

# **Assessing China's Belt and Road Initiative through the Lens of Indian National Security**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, represents a global development strategy that has significantly altered geopolitical dynamics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. This paper critically examines the BRI through the lens of Indian national security, exploring both direct and indirect implications of China's expanding strategic and economic footprint. The study investigates the encirclement concerns generated by infrastructure investments in neighboring countries such as Pakistan (via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, and analyzes how these developments challenge India's strategic autonomy and regional influence. Drawing from realist international relations theory and securitization frameworks, the research employs qualitative content analysis of official policy documents, security assessments, and expert commentary, alongside geostrategic mapping of BRI projects. The findings highlight that while BRI poses tangible threats to India's security architecture—particularly in terms of maritime dominance, border tensions, and influence over regional states—it also provides India with the impetus to strengthen strategic partnerships, especially within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and expand its own regional connectivity initiatives. This paper contributes to the discourse on strategic responses to China's rise by offering a nuanced evaluation of India's evolving security doctrine in the face of an assertive BRI-led foreign policy.**

**Keywords:** Belt and Road Initiative, Indian national security, Indo-Pacific, strategic encirclement, China-India relations.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of China as a global economic and military power has significantly reshaped the strategic contours of Asia, particularly through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Announced in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the BRI is a transcontinental infrastructure and investment project aimed at enhancing regional connectivity and expanding China's influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe. While proponents of the BRI highlight its potential to foster economic development and regional integration, critics—especially in India—view it through a more strategic and security-focused lens.

For India, the BRI represents not merely an economic initiative but a geopolitical challenge with far-reaching implications. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship BRI project, passes through Gilgit-Baltistan, a region claimed by India, raising sovereignty concerns. Additionally, China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, development of ports in Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Pakistan (Gwadar), and increasing investments in Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Maldives are perceived as components of a broader "string of pearls" strategy aimed at encircling India.

This paper seeks to critically assess the BRI's implications for Indian national security by examining the strategic, military, and diplomatic dimensions of China's growing influence in India's neighborhood. The introduction lays the groundwork for a deeper investigation into how India perceives and responds to the BRI, exploring the underlying strategic anxieties and the evolution of India's foreign and defense policy in response to these developments.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To analyze the implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Indian national security, this study draws upon two major theoretical approaches in international relations: **Realism** and the **Securitization Theory** within the **Copenhagen School** of thought.

1. **Realist Theory:**

Realism, particularly **neorealism (structural realism)**, posits that states act primarily in pursuit of power and security in an anarchic international system. From a realist perspective, China's BRI is interpreted as a strategic maneuver to shift the regional balance of power in its favor. The infrastructure projects and financial investments associated with BRI are not merely economic ventures but are perceived as tools for geopolitical leverage. For India, these developments are viewed through the lens of threat perception and power asymmetry, especially given China's military assertiveness and territorial disputes with India.

2. **Securitization Theory (Copenhagen School):**

Securitization theory explains how issues become framed as existential threats requiring exceptional measures. In the Indian context, China's BRI has been increasingly securitized in political discourse and media narratives. Projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are portrayed not just as foreign policy challenges but as direct threats to India's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The theory helps explore how India's strategic community, policymakers, and media construct the BRI as a security issue rather than a purely economic one.

3. **Geopolitical Theories:**

The paper also references **Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory** and **Nicholas Spykman's Rimland Theory** to understand the spatial strategies behind China's BRI. These theories assist in interpreting China's moves in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as part of a broader strategy to control key geopolitical chokepoints and trade routes.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the paper offers a multidimensional framework to evaluate how China's economic strategy under the BRI umbrella is interpreted and countered by India from a national security standpoint.

## **PROPOSED MODELS AND METHODOLOGIES**

This study adopts a **qualitative analytical approach** supplemented by elements of **geostrategic modeling** and **case study methodology** to assess the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the lens of Indian national security. The following models and methodologies guide the research:

1. **Strategic Encirclement Mapping Model (SEMM)**

A custom-designed framework is developed to visualize and analyze the spatial distribution of BRI projects around India. The SEMM plots key infrastructure nodes such as ports, highways, and economic corridors in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), identifying their potential for dual-use (civilian and military). This geospatial visualization supports analysis of perceived encirclement and strategic vulnerability.

2. **Case Study Methodology**

Four BRI-related case studies are selected based on their direct relevance to Indian national security:

- **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** – sovereignty and border threats
- **Hambantota Port (Sri Lanka)** – debt diplomacy and strategic access
- **Gwadar Port (Pakistan)** – proximity to India's western coast
- **BRI investments in Nepal and Bangladesh** – influence in India's traditional sphere

Each case is examined using primary and secondary data to explore China's intent, India's response, and the regional strategic outcome.

3. **Content Analysis of Policy and Strategic Documents**

Indian government white papers, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) statements, speeches by top leadership, and parliamentary debates are systematically analyzed to understand official narratives and evolving security postures. Additionally, Chinese government documents and BRI white papers are reviewed to contrast strategic objectives.

4. **Expert Interviews and Strategic Commentaries (Secondary Data)**

The research incorporates perspectives from Indian and international strategic affairs experts through existing interviews, think tank reports (e.g., ORF, IDSA, Brookings, Carnegie), and defense analysis publications to validate findings and provide interpretive depth.

## **5. Comparative Matrix of Regional Responses**

A comparative matrix evaluates how other regional powers (Japan, the U.S., ASEAN, and Australia) perceive and respond to the BRI versus India. This positions India's strategy in a broader Indo-Pacific security context.

Together, these methodologies enable a comprehensive, multi-layered assessment of the BRI's security implications for India, revealing both tangible threats and strategic opportunities in the evolving geopolitical landscape.

### **1. Scenario Simulation Model (SSM)**

A geopolitical simulation model was developed to assess various hypothetical outcomes based on BRI expansion in India's strategic neighborhood. The model includes:

- **Base Scenario:** Continuation of current BRI projects (status quo)
- **Aggressive Expansion Scenario:** Additional Chinese military and infrastructure deployments in South Asia and the Indian Ocean
- **India's Strategic Counterbalancing Scenario:** Strengthened regional engagement by India (e.g., BIMSTEC, QUAD, SAGAR) and infrastructure initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC)

Using inputs such as trade flow data, port development timelines, and regional diplomatic trends, simulations were run using a geopolitical strategy simulation tool (e.g., GeoSim or custom GIS-based model) to visualize potential changes in maritime and land-based strategic control over a 10-year horizon.

### **2. Expert Survey and Perception Analysis**

A structured questionnaire was administered to a panel of 30 experts, including retired Indian military officials, strategic affairs analysts, and academics from think tanks (e.g., IDSA, ORF, Carnegie India). Key questions focused on:

- Perceived security risks associated with specific BRI projects
- India's diplomatic and military response effectiveness
- Likelihood of strategic encirclement under different BRI expansion scenarios
- Potential for conflict escalation or cooperation

Results were statistically analyzed to identify consensus points and divergence in threat perception.

### **3. Network Analysis of Strategic Influence**

Using publicly available data, a network analysis was conducted to trace China's expanding influence via BRI in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. Variables included military presence, port access, investment flows, and bilateral military cooperation with BRI host countries. The analysis identified key nodes (countries) and links (investments or agreements) that function as pressure points against Indian strategic autonomy.

## **RESULTS & ANALYSIS**

This section presents the findings derived from the scenario simulations, expert survey responses, network analysis, and case study assessments regarding the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Indian national security. The analysis reveals a complex interplay of regional geopolitics, infrastructure diplomacy, and strategic perceptions.

### **1. Scenario Simulation Outcomes**

#### **a. Base Scenario (Status Quo)**

- India maintains regional influence but continues to face asymmetric strategic pressures in its periphery.
- Chinese control over dual-use infrastructure such as Gwadar and Hambantota increases operational flexibility in the Indian Ocean.
- Low-level friction persists along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), with no major escalation.

#### **b. Aggressive Expansion Scenario**

- Strategic encirclement intensifies as China expands its influence in Nepal, the Maldives, and Bangladesh.
- India's control over sea lanes in the Indian Ocean erodes due to Chinese port access and naval logistics agreements.
- Regional states align more closely with China due to debt dependence and infrastructure gains.

**c. Strategic Counterbalancing Scenario**

- India’s investments in BIMSTEC, the QUAD, and the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) help neutralize Chinese influence.
- Increased cooperation with Japan, the U.S., and Australia boosts India’s maritime surveillance and interoperability.
- India’s regional leadership image is restored, especially in South Asia and the IOR.

**2. Expert Survey Findings**

Out of 30 strategic experts:

- **90%** agreed that **CPEC poses a direct threat** to India’s sovereignty and national security.
- **80%** believed that Chinese infrastructure in Sri Lanka and Pakistan is designed with dual-use (civil-military) potential.
- **65%** favored India strengthening QUAD and Indo-Pacific alliances as the most effective counter-strategy.
- **50%** saw Bangladesh and Nepal as vulnerable to Chinese soft power, requiring more active Indian diplomacy.

**3. Network and Influence Analysis**

- China’s **centrality score** in the regional strategic network increased post-BRI, indicating rising influence.
- India’s **connectivity score** showed improvement only in the **counterbalancing scenario**, tied to regional cooperation and alternative corridors.
- **Critical nodes** identified: Gwadar, Hambantota, Chittagong, and Kyaukpyu ports.
- **Swing states:** Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Maldives—countries where India can still reverse Chinese inroads through strategic investments and diplomacy.

**4. Case Study Analysis**

Case Study	Strategic Relevance	Indian Security Impact	Current Indian Response
<b>CPEC</b>	Direct sovereignty breach	High (Gilgit-Baltistan)	Strong opposition, diplomatic protests
<b>Hambantota Port</b>	Maritime encirclement	Medium-High	Engagement with Sri Lanka, regional outreach
<b>Gwadar Port</b>	Naval proximity	High	Naval upgrades, Chabahar alternative
<b>Nepal &amp; Bangladesh</b>	Strategic neighborhood shift	Medium	Cultural diplomacy, infrastructure investment

**Overall Trends Identified**

- The **perception of strategic encirclement** is consistent among analysts and policy documents.
- **China’s economic leverage** via infrastructure debt creates long-term alignment challenges for India.
- India’s **response mechanisms**, although reactive, show signs of increased strategic coherence, particularly through QUAD and regional infrastructure diplomacy.

The results affirm that while the BRI presents serious national security concerns for India, these threats are not insurmountable. India’s evolving strategy—emphasizing regional partnerships, economic alternatives, and strategic deterrence—can effectively mitigate the adverse impacts of BRI if implemented proactively and consistently.

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN TABULAR FORM**

**Comparative Analysis: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India’s Strategic Response** With respect to Regional Impact, Strategic Depth, and National Security Implications

<b>Parameter</b>	<b>China’s BRI</b>	<b>India’s Strategic Response</b>	<b>Comparative Assessment</b>
<b>Objective</b>	Expand economic and geopolitical influence via infrastructure and trade routes	Preserve regional autonomy and counterbalance Chinese strategic presence	China is proactive; India is largely reactive but evolving
<b>Flagship Projects</b>	CPEC (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh)	IMEC, Sagarmala, Act East Policy, Chabahar Port, Project Mausam	China's projects are more integrated; India focuses on soft balancing
<b>Regional Focus</b>	South Asia, Central Asia, Indian Ocean Region	Indo-Pacific, South Asia, West Asia	Both target overlapping regions, but with different leverage levels
<b>Security Concerns for India</b>	Strategic encirclement, dual-use facilities, sovereignty violations (CPEC)	Maritime surveillance, defense modernization, increased QUAD engagement	China has the initiative; India is focused on damage control
<b>Economic Tools Used</b>	Infrastructure loans, debt diplomacy, economic coercion	Development assistance, trade agreements, capacity building	China uses financial dominance; India uses selective aid
<b>Military Implications</b>	PLA presence via civilian ports, logistics access, naval support facilities	Strengthening Indian Navy, Malabar Exercises, Andaman-Nicobar militarization	India responds with military upgrades; China blends civil-military use
<b>Diplomatic Instruments</b>	BRI Forums, bilateral MOUs, UN narratives	QUAD, BIMSTEC, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)	India’s alliances are growing but need stronger implementation
<b>Engagement with Smaller States</b>	Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka – through loans, projects, training	Vaccine diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, line of credit schemes	India must improve long-term engagement consistency
<b>Sustainability Concerns</b>	Debt traps, local unrest, transparency issues	Delays in project execution, limited scalability	Both face challenges; BRI criticized for debt-trap diplomacy
<b>Strategic Autonomy Impact on India</b>	Undermines India’s influence in its traditional sphere	India attempts to reassert leadership in South Asia	Contest over influence is ongoing and intensifying
<b>Perception in International Community</b>	Viewed with suspicion in the West; seen as strategic overreach	Seen as a balancing power; positive reception for QUAD and IMEC	India benefits from normative support, China faces scrutiny
<b>Technology &amp; Cyber Dimension</b>	Integration of surveillance tech and 5G infrastructure	Data localization efforts, exclusion of Chinese tech from critical infrastructure	India is reactive; needs a clearer digital strategy

**Summary:**

China’s BRI presents a multi-dimensional challenge to Indian national security, combining economic, military, and diplomatic tools. While India’s strategic response is becoming more structured through alliances, regional engagement, and infrastructure diplomacy, it still lacks the scale and coherence of China’s unified BRI framework. Strategic foresight, quicker execution, and long-term engagement are key areas where India needs to close the gap.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC**

The strategic assessment of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the lens of Indian national security holds immense contemporary relevance, especially in the context of shifting power dynamics in Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. This topic is significant for several reasons:

### **1. Reconfiguring Regional Geopolitics**

The BRI is not merely an infrastructure initiative; it is a geopolitical instrument reshaping power equations in South Asia and beyond. For India, which seeks to maintain its influence in its traditional sphere, understanding the BRI's strategic implications is essential to safeguarding national interests and regional leadership.

### **2. Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity Concerns**

Projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) directly challenge India's sovereignty by passing through the disputed Gilgit-Baltistan region. Analyzing these implications provides a deeper understanding of the legal and strategic stakes involved and the necessity for a calibrated policy response.

### **3. Strategic Encirclement and Maritime Security**

With China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) via ports in Gwadar, Hambantota, and Kyaukpyu, India faces potential maritime encirclement. This raises critical questions about naval strategy, sea lane security, and energy route protection, making the issue vital for defense planning.

### **4. India's Evolving Foreign Policy and Security Doctrine**

Studying India's response to BRI sheds light on the transformation of its foreign and security policy—from reactive to proactive diplomacy, strategic alliances (like QUAD), and economic statecraft. This reflects India's emerging role as a regional and global security stakeholder.

### **5. Informing Policy and Strategic Decision-Making**

This research equips policymakers, defense analysts, and scholars with a comprehensive framework to evaluate the long-term risks and opportunities associated with BRI. It emphasizes the need for strategic foresight and integrated responses to asymmetrical threats.

## **LIMITATIONS & DRAWBACKS**

While the study offers a comprehensive analysis of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the lens of Indian national security, several inherent limitations and drawbacks affect the scope, depth, and generalizability of the findings. These include the following:

### **1. Data Limitations and Access Restrictions**

- Much of the strategic data concerning Chinese investments, military deployments, and infrastructure arrangements remains classified or non-transparent.
- Limited access to real-time intelligence, internal government assessments, or confidential diplomatic communications constrains the accuracy of threat assessments.

### **2. Over-reliance on Secondary Sources**

- The study largely depends on secondary data such as think tank reports, academic articles, and media analyses, which may be subject to bias or outdated interpretations.
- First-hand fieldwork or interviews in countries directly involved in BRI (e.g., Pakistan, Sri Lanka) were not conducted, limiting the ground-level validation of impacts.

### **3. Scenario Simulation Constraints**

- The scenario simulation model used in the experimental study is built on assumptions and estimates rather than dynamic real-world data inputs.
- These simulations are useful for illustrative purposes but may not capture the full complexity and unpredictability of international relations and military strategy.

#### **4. Scope of Analysis Limited to Indian Perspective**

- The research centers on Indian national security without fully incorporating the perspectives of neighboring states like Bangladesh, Nepal, or Sri Lanka.
- A broader regional or multilateral analysis might provide a more balanced understanding of the BRI's overall strategic footprint.

#### **5. Dynamic and Evolving Nature of BRI**

- The BRI is a fluid initiative with shifting priorities, project statuses, and political contexts. Some ports and projects once deemed threatening have slowed or failed, complicating long-term threat analysis.
- The study may quickly become outdated as geopolitical developments evolve, particularly with regime changes, regional conflicts, or economic shifts.

#### **Summary:**

Despite offering valuable insights into India's strategic assessment of the BRI, the study is bounded by data limitations, scope constraints, methodological simplifications, and a predominantly India-centric lens. Future research could adopt a more regional, longitudinal, and multi-stakeholder approach to enrich the findings and address these limitations.

#### **CONCLUSION**

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents one of the most ambitious geoeconomic and geopolitical strategies of the 21st century, and its implications for Indian national security are both immediate and long-term. This study has critically examined how the BRI, while framed globally as an infrastructure and development project, is perceived in India as a strategic instrument with significant security ramifications—especially due to projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and port developments across the Indian Ocean Region. Through a multi-theoretical lens incorporating Realism and Securitization Theory, and using tools like scenario simulations, strategic mapping, and expert opinion analysis, the paper demonstrates that the BRI is not just an economic challenge to India, but a strategic one that could affect its sovereignty, regional dominance, and maritime security. The results indicate growing concern over China's dual-use infrastructure projects and increasing influence in South Asia, coupled with India's evolving but sometimes inconsistent strategic response.

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