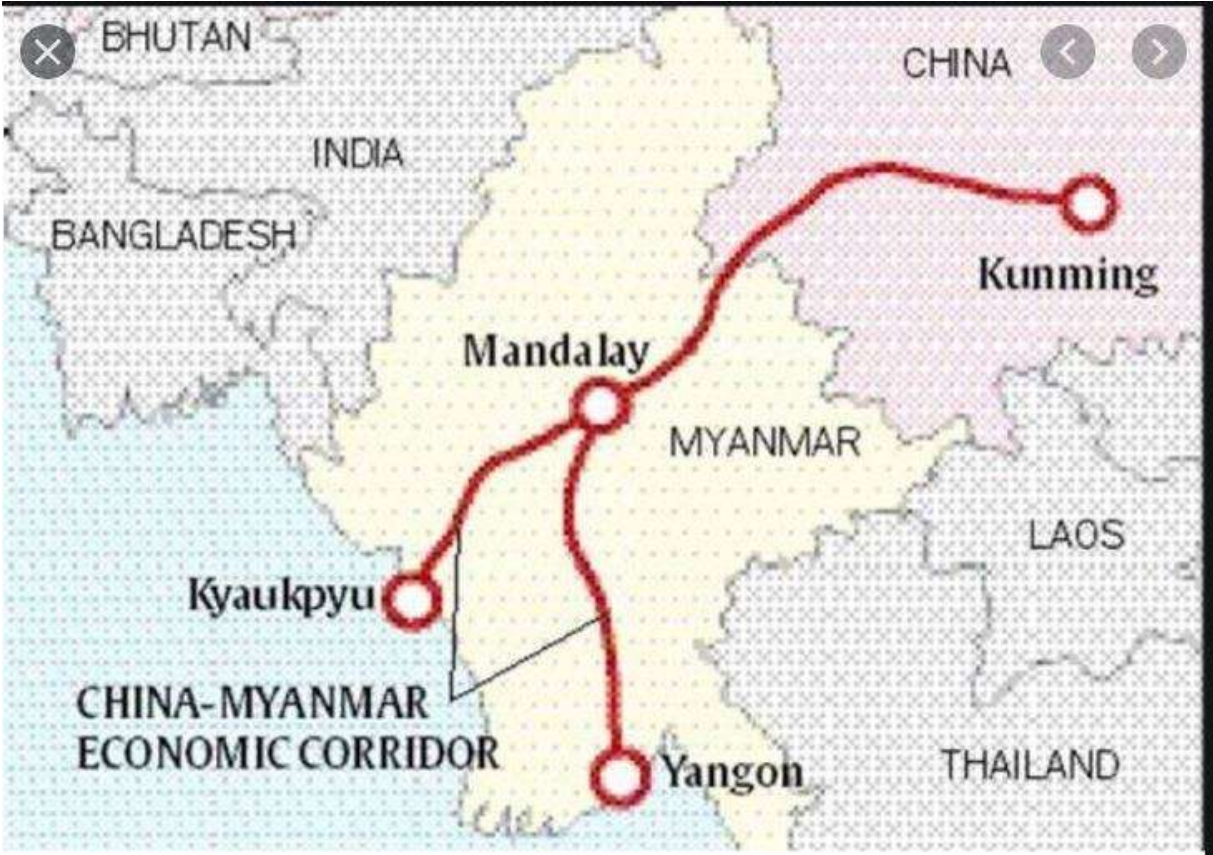
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Appendix



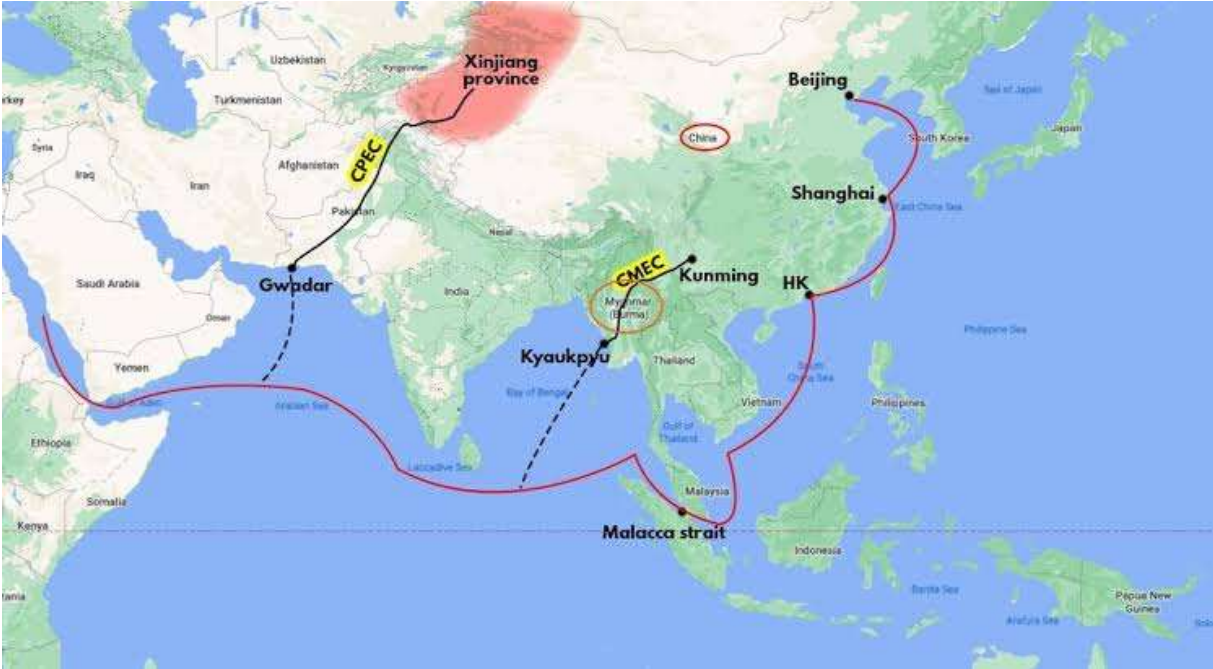
1. Map of the Belt and Road Initiative

(Asian Society, 2021)



2. Map of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor

(Haralambides & Merk, 2020)



3. CMEC’s Strategic Location

(Ahmad, 2023)