

## The BRI reflects China's Growing Geopolitical and Economic Influence: Case Studies of the CPEC and the China-Europe Railway Express

ZHU Ying<sup>[a],\*</sup>; CHEN Ye<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Post-graduate, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, China.

<sup>[b]</sup> Associate researcher, Yancheng Teachers University, Yancheng, China.  
\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

China's expanding geopolitical and economic influence in Asia, Europe, South America, and Africa is reflected in the BRI initiative, an international project, the construction of which implies China's desire to expand its global influence. This paper applies the key concepts of geopolitics or geo-economics, and adopts the case study research method to analyse the effect of BRI in enhancing China's geo-influence, using CPEC and CERÉ as the objects of the study. The finding was that the China-led BRI expands China's international market, increases political and economic cooperation, and thus enhances China's geo-political and economic influence. This article is more descriptive than analytical.

**Key words:** BRI; geopolitics; Geopolitical economy; International relations; CPEC, CERÉ; China; China's influence

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2001, with China's accession to the World Trade Organization, the domestic economy has developed at

an astonishing speed. The national strength of China has rapidly accumulated and grown on the international stage, leading to a gradual increase in its global influence. The late Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew once stated that the rise of China was "so far, so fast, on so many dimensions of power" (Allison, 2015, p.3). This poses a threat to the world economic order dominated by the United States and arouses the hostility of the American government towards China (Yoder, 2019, p.87). Despite opposition from the international community, it cannot be denied that China is currently undergoing significant changes and its global influence is growing along with some ambitious programs launched by the government. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one such national plan, which aims to enhance China's international influence through the establishment of co-built trade routes inspired by the ancient Silk Road, with the goal of revitalizing and strengthening economic ties and cooperation with countries across Eurasia. BRI envisions projects in infrastructure development, unimpeded trade and finance, and coordination of national policies among dozens of countries in Eurasia, Africa, and Oceania (Li, 2020, p. 169). In this way, China is building closer ties with countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, expanding its geopolitical and economic influence. In order to prove that, this essay will first present the motivation for the establishment of BRI project. Then, case studies of two typical BRI outcomes -- the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Europe Railway Express (CERÉ) -- will demonstrate that China's geopolitical and economic influence is keeping growing. Finally, the evaluation of the impact of BRI on China's political and economic status in the international system will be conducted.

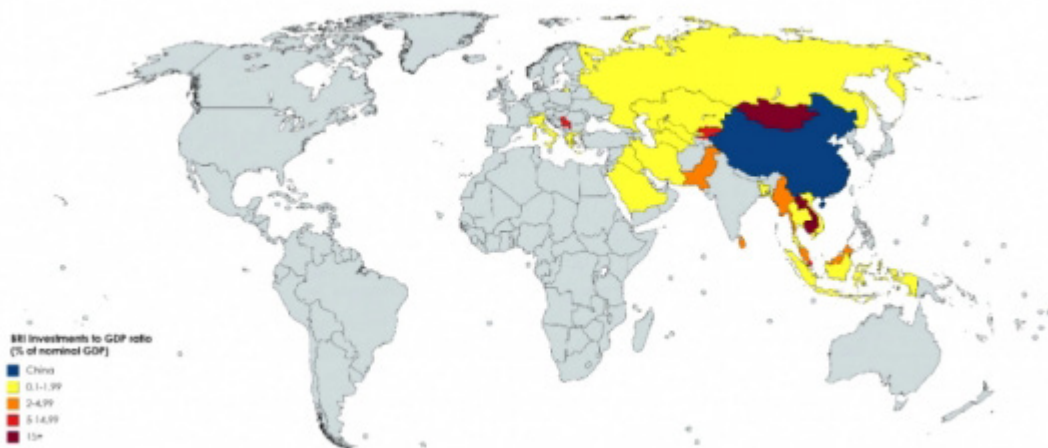
### 2. MOTIVATION BEHIND THE BRI

BRI's motivation is closely related to the core interests of China's government, which include safeguarding national

political security, promoting economic development and protecting territorial integrity, unity and the well-being of its people. These goals must be achieved through increased national power and influence on the international society. BRI is a conglomeration of three objectives and strategies: economic integration, regional influence, and global geopolitical competition (Flint & Zhu, 2019, p.95). BRI is set to meet this goal on a broader consideration of the international situation and a growing hostility of the international society. Specifically, BRI is motivated by increasing China's political, economic, and cultural influence on the international community.

First of all, modern China developed from a backward country, which was once the target of powerful imperialist aggression by Western society. Thus, for now, China's government is eager to project their power and political influence internationally. In recent years,

with China's rapid economic development and growing national strength, the leader of China has become more confident about achieving this goal. This is an accurate representation as expressed by BRI. Under this plan, China adopts a gradual approach to advance its international influence. As the core of China's new diplomatic strategy, BRI places particular emphasis on fostering relations between China and its Asian neighbors (Yu, 2017, p. 356), which mainly includes the underdeveloped countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the border areas between Asia and Europe. This can be seen from BRI's contribution to each country as a percentage of nominal GDP (see Figure 1). Therefore, geopolitical considerations are the first motivation of BRI, in particular, China has firmly cooperated with Russia to ensure political stability and national security as a counterbalance to the pressure of Western countries led by the United States.



**Figure 1**  
**Map of BRI Investments as a Percentage of Nominal GDP (Holt, 2020)**

Secondly, BRI has been set as a national plan to increase the domestic economic strength by encouraging state-owned enterprises to participate in international competition and a wider use of the world's resources. The initial phase of this endeavour is directed towards the neighboring countries and regions of China, as well as certain low-income economies that are of particular significance. By establishing and strengthening close ties with the above-mentioned regions and states, China is expected to optimize its development in an unfavourable international environment. For example, one crucial aspect of working with these countries is to ensure energy security, given their location along the oil shipping routes in the Middle East. One of the major advantages of increasing China's economic influence is to turn the less developed regions situated between Western Europe and East Asia into destinations for Chinese investment and exports, thereby creating a new growth driver for the global economy. This will also generate fresh markets for China's outbound

investment and export activities (Tian et al., 2016, as cited in Huang, 2016). To achieve this development of trade and investment, BRI involves infrastructure construction such as roads, railways, ports, airports, etc., which enhances cross-border transportation and logistics capabilities of countries along the routes and facilitates infrastructure modernization (Yu, 2017, p. 357). Therefore, BRI serves as a strategic platform for China to secure long-term international markets and reliable resources, ensuring sustainable prosperity for its future economy.

Thirdly, BRI is dedicated to the restoration of China's vast cultural influence as a great nation. To enhance China's international image, culture has increasingly become a focal point in China's foreign policy (Benabdallah, 2019, as cited in Li et al., 2021, p. 11). It is no coincidental, then, that the Chinese government decided to follow a route roughly aligns with the ancient Silk Road, which dates back over 2,000 years to the Han Dynasty. In the Chinese imagination, this historical

Silk Road represents the past glory and prosperity of the Chinese Empire, which lasted for thousands of years, far ahead of other peoples. BRI aims to restore China's past influence by maintaining close ties with countries along the ancient Silk Road, building "a stronger 'Asian' cultural identity (Flint & Zhu, 2019, p. 98)". This ambition has been considered as a core purpose of China to come back to the international society with a cultural pride.

In general, BRI symbolizes the rapid expansion of China's influence in the Western-dominated international system in terms of geopolitics, economy and national culture. The economic might that China has amassed over the past few decades has fueled its ambition to actively participate in international affairs and strive towards "reconstructing the global political and economic order".

### 3. CASE STUDIES

Sufficient cases have been available to illustrate the growing influence of China over the international society with the adoption of the national plan of BRI. Yet the political, economic and cultural ambition of China has been checked by the West since the international society has grown an alertness and hostility to a rising China. Politicians in the United States, both Republicans and Democrats, have argued that containing China's rise is the most critical diplomatic task faced by the United States and the Western world (Layne, 2020, p. 345). Nevertheless, China's economic development and prosperity in the international society are still fast. BRI, thanks to the persistent efforts of the Chinese government and state-owned enterprises, has achieved numerous accomplishments and boasts a plethora of successful examples. In the following article, two of the most typical successful practices, CPEC and CER, will be analyzed in detail to illustrate how BRI reflects China's rise and growing international influence. It should be emphasized that the focus of the following case studies is to highlight the expansion of China's geopolitical and economic influence.

### 3.1 China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

#### 3.1.1 Introduction of CPEC

The term China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was firstly invented by Li Keqiang, the then Chinese Premier in 2013, referring to a 3000-kilometer route starting from Kashi of Tibet to Gwadar of Pakistan. CPEC was officially established in April 2015 during President Xi's visit to Pakistan (Khan & Liu, 2019, p. 467). The corridor extends to the south of China along the so-called Maritime Silk Road, another trade road of ancient China to connect the outside world via marine transportation since the Qin Dynasty. It starts from the coast of South China, traverses the South China Sea, extends westward to the Indian Ocean, and further connects countries along the Arabian Sea, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. These are important production places of fossil energy source. Located directly north of the Arabian Sea, Pakistan plays a vital role in facilitating China's access to the Middle East. With Gwadar serving as a strategic port for sea-borne resources, southwest China can benefit from direct transportation links. The overland route of Middle Eastern oil into China through Gwadar would reduce the distance China currently travels via the Strait of Malacca by 85 per cent. This freed China from the long shipping routes and the so-called "Malacca dilemma". As an economic corridor linking western China and southern Pakistan, CPEC encompasses extensive infrastructure development, including roads, railways, pipelines, and power grids. It is also a crucial element of China's "String of Pearls" strategy, which involves the construction of ports and infrastructure across the Middle East to Southern China in order to safeguard its overseas power and trade transportation (Butt & Siddiqui, 2021, pp. 73-74). Therefore, CPEC not only promotes economic cooperation and trade between China and Pakistan, but also holds significant implications for expanding China's geopolitical influence in the Indian Ocean region.

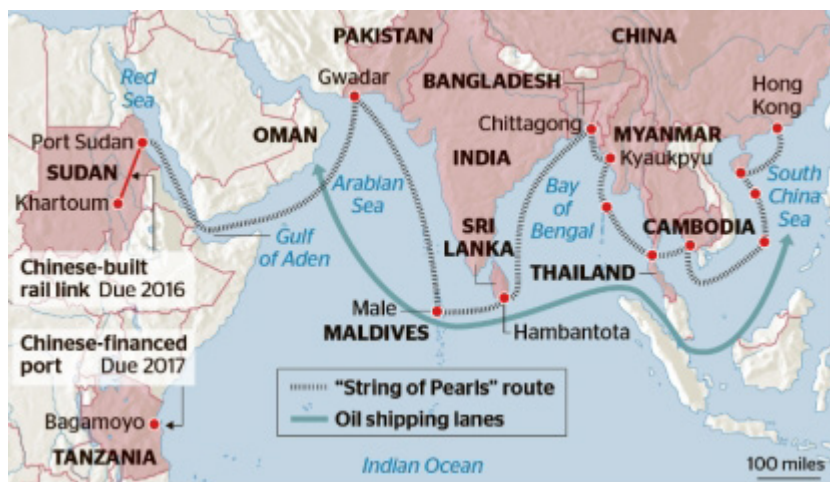


Figure 2  
Oil Shipping lanes and "String of Pearls" route along the ancient Maritime Silk Road (Butt & Siddiqui, 2021, p.74)

CPEC covers a wide range of China-Pakistan cooperation projects, in particular, China's investment in building and improving transportation and other public infrastructure in Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and Gwadar Port. These projects have greatly contributed to the local Pakistani population and the economic ties between China and the region. According to the official CPEC website, it has been described as the "framework of regional connectivity", aiming particularly at "the enhancement of geographical linkages having improved road, rail and air transportation system" between the two countries (CPEC Authority, n.d.). To support the construction of the CPEC project, China's initial investment of \$46 billion exceeded all past foreign direct investment in Pakistan, even increasing to \$62 billion in 2017 (Ullah et al., 2022, p.2). These investments have significantly enhanced local infrastructure, thereby facilitating Pakistan's social and economic development. Also, they have bolstered the political and economic cooperation between China and Pakistan, thus realizing the long-term sustainability of future collaboration to mutual benefits.

### 3.1.2 Evaluation of CPEC

The CPEC program has brought huge benefits to Pakistan and China. On the one hand, CPEC strengthens the economic regionalization of neighboring countries led by China (Khan et al., 2020, p. 208). CPEC serves as a relay station for the above maritime economic corridor, facilitating connectivity among South Asian nations and extending to energy-rich countries in the Middle East such as India, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The enhanced road and rail systems of the CPEC project are crucial for economic growth and regional connectivity, so that trade between China and these countries in the above regions will be more convenient (Khan et al., 2020, p. 201). On the other hand, by facilitating land and sea transportation, CPEC strengthens bilateral exchanges among various parties and makes sea transportation safer and faster to boost economic interactions among neighboring countries. The expansion of the CPEC program will also benefit neighboring countries along the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, increasing the likelihood of economic integration in the near future. This is of strategic importance for China to maintain its continued regional influence.

The CPEC project also involves political and military considerations. Undoubtedly, the connection between China, Central Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean region has expanded cooperation and enhanced China's voice and geopolitical influence in international affairs. In addition, the seas around the Red Sea and Persian Gulf have long been plagued by piracy. The issue of security in this region has remained a pressing concern for the international community due to the crucial maritime transport route for oil from the Middle East to East Asia. To ensure the safety of maritime energy transportation

corridors, CPEC and the "String of Pearls" route have strengthened the military function of local infrastructure construction (see Figure 2). CPEC has helped to strengthen the military cooperation between China and Pakistan, playing an important function in maintaining the regional security and stability of economic development of both sides. Further, this cooperative relationship has as well contributed to the regional security of the whole region of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. This underscores China's pivotal position in global affairs.

Overall, the CPEC initiative reflects China's growing geopolitical and economic influence in South and West Asia, promoting greater economic connectivity and political cooperation with regional countries. Furthermore, the establishment of CPEC has enabled China to maintain a sustained military and exert political influence in this region. This helps to ensure the regional security against international terrorism and contribute significantly to regional peace. On the other side, CPEC helps strengthen the continued influence of China in this region and realize a rising power internationally.

## 3.2 China-Europe Railway Express (CERE)

### 3.2.1 Introduction of CERE

Different from the CPEC along the maritime Silk Road on the south, the China-Europe Railway Express (CERE) goes along the route of the land Silk Road dated back to the Han Dynasty more than 2000 years ago. CERE is targeted at enhancing the geographical and economic connection of China with the countries of West Asia as well as European nations further west, thereby strengthening regional cooperation and promoting mutual development. According to 2021 China-Europe Express Development Report, China has been prepared to engage in dialogue with any country along the line and establish a long-term, stable cooperative relationship that benefits both sides.

CERE represents a broad and extensive collaboration between China and the countries along the railway line spanning West Asia and Europe. The project encompasses not only the construction of railway infrastructure, but also extends to collaboration in developing and constructing other social infrastructures utilizing cutting-edge technological innovations. Notably, the CERE project has made perceivable achievements with a total of over 57,000 freight train journeys from China to Europe. This approximately equals to more than 5 million twenty-foot equivalent unit containers worthy of about \$300 billion, enabling more than 20 countries and nearly 200 cities along the route to reap huge benefits (Ouyang, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the railway was a vital lifeline, transporting a total of 109,000 metric tons of anti-pandemic drugs and vaccines to European countries, ultimately saving millions of lives (Ouyang, 2022).

### 3.2.2 Evaluation of CERE

CERE is a very typical BRI project, serving as a regional linkage and promoting economic cooperation between China and partner countries. It embodies China's growing and accumulating influence on the global stage and marks China's international political and economic rise. Firstly, CERE has emerged as a pivotal platform for land transportation cooperation between China and countries along the Belt and Road, while also serving as a significant catalyst for economic and trade exchanges among these nations (Wang et al., 2018, p.1276). This is highly effective in strengthening cross-border cooperation and links, thereby boosting China's potential for overseas trade and representing a crucial step towards the development of its trade-oriented economy. Considering that the Railway track gauges along CERE regions are not unified, the building of this railway line contributes significantly to the connection of these nations. This can be regarded as a major contribution of the China-initiated BRI. The China-Europe Railway serves as a novel platform for cargo transportation between Asia and Europe, significantly enhancing transportation efficiency, and setting an example of transport cooperation among countries along the Belt and Road (Wang et al., 2018, p.1285), contributing to strengthening economic and trade cooperation among these countries.

The CERE project benefits both China and the countries along the railway line. Through its construction and utilization, China has effectively expanded its economic influence to West Asian and European regions. Considering the unique geographical and political isolation of some countries like Russia and Turkey, CERE has played a crucial role in bringing back these countries into the international community. A study of Fang et al. (2021) shows that CERE is also conducive to creating employment opportunities for residents of countries along the railway line, and indirectly makes a significant contribution to the development and prosperity of local society. The construction of infrastructure has also brought great convenience to the living and working of local residents in these countries. For China, CERE serves to improve trade relations with European countries, which collectively represent one of the largest and most established markets in the global economic arena, thereby exerting a lasting impact on the country's future economic development.

With the implementation of the CERE project, China's political and economic influence should not be overestimated, let alone underestimated. China has increased its political influence on the countries along the railway through active participation in regional cooperation and various international activities. Moreover, some bilateral relations, such as the strategic partnership between China and Russia, are crucial in maintaining international political balance. This is perceived as a countermeasure to mitigate the overwhelming dominance

of the United States in the old Euro-Asian continent. The influence of a more potent China is deemed a significant source of strength on the global stage, particularly as it engages in regional political affairs.

#### 4. EFFECT ANALYSIS OF BRI

The CPEC and CERE projects are among the most successful examples of the BRI plan launched by the Chinese government in the recent years. These projects have significantly increased the international influence of China, signifying an inevitable rise of China as a great power in the international arena. The rapid expansion of BRI reinforces China's position as the political and economic center of Asia, while also bringing it closer to the center of the world community (Deng, 2021, p. 749). The effect can be summarized in three aspects.

First of all, BRI projects serve as a means for China to enhance trade relations with countries along the Belt and Road, contributing to the sustained and stable accumulation of national wealth over recent decades. For instance, CPEC has been particularly successful in developing the economies of Tibet, Yunnan and Guizhou in the southwest as international activities have increased. According to Ali (2020, p. 110), less developed areas in western China can gain considerable benefits from CPEC. This is essential for achieving a balanced development of the national economy. In addition, the enhanced trade by the BRI is as well beneficial to the economic development of the Eastern coastal areas. The benefits are particularly noticeable for key port cities such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Shanghai.

Secondly, the implementation of BRI has contributed significantly in enhancing China's political influence on the global stage. The current international order has been regarded as one that is dominated by the United States and the advanced economies in Western Europe. However, with the rise of China, the monopole international society headed by the United States has been challenged. For China, this presents a valuable opportunity to engage in international affairs and counter the pressure exerted by the United States. Moreover, it implies an opportunity to ensure the international security and maintain a stable environment for sustainable economic growth. This is why the Chinese government has remained steadfast in its commitment to BRI over recent decades. Overall, the BRI program enhances the international development environment and reflects China's great influence in global affairs.

Finally, China's rapid rise as an international power has aroused great alarm and hostility from the United States and other developed countries. What China sees as its legitimate international economic pursuits are interpreted as a challenge to US global leadership that must be offset, if necessary, by military means (Wu &

You, 2020, p. 225). As a result, various measures have been employed to impede China's development and expansion, resulting in the BRI program encountering obstacles in numerous regions and countries. The recent trade friction between the United States and China can be seen as a prime example of these countermeasures. In any case, a strong and rapidly growing China is the dominant force threatening American hegemony.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, it has been firstly explained that BRI aims to comprehensively expand China's political, economic and cultural influence in the world. Then, two case studies, CPEC and CER, prove that China's geopolitical and economic influence continues to expand under BRI, although it arouses the vigilance of Western countries. In conclusion, BRI, introduced by the Chinese government, represents a significant elevation of China's geopolitical and economic clout in international dialogue. So far, BRI has effectively captured the attention of related regions and nations, most of which are the underdeveloped ones within the global economic sphere. For these countries, obtaining assistance from China, particularly in terms of financial aid for the development of fundamental social infrastructure, is a pressing priority. As such, BRI represents a valuable opportunity for economic and political advancement among participating countries. The local residents in these countries have obtained substantial benefits with the increase of employment chances as well as the improvement of basic social facilities. On the other hand, for China, the BRI expands its international influence and an increased voice in international dialogue. Additionally, BRI has expanded its international market to new regions, further enhancing the nation's global economic impact. As an economic entity focused on foreign trade as a key driver of growth, this expansion presents significant opportunities for sustainable development of the national economy on an international scale.

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