

CHINA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS AFTER BELT ROAD INITIATIVE: IMPACTS ON REGIONAL POLITICS

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, has significantly reshaped the regional dynamics of South Asia. Bangladesh, as a key partner in the BRI, has deepened its economic and infrastructural ties with China through a range of development projects, including the construction of roads, ports, power plants and industrial zones. This engagement has brought economic benefits to Bangladesh, notably improved connectivity and increased foreign direct investment. However, it has also influenced regional politics by shifting the strategic balance, particularly with respect to India and other regional actors. China's expanding footprint in Bangladesh has raised concerns about debt dependency, strategic autonomy, and the evolving alliance structures in South Asia. This paper examines the

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evolving China-Bangladesh relationship under the BRI framework and evaluates its broader implications for regional power dynamics, strategic partnerships, and geopolitical competition especially in light of claims made by the US and other powers that China's rise is not entirely peaceful. The study concludes that while the BRI presents significant development opportunities for Bangladesh, it simultaneously requires a cautious and strategic balancing act to preserve national interests and ensure regional stability.

Keywords: Belt-Road Initiative, China-Bangladesh Relations, South-Asia, Regional Dynamics, Economic Development, Economic Development, Strategic Balance, Connectivity

Introduction

Since Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, it has developed strong diplomatic, strategic and economic ties with China. In recent years, this relationship has deepened further, especially after Bangladesh joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was initiated in 2013. Under this initiative, China is collaborating Bangladesh by investing in major infrastructure projects, such as roads, railway lines, special economic zones and electricity projects. It is also involved in developing key Bangladesh seaports such Chittagong, Sonadia, and Payra. China has become the largest foreign investor in Bangladesh, and its

support is playing an important role in promoting technological progress, boosting the economy, and improving the social conditions. These efforts are helping to reduce poverty, illiteracy and unemployment in the country.

Both China and Bangladesh hold strategic importance for each other. China's not only supports Bangladesh's development but also benefits economically and socially from the partnership. By working with Bangladesh, China has gained access to a shorter and safer trade route through the Bay of Bengal. This allows China to expand its trade network and strengthen its influence in the region, which in return reduces India's dominance. However, China's growing presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has raised concerns in countries like the US, Japan and India. These countries worry that China is trying to expand its power and become a global hegemon through what they call 'the String of Pearls Strategy'', a network of Chinese investment and military facilities that they believe could threaten global peace and security.

China, on the other hand rejects these accusations and responds by emphasizing that the BRI is aimed at mutual benefit. It argues that BRI projects are helping all participating countries by improving trade links, boosting economies, and supporting development. According to China, the goal is to share prosperity, and create balanced growth that benefits people across all regions equally.

The literature reviewed on China-Bangladesh relations includes books, academic journals, magazine articles and research reports. Most of the available sources focus on different aspects of the relationships especially under the framework of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). These sources also highlight the security concerns of regional and global powers as well as China's rising global presence, its policies and ambitions. However, there is a limited discussion on how China's growing ties with Bangladesh are reshaping regional influence patterns, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and forming new partnerships that are impacting global trends. There is a need to integrate both strategic and economic dimensions into a single comprehensive analysis to fully understand the scope and impact of China-Bangladesh relations under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A clear gap exists in the current literature as no single study combines these interconnected aspects to fill that gap by providing a holistic view of the evolving relationship and its significance within the broader context of regional geopolitics. This paper aims to fill that gap by analyzing these interconnected developments in a broader context.

This paper mainly focuses on the evolution of China-Bangladesh relations, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It examines China's policies and ambitions related in the context of BRI, the development and connectivity of key seaports in Bangladesh namely Chittagong, Sonadia and Payra as part of this

initiative. The study also analyzes the mutual benefits gained by both countries through these projects along with the concerns and strategic fears that arise among the regional and world power. Through this analysis, the paper aims to provide an understanding of how the BRI is shaping bilateral ties. In addition, this study analyses the impacts of China-Bangladesh relations under the BRI on the broader South Asian region, where it is reshaping the balance of power, shifting regional influence, and transforming strategic partnerships. These developments are significantly affecting the regional political landscape and creating new dynamics in South Asia geopolitics.

Research Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature as it aims to explore the phenomena surrounding the China-Bangladesh relationship under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its broader impact on regional politics. The main purpose of the research is to explore the China's ambitions in context of 'the String of pearls Strategy.' It follows a descriptive-analytical approach, using qualitative tools to examine the subject matter. The study relies entirely on secondary sources including books, journals and magazine articles and research reports to gather data and analyze the evolving dynamics and implications of BRI in the South Asia.

China-Bangladesh Relations: A Historical Review

In 1971, when Bangladesh became an independent country, its relationship with China was initially unfriendly. However, it soon

turned into a strategic partnership. China became important for Bangladesh because of trade and economic investments. Bangladesh also saw China as an alternative to India especially anti-India feelings were increasing. Today, both countries have close political and strategic ties. Bangladesh is becoming more dependent on China particularly in the area of defense and the economy. India is closely watching the growing relationship between Bangladesh and China because Bangladesh as a neighboring country, holds strategic importance for India. Their partnership is also influencing regional politics. For Bangladesh, its relationship with China is important for economic development. Since 1999, Bangladesh has made strong efforts to reduce poverty and grow its economy. Poverty fell from 11.8 % in 2011 to 5.0 % in 2022, based on the international poverty line of 52.15 per day. However, the country faces challenges like limited natural resources, dependence on garments exports, frequent natural disasters and a high population growth rate. Because of these issues, Bangladesh relies on foreign countries for investment and technology to support its development.

China has a strong and friendly economic relationship with Bangladesh. From 2011 to 2019, China's investment in Bangladesh increased by 10.9 times. It is investing in many sectors such as energy (including coal power plants and industries) and infrastructure (like railway lines, seaports and economic zones). Both countries also work closely together in

defense, information technology and education. China is providing funds for the development of educational institutions in Bangladesh as well. The relationship in between the countries became even closer when China began funding major projects in Bangladesh that had been rejected by western countries. For China, investing in Bangladesh is important to expand its influence in South Asia, access regional markets and counter India's presence in the region.

China and Bangladesh have a strategically important relationship. Both countries are strengthening their bilateral ties through high-level visits, increased trade and investment, and cooperation in advanced technology and development. In 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina held a bilateral meeting after four years. That same year, about 700 Chinese Companies invested around \$1.4 billion in Bangladesh, creating nearly 550, 000 for people in both countries.

Bangladesh holds strategic importance for China due to its geographic location, which gives China access to the Bay of Bengal and to neighboring India. To balance its regional influence with India, China supplies arms to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is also part of China's String of Pearls strategy'' which connects ports in Bangladesh through the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). This helps China expand its presence in the Indian Ocean, secure trade routes and protect oil pipelines.

Over the past decade, Bangladesh has become a gateway for China to access trade and economic markets in South Asia. Under the BRI, China has invested \$ 4.45 billion in 35 projects in Bangladesh. Major Infrastructure projects include the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel, the Padma Bridge, the BCIM Economic Corridor and the Single- and double-Point Mooring System.

China has shifted its focus from industrial investment to large-scale infrastructure development, including highways and power projects. These efforts have improved Bangladesh's energy, transportation, trade and communication sectors. China is also developing the Bangladesh-China-India- Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, which links the four countries through trade and infrastructure. This corridor not only strengthens China's access to South Asian markets but also increases Bangladesh's strategic value. Additionally, China benefits from Bangladesh's lower cost labor.

Similarly, for Bangladesh, China is strategically important as it is a rapidly growing global economic power that supports Bangladesh's social and economic development. At the same time, Bangladesh's relations with the United States have become strained due to its closer ties with China. The United States has raised concerns about democracy in Bangladesh, especially since the country has shown authoritarian tendencies since 2014. In 2021, trade between China and Bangladesh grew

significantly. China's exports to Bangladesh rose from \$ 652 million in 1995 to \$24.1 billion in 2021. Bangladesh mainly exports fabrics, garments, leather goods and agriculture products to China. However, the bilateral trade relationship between the two countries still has room for further improvement and expansion in various sectors.

China and Bangladesh are also cooperating in areas such as energy, digital technology, and climate change. One major project is a large wind power plant in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, which is expected to produce about 145 million kilowatt hours (KWH) of clean electricity per year. This will help reduce coal use and lower carbon emissions. The entire project is funded by a Chinese company, SPIC Willing Power Corporation which is providing financial support to the private firm US-DK Green Energy BD Ltd, the main company leading the project (Menon, 2024; Chen, 2021).

China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI) is a global economic interconnectivity project that links countries through seaports, economic corridors, roads, railways, canals, bridges and pipelines for gas and oil. The initiative was first proposed in 2013 by China's President Xi Jinping. Its main goal is to build a peaceful, cooperative and interdependent world by promoting mutual economic growth and social development.

However, some Western and Asian countries, especially the US, Japan and India views China's growing economic power through

this initiative as a threat to their own interests and regional influence. These countries argues that China's rise is not entirely peaceful.

Despite these concerns, China promotes the BRI as a tool for shared development, cooperation and peace. Its aim to empower developing countries across Asia by supporting their economic progress. Through the 'Road' component of the BRI, China is enhancing connections across Asia by linking seaports with as network of sea-lanes, roads and railways. Under the BRI, China is also financing and constructing development projects in many Asian Countries with seaports. These include establishing free trade zones, energy projects involving gas, oil, electricity and building infrastructures like roads, railways and pipelines (Berman, Maizland, & Chatzky, 2023; Wallace, 2021).

Nature and Ambitions of China's Policy on Road Initiative

China has established the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) on the core principles of peace, cooperation and development and mutual respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The initiative aims to create interconnections between the nations regardless of their size and level of development by promoting peaceful collaboration and sustainable development both regionally and globally. Within the South Asia, the BRI integrates the countries into the Maritime Silk Road including Bangladesh, India, Sri-Lanka, and the Maldives etc. Furthermore, China is constructing two major economic corridors in the

region: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor. These projects elevate the strategic importance of South Asia not only for China but also for rival powers (Belt and Road Initiative, 2017).

Considering the BRI's emphasis on mutual gain, cooperation and peace. India's participation in this initiative holds significant value for supporting China's peaceful emergence on the global stage. Through the BCIM Economic Corridor, China links with India via the Kolkata Seaport. In addition, China has endorsed India's role in regional cooperation by granting it full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Strengthening Sino-Indian relations contributes to regional stability at a time when increased militarization and the formation of military alliances primarily aimed at countering China are becoming more prominent (Belt and Road Initiative, 2017; Panda, 2022).

Chittagong & Sonadia Seaports of Bangladesh

In June 2014, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina visited China and proposed that Beijing take the lead in developing the Chittagong and Sonadia Seaports. Although, several other nations including the US, India, Japan and Germany also expressed interest in these infrastructure projects, Bangladesh chose to prioritize cooperation with China. This decision was influenced by both geographical proximity and

Dhaka's confidence in Beijing's policy of non-interference in the internal political and national affairs of other countries. China generally refrains from questioning the legitimacy of foreign governments which aligns with Bangladesh's preference for sovereign respect. During the visit, the two countries signed a significant agreement for China to establish an economic zone in Bangladesh's Chittagong's district, where Chinese investment would be directed (Chowdhury, 2014). In addition to this, multiple bilateral agreements were concluded concerning the development of transportation infrastructure such as roads and railway lines as well as the construction of power plants, further deepening economic cooperation between the two nations (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Bangladesh, 2014).



Figure 1: Silent Features of Bangladesh's Geography

(Source: [https://global-](https://global-geography.org/af/Geography/Asia/Bangladesh/Maps/Bangladesh)

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As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, China is actively involved in developing two major seaports in Bangladesh: the Chittagong

Seaport and the Sonadia Seaport (Belt and Road Initiative, 2017). The Chittagong Seaport, one of the oldest and most significant ports in the region, plays a crucial role in facilitating Bangladesh's trade with international markets. Under the framework of the road component of the initiative, China's plan to significantly expand the port's area to 11 kilometers in length, allowing the accommodation of 58 jetties. This expansion will accompany by broader infrastructure development aimed at enhancing the port's overall trade capacity.

Currently, construction and development efforts at the Chittagong port are ongoing with full completion anticipated by the year 2055. The port holds strategic economic importance for Bangladesh, contributing approximately 14 percent to the country's total GDP- a figure that surpasses many other revenue generating sectors (Chittagong Port Authority, 2016). On September 16, 2023, the first direct trade shipment from China arrived at the Chittagong seaport, marking a significant milestone in bilateral trade. The shipment, which originated from the Ningbo-Zhoushan Seaport in China and passed through Shanghai and Shekou, consisted of 522 containers and reached Chittagong in just nine days. This new direct shipping service, known as the "China-Chittagong Express" has significantly reduced transit time between the two countries. Previously, shipments from China to Chittagong took 20 to 25 days, as they were routed indirectly through ports in Singapore, Malaysia, or Colombo. The

launch of this direct route is part of the Belt Road Initiative and offers enhanced logistical efficiency for both nations (Dhaka Tribune, 2023). Moreover, in a move to strengthen connectivity, China and Bangladesh have also agreed to establish direct road and rail links between Kunming, a city in China's Yunnan Province, and the Chittagong deep seaport, further boosting trade and regional integration (Islam, 2020).

Sonadia Seaport, Bangladesh

During Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to China in 2014, Bangladesh and China engaged in discussions regarding the development of the Sonadia deep Seaport. Sonadia, a small island situated along the Bay of Bengal, holds strategic geographical importance due to its potential to evolve into a major regional trade hub. Its coastal location offers direct maritime access through the Bay of Bengal, enhancing regional connectivity. The port, once developed, could serve as vital gateway not only for China's Yunan province but also for India's landlocked northeastern states, as well as for the Himalayan nations of Nepal and Bhutan, thereby fostering regional economic integration and cross-border trade (Chowdhury, 2014).

The Sonadia Seaport is a newly planned maritime port in Bangladesh that remains under construction. China is both funding and overseeing its development. The first phase of the project was expected to reach completion in 2015. Like the

Chittagong seaport, Sonadia is also located in the Cox's Bazar district, and is set to become Bangladesh's second deep seaport following Chittagong. To enhance regional connectivity, the Sonadia Seaport is being linked to China's Kunming province through a direct link road and railway network, which is currently under the development (Haque, 2014). In support of this initiative, Bangladesh, with China's approval, established a consular office in Kunming in 2013 to facilitate coordination and ensure smooth implementation of the infrastructure projects (The Daily Star, 2013). China has committed toward the construction of the entire project of approximately \$ 1.9 billion (Tusher, 2014).

India has expressed growing concern over China's expanding economic presence and its involvement in the construction of seaports across the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. From India's perspective, China's increasing investments in Bangladesh's trade and infrastructure sectors offer Beijing strategic access to the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, while also providing it with alternative trade routes for trade (Chowdhury, 2014). Although the bilateral relations between the two nations have seen gradual improvement over recent years, India remains China's primary regional competitor (Borah, 2016). India views China's rising influence in South and South-East Asia as a significant challenge to its own regional dominance, particularly in areas bordering its sphere of influence

(Heydarian, 2014). The competition between the two countries extends to both economic and military domains (Borah, 2016). As the third largest economic power in Asia (Aljazeera, 2016), India harbors ambitions of becoming one of the region's most developed and influential nations (Mohan, 2016).

According to India's thinktank, Asia Strategic Studies, China is reportedly planning to establish a naval base at the Sonadia Seaport (Asian Strategic Studies, 2015). This concern has been echoed by various Indian media outlets which assert that China's growing presence and activities in the Indian ocean are part of the broader strategy to undermine and encircle India's sovereignty. Analysts and commentators suggest that Beijing's involvement in development ports in the region could potentially pose a security threat to India's territorial and strategic interests (Chowdhury, 2014; *The Hindu*, 2014). At both the governmental and media levels, India has voiced strong warnings, using assertive language to allege that China harbors expansionist ambitions through its seaport's initiatives in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal (*The Hindu*, 2014).

However, despite earlier developments between the two countries regarding the construction of the Sonadia deep seaport first proposed in 2014, the project never materialized even during the Visit of China's President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh in 2016. Ultimately, in August 2020, the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina officially announced the cancellation of the

project following a cabinet meeting. Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam informed the media that the decision was primarily based on the environmental concerns, as the construction of deep seaport at Sonadia could pose risks to local communities and ecosystems. Nonetheless, experts suggests that geopolitical factors also played a role in the cancellation. There were apprehensions that China's involvement in the port could grant its strategic control over the area, potentially posing a challenging India's security interests (Marchionni,2023).

China's efforts to establish a naval presence at key seaports, including those in Bangladesh are closely tied to its broader energy security strategy. Beijing seeks to safeguard these strategic maritime assets from potential military threats posed by India, the United States and Japan. These seaports are considered critical check posts, offering maritime access to China's economically underdeveloped and landlocked western and central regions. They also provide alternative trade routes that allow China to bypass more vulnerable pathways such as the Strait of Malacca.

Recognizing the growing militarization in the region and the strengthening defense partnerships between the United States and its allies including India. China perceives increased risks to the security of its vital sea-lanes. In response, it has proposed deploying naval forces at Bangladesh ports to ensure the protection and continuity of its trade networks. If access to the

Gwadar seaport in Pakistan became restricted, the seaports in Bangladesh would serve as essential alternatives for maintaining trade flows. Similar to Gwadar, these ports offer China efficient and cost-effective access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean (Asian strategic Studies, 2015).

Payra Seaport

In addition to the Chittagong and Sonadia seaports, China and Bangladesh have recently entered into an agreement to develop the Payara Deep Seaport, which is set to become the largest and one of the most economically significant ports in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi government has expressed strong interest in accelerating the development of this strategic port, viewing it as a future regional trade and commercial hub with the potential to boost connectivity and economic activity across South Asia (Rahman, 2015). In 2021, China has developed Payara Bridge which connects Dhaka to Payara Seaport and the Kuakata tourist spot to Padma Bridge (Swadhin,2024).

China's development projects in Bangladesh under the Road Initiative

China has played a pivotal role in supporting's Bangladesh economic growth (Rahman, 2015). Through grants, interest-free loans, and development funds, China is currently backing a range of socio-economic initiatives aimed at uplifting the country's economy and improving the living standards of its people (Huaxio, 2015). Notably, from 2011 to 2019, China's direct

investment towards Bangladesh has been increased 10.9 times that focused on its political and social development whereas it is suffering greatly from poverty and natural disasters (Menon, 2024). In recognition of this long-standing support, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina expressed her appreciation to Chinese President Xi Jinping during the South-South cooperation roundtable meeting at the United Nations in September 2015. She acknowledged Beijing's continued assistance in advancing both the social and economic well-being of the nation (*The China daily*, 2015). In 2023, China and Bangladesh enhanced strategic partnership of cooperation when after four years President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina holds face to face talks. In the same year, China's investment in Bangladesh reached to about 1.4 billion US Dollar which helped more than 700 Chinese companies and that created 5,50,000 jobs opportunities. Today, Bangladesh stands as one of the China's key cooperative partners in the South Asian Subcontinent. The two nations are actively enhancing their bilateral collaboration across multiple sectors, including trade, industrial capacity, energy, infrastructure, media and cultural exchange.

The trade relationship between China and Bangladesh has witnessed significant growth over the years. In 1995, China's exports to Bangladesh stood at \$ 652 million which surged in 2021 to \$ 24.1 billion. As trade ties continue to deepen, China is poised to become Bangladesh's largest trading partner, a

development that is gradually diminishing India's long standing economic influence in the region (Menon, 2024).

To address the trade imbalance between China and Bangladesh, Beijing has taken proactive measures by allowing duty-free access to wide range of Bangladeshi exports into the Chinese markets (South Asia Monitor, 2020). Additionally, China has simplified its visa procedures for Bangladeshi citizens, making travel between the countries more accessible. Significantly, during his 2011 visit to Bangladesh, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged that China would continue to support and assist Bangladesh in its efforts to attain middle-income country status by 2021 (People's Daily Online, 2011). The relationship between the two nations is rooted in mutual respect and growing cooperation. Both countries maintain strong diplomatic ties and hold similar perspectives on key global and regional challenges including climate change and food security (Menon, 2024).

During Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina's official visit to China in June 2014, Bangladesh and China signed five key agreements aimed at strengthening their economic, diplomatic and cultural relations. This agreement covered a wide range of areas including technical and economic, the import and export of China's national machinery, the establishment of Coal-fired power plant, the supply of disaster management equipment, and a feasibility study on flood prevention and management in Bangladesh. Furthermore, both nations agreed to establish a Chinese

economic and investment zone within Bangladesh to further enhance bilateral collaboration and economic development (The Hindu, 2014). In March 2025, Bangladesh's interim Prime Minister Muhammad Youns did pay visit to China to consolidate political and strategic relations. Both states signed many agreements in energy, trade and technology development etc., (Liu,2025).

China has overtaken India to become Bangladesh's principal trading partner and largest source of imports. The bilateral trade volume between China and Bangladesh has exceeded to \$ 7 billion and was projected to rise to \$ 13 billion by 2016 (Yingqing, 2016) and reached in 2022 to US \$ 29.1 (Rahman & Rahman, 2023). Surpassing India's trade volume with Bangladesh, which stood at \$ 6.5 billion (Jacob, 2015) reached in 2024 to \$ 12.90 billion (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2025).

Under the Asia Pacific Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), China has eliminated tariffs on 84 Bangladeshi export products, including key items like jute and textiles which are the major components of Bangladesh's domestic economy. In a further step to bolster economic ties, China removed duties on 5000 Bangladeshi products in 2010 as a goodwill gesture to promote strong bilateral diplomatic and trade relations (Rahman, 2015; Kamruzzaman, 2021).

China has also been actively involved in infrastructure development in Bangladesh. It has constructed six bridges across

the country and in 2012, signed an agreement to build the seventh known as Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge (Pin-Leng, 2012). Additionally, China gifted Bangladesh its largest convention venue, the Bangabandhu International Convention Center to demonstrate its commitment to deepening its bilateral ties. The Chinese government has also participated in multiple energy projects including the construction of the Barapukuria coal power plant and a nuclear power facility (Rahman, 2015). China has proposed to establish connections between six urban areas across different cities in Bangladesh and corresponding cities in China, forming what will be known as ‘Union of Sister Cities’ (Kamruzzaman, 2021).

China and Bangladesh maintain cooperative relations across economic, political and social spheres. With the addition of strategic connectivity through seaports development, the partnership between the two nations is expected to deepen further, as they share multiple strategic and economic interests. Despite facing numerous socio-economic challenges including poverty, high unemployment and the impacts of climate change. Bangladesh is increasingly benefiting from China’s expansive support and engagement. Through its investment and development projects, China is not only enhancing Bangladesh’s economic and social infrastructure but also expanding its own regional influence which is gradually displacing India’s dominant role. This cooperation contributes positively to Bangladesh’s

economic growth, national autonomy and sovereignty (Rahman & Rahman, 2023).

Unlike the military alliances formed by the United States and Japan across Asia and other regions (Leng, 2016). China does not pursue a military pact with Bangladesh (Jianmin, 2015). Furthermore, Beijing maintains a policy of non-interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs and avoids encouraging any antagonistic stance against India, thereby reinforcing a peaceful development that focused on bilateral relationship (China Daily US, 2014; Rahman & Rahman, 2023).

China's commitment to mutual respect and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other nations has been central to building trust and expanding its influence globally (Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 2017). These principles played a significant role in shaping its relationship with Bangladesh. Motivated by both China's values and the potential economic benefits, Bangladesh exclusively granted China the opportunity to construct the strategically important Sonadia deep seaport. Despite keen interest from other major powers, such as the United States, India and Japan owing to the port's vital location along the Bay of Bengal, Dhaka chose to partner solely with Beijing (Sakhuja, 2009; Singh, 2024; U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2019).

In 2015, China and Bangladesh signed an agreement for the development of Payra Seaport in Bangladesh, with China taking on both the financial and construction responsibilities. Notably, this port will not be the part of Maritime Silk Road Network (Zaman, 2015). Earlier in 2013, China, along with Bangladesh, India and Myanmar agreed to establish the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM). This initiative aims to link India's Kolkata Seaport with China's Kunming city in Yunan province in via an extensive road network. The corridor fosters regional connectivity, economic interdependence and cooperation contributing to peace and development across Asia (Kayes, 2016).

As part of the BCIM project, China has committed to constructing a high-speed rail link from Kunming to Kolkata, passing through Dhaka and Chittagong. This railway will span 2800 kilometers and will significantly shorten the travel distance for China from 17000 kilometers (the distance from Kunming to Southern Chinese Seaports) to just 1000 kilometers to reach Chittagong. The shorter route will drastically cut the costs and time of trade shipments for China (Dhaka Newspaper, 2015).

China has committed to investing \$ 300 million in the development of Bangladesh's textile industry. Additionally, it has pledged approximately Tk 796.01 crore as a grant to support the construction of the Bangladesh-China Friendship Exhibition Center in the purbachal area of Dhaka. China also plans to

construct roads that will link Myanmar to Kunming via Bangladesh which is expected to significantly contribute to the country's social and economic development (Dhaka Tribune Newspaper, 2015).

China is funding the construction of the four-lane Dhakha-Chittagong express-way which spans 205 kilometers. The total investment for this project is estimated at Tk 70,000 crore. According to the study by the Asian Development Bank by 2012 nearly 90 percent of Bangladesh's goods were transported via the highway connecting Dhaka and Chittagong. The new expressway is expected to greatly enhance connectivity in the social sector and promote trade across various regions of the country (Dhaka Tribune, 2016).

In 2013, China extended \$133million in soft loans to Bangladesh for the implementation of phase II of the National ICT Infra-Network for the government of Bangladesh (China Daily Business, 2013). Furthermore in 2015, China initiated discussions with Bangladesh regarding the launch of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) aimed at addressing the trade imbalance. Bilateral trade between the two nations has already exceeded \$ 10 billion (Daily Star Newspaper, 2015).

Under the Belt Road Initiative, China is significantly enhancing its collaboration with Bangladesh across various sectors including trade, culture and social development. The economic and cultural ties between the two nations are steadily deepening.

Through major development projects, China is generating employment opportunities and fostering social progress in Bangladesh. These initiatives are also contributing to the country's economic growth. The strengthening partnership between the two countries is not only advancing regional peace and development but also supporting the emergence of the multipolar world grounded in mutual cooperation and interdependence (Haque, 2014).

Mutual Economic, Social & Strategic Advantages

The integration of Bangladesh's seaports into the Maritime Silk Road is expected to significantly boost its economic and social development. This strategic connectivity will create numerous opportunities, thereby improving living standards and enhancing access to healthcare and education (China Daily Europe, 2015). Bangladesh's sovereignty and national security are also anticipated to be strengthened. With China as a key economic partner, Bangladesh is gaining greater autonomy in policymaking moving away from its previous political dependence on India due to economic reliance (China Daily COM, 2014; Yinan, 2014; Islam, 2013). Through its evolving New World Order framework, China is helping developing nations by promoting growth and reducing the political and economic influence of regional powers like India (Liu, 2015; Abbasi & Khan, 2015). By positioning itself as a viable economic alternative to India, China is reshaping regional dynamics (Rahman, 2015).

China openly opposes the discrimination and exploitation of developing nations (China Daily Newspaper, 2016). Through its Maritime Silk Road Initiative, China is empowering Bangladesh and safeguarding its own trade and energy interests via mutual cooperation (Bangladesh port Authority, 2015). Compared to India, China's economy is more open, cooperative and technologically advanced with a focus on sharing development gains (Zhuangzhi, 2015; China Daily US News, 2015). While energy, investment and connectivity form the core of economic cooperation between India and Bangladesh, the relationship remained imbalance. Due to India's larger geographical and economic scale, it tends to benefit more from bilateral trade. Despite ongoing trade ties, significant barriers still exist (China Daily US Newspaper, 2015). For example, in 2014, India's exports to Bangladesh totaled \$ 6.1 billion whereas Bangladesh's exports to India stood at only \$ 462 million. This created a substantial trade imbalance with a ratio of 1:10 in favor of India (India Times, 2014).

Like India, the United States maintains economic relations with Bangladesh primarily through investment and trade. The US remains Bangladesh's largest export destination and is one of its top donors, ranking just behind Afghanistan and Pakistan. American assistance is directed towards areas that pose threats to democratic governance, hinder economic growth, fuel extremism

or are impacted by health crises, natural disaster and climate change (U.S. Department of the State, 2015).

However, China is steadily replacing both India and US economic influence in Bangladesh by fostering sustainable economic growth through policies rooted in cooperation, peaceful development, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit (Rahman, 2015). Unlike, the U.S., China offers Bangladesh trade relations free from tariffs and political conditions. Through these initiatives, China is genuinely empowering Bangladesh, helping it achieves greater independence, and integrating it into the emerging Asian economic power zone (Yingqing, 2016).

Similar to China, India has also sought connectivity through Bangladesh, with its northeastern region linked to the Chittagong seaport via the Akhaura-Agartala railway line to commercial use (Chowdhury, 2014). On a global scale, China plays a pivotal role in fostering economic interdependence between itself and neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Myanmar through strategic infrastructure projects like the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor (BCIM) economic corridor (Yingqing, 2016). By promoting connectivity through seaports and corridors, China is facilitating new opportunities for regional development. Overtime this growing economic interdependence may help resolve longstanding disputes among China, India and Bangladesh including border conflicts, the Teesta River water sharing issue, and maritime

disagreements (China Daily US, 2014; China Daily Com, 2016; Dhaka Tribune News, 2015). Broadly speaking, China's vision aims to build a new world order founded on mutual peace, cooperation and inclusive development, offering an alternative to the current US -led hegemonic system (Liu, 2015; Leng, 2016).

The Chittagong Seaport, the Sonadia Deep Sea port, BCIM economic corridor and Kunming-Chittagong Road rail link also offer significant economic advantages to China. The Sonadia Seaport in particular, provides a shorter and more efficient route for Chinese goods transported from Kunming. Currently, Chinese Cargo travels roughly 1,800 kilometers from Kunming to South-China Sea-ports followed by an extensive 18,300 km maritime journey to reach Europe. However, by utilizing the Sonadia port, this land distance is reduced to approximately 1000 km, while the sea route to Europe shortens to about 15,100 kilometers, thereby significantly lowering shipping costs (Ahsan, 2014).

The improved connectivity is expected to transform Kunming into a central trading hub for China's economically underdeveloped interior. It will also stimulate trade across neighboring regions including Hanoi, Bangkok, Vientiane as well as Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos (Kumar VR, 2015). Moreover, linking Chittagong and Sonadia ports with Kunming in China's Yunnan province offers a secure alternative to the Malacca strait a route China perceives as vulnerable to strategic threats from the US, India and Japan (Ahsan, 2014).

Fears & Concerns and China's towards peaceful Rise

The US has maintained its influence in Bangladesh primarily through its role as a major donor, providing substantial financial assistance to support the country's economic development and address various challenges such as poverty, extremism, food insecurity, health, education, security and natural disasters etc. As a global superpower, US foreign policy traditionally aims to preserve its dominance and maintain strategic influence over other nations particularly in Asia a region critical for American trade and energy interests due to its vast market and resource availability, at competitive prices. Concurrently, the US is seeking to counterbalance China's expanding economic presence in the region (Rahman, 2015).

According to Neoliberalism perspective in International Relations, contemporary global interactions are increasingly characterized by mutual cooperation and peaceful coexistence. States are becoming more interdependent across economic, social, military and strategic domains. Within this framework, economic development is prioritized over military expansion as nations recognize that economic strength forms the foundation of sovereignty and is essential for sustaining military capabilities. The neoliberal approach suggests that free-market capitalism and open trade contribute significantly to global peace and prosperity (Baylis & Smith, 2001:182-197).

China's foreign policy reflects key tenets of the neoliberal approach in international relations. Through initiatives such as Maritime Silk Road, it actively promotes neoliberal principles including commercial engagement, institutional cooperation, democracy and transnationalism by adhering the policies grounded in mutual peace, interdependence, cooperation, respect, and non-interference (Baylis & Smith, 2001:182-197; *China Daily Europe*, 2015). Under the broader framework of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is strengthening its cooperative engagement with other countries via regional and global institutions. It facilitates economic development by investing in strategic infrastructure such as seaports, trade corridors, transportation networks, and development projects in health and education. This approach not only to stimulate economic growth in partner countries especially in developing Asian nations but also to expand China's own sphere of economic influence (*China Daily Europe*, 2015). Through these efforts, China seeks to reshape the global order by advancing a vision based on mutual cooperation, respect for sovereignty, and peaceful interdependence, offering an alternative to the traditional world order characterized by hegemony, political interference, and strategic dominance (Leng, 2016).

China prioritizes economic growth over military expansion, asserting that a strong economy serves as the foundation for building military capabilities, developing national infrastructure,

and advancing other sectors of the society (*China Daily News CN*, 2015). Despite its emphasis on new development, China perceives potential security threats to its Maritime Silk Road and Economic Belt Initiatives. These threats stem not only from piracy and natural disasters but also from the strategic presence of countries such as US, Japan and India in key maritime zones (Bo, 2015).

President Xi Jinping has emphasized the historical pattern that nations pursuing peace and development have prospered, whereas those engaging in aggression and warfare have faced decline and destruction. He argues that peaceful and stable development brings long term prosperity and offers mutual benefits for both China and International community (Jinping, 2014: 325-327).

China is currently fostering global connectivity and cooperation through economic linkages that promote mutual interdependence. This growing interdependence is expected to further enhance peaceful relations and collaborative opportunities among states. However, China remains firmly committed to its national interests, security, sovereignty and development. President Xi Jinping has made it clear that while China will persist in pursuing peaceful growth, it will compromise its core interests or national priorities under external pressure (Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 2017; Kallio, 2022).

Dr. Hu Shi Sheng has commented on China's seaport construction strategy, emphasizing its primarily economic nature. His statement highlights that China's approach is fundamentally

based on economic cooperation and infrastructure development rather than military alliances. It also reflects the growing regional acceptance of China's presence as an alternative to traditional powers with an emphasis on mutual benefit and non-militarized support. He stated, "The Seaport construction is mainly economic. Chinese companies have expanded abroad and launched numerous projects. In India alone, China has secured \$ 60 billion in projects. India is a powerful nation; however, its neighboring countries such as Sri-Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal are increasingly seeking alternatives. Many coastal countries are supporting China's initiatives. China genuinely seeks the support of these host countries, and likewise, these countries are welcoming China's presence. China possesses the capacity to assist and protect these host nations. In the future, it is likely to do so, although not in the form of military intervention, as the US provides through its full spectrum of services including humanitarian assistance."¹

Conclusion

The growing relationship between China and Bangladesh under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is shifting the regional influence. Their cooperation is expanding across many areas including trade, economy, politics, culture, society, energy and infrastructure. China sees Bangladesh as a key strategic partner because of its location near the Bay of Bengal and close to India. This gives China access to shorter and safe trade routes like the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor which offers an alternative to Strait of Malacca and access to Southeast Asia. Bangladesh's position also helps China reach regional markets more easily and gives it chance to reduce India's dominance and

¹ Dr. Hu She Sheng Interview with Author on 27 May, 2014.

expand its own influence in South Asia, where they believe their own strategic interests may be threatened. These countries often describe China's rise as part of the 'String of pearls strategy'', suggesting that China aims to become a dominant global power by expanding its presence and control across key locations. They use this term critically, portraying China's actions as attempts to build hegemony and encouraging other countries to be cautious in cooperating with China.

However, the study shows that China is apparently contributing to development in partner countries through infrastructure, technology and economic investment which helps uplift their weak economies and societies. At the same time, it is also cannot be denied that many of these countries are falling into heavy debt of Chinese loan. This creates a situation where these countries become highly dependent on China not just for economic help, but also for ongoing development. With this growing dependency these projects benefited China from these partnerships as they support its trade routes, economic growth and global influence through the BRI network.

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