

# **China's Belt and Road Initiative: Perspectives from India**

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## **Abstract**

Multilateralism is currently in doubt due to the growing protectionism of former dominant powers, like the United States (US). In contrast, China, an emerging power, has shown interest in securing a globalised world order through the promotion of regional integration and multilateral cooperation. Accordingly, it has implemented the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to reinforce the development of infrastructure and transportation and enhance global connectivity. Nonetheless, there is suspicion around China's intentions with the project, particularly due to the lack of operational transparency. At this point, the BRI seems to primarily be perceived as a geostrategic tool for expanding Chinese influence at a global level. Despite its strategic location in South Asia, India is the first high-profile country to oppose the development initiative since its introduction in 2013. However, China might have changed its approach to the BRI since its launch some seven years ago. This invites an opportunity to map current perceptions of the BRI in India and the evolution of India's stance on the initiative. The research question of this study is 'How is the Belt and Road Initiative perceived in India?'. This question was addressed by thematic analysis of media discussions in India.

The findings suggest that although China continues to emphasise win-win cooperation, the general consensus in the media in India is that the benefits of the project still seem to primarily accrue to China. Yet, the analysis in this study also shows conflicting views in the media as to whether and how India might commercially benefit from the BRI. The findings also indicate that China has not yet sufficiently addressed India's concerns around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to warrant India's participation in the project. Apart from this, China's growing presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean has posed challenges to India's strategic interests. In response, India has instead pursued strategic alignments with other major powers, including the US and Japan. Recently, China acknowledged that the long-term success of its BRI hinges on its efforts to address international criticism. The country's attempt at showing greater accountability is perhaps most evident in the recent adoption of a sustainability framework and increased emphasis on transparency. However, in the Indian press, China's response has, so far, been considered inadequate as China is still seen as failing to sufficiently address the key sources of India's sovereignty concerns. As a result, India is not compromising on its position and is likely to remain firmly against the BRI for the foreseeable future.

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## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Souliyakhom', is centered within a light gray rectangular box.

Souliyakhom Thammavong

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AAGC	Asia–Africa Growth Corridor
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCIM	Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor
BRF	Belt and Road Forum
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CPEC	China–Pakistan Economic Corridor
EU	European Union
FDI	foreign direct investment
GDP	gross domestic product
IT	information technology
JeM	Jaish-e-Mohammed
MNE	multinational enterprise
MSR	Maritime Silk Road
OFDI	outward foreign direct investment
PoK	Pakistan-occupied Kashmir
R&D	research and development
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RMB	renminbi
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SOE	state-owned enterprise
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organization

# Chapter 1: Introduction

After World War II, many nations experienced unprecedented economic growth facilitated by globalisation (Morrison, 2017). The process of greater interconnectedness and interdependence has shaped the economic landscape through an increase in the flow of goods and services, including labour, information and capital across national borders (Liu & Dunford, 2016; Meyer, 2017; Morrison, 2017). In addition, international trade has enabled economic specialisation and cross-border resource pooling leading to better productivity (Phillips, 2017). This has resulted in high economic growth rates as well as a reduction in global poverty (Liu & Dunford, 2016; Morrison, 2017). Generally, governments consider economic growth as a sign of national success (Kallis et al., 2018), with high competition expected in all spheres of economics and politics.

It has been argued that the rules of free trade were largely written and governed by the advanced industrial nations, particularly the United States (US), to facilitate domestic economic interests (Stiglitz, 2018a). Trade liberalisation has also granted tremendous opportunities to multinational enterprises (MNEs) to further mobilise the power asymmetry (Phillips, 2017). This is observed in the disaggregation of value-added activities, which accrue profit by relocating production in low-cost countries. Although the global value chain has contributed to increased employment globally, both resources and labour in the system have been exploited (Phillips, 2017). That is, globalisation primarily benefits only the most influential groups in societies. Hence, the gap between the rich and poor has increased significantly as a result of the unequal distribution of global wealth (Meyer, 2017; Stiglitz, 2018a).

Although it has been argued that more advanced economies have manipulated developing nations by exploiting the unfair rules of trade (Stiglitz, 2018b), the literature has discussed their dominance in the global economy (Horner, Schindler, Haberly & Aoyama, 2018). More specifically, the noted decline in US hegemony was spurred by its eroding willingness to participate in multilateral collaboration (Stiglitz, 2018a). Today, the country maintains that international trade rules are unfair, and emphasises the importance of borders through its protectionist agenda. The US also left the Trans Pacific Partnership, declared that it will withdraw from the Paris Agreement and renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement. At the same time, various areas of the developing world have experienced the rapid economic growth. In particular, emerging market economies have accrued substantial wealth and influence globally (Horner et al., 2018; Hurrell, 2018), hence, the growing urgency to reconsider the balance of power and, by implication, the global institutional order (Hurrell, 2018).

In opposition to rising US protectionism, China is now playing a leading role in securing the global economic environment (Horner et al., 2018). Since 2013, it has promoted both multilateral cooperation and regional integration through (in particular) the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with the aim of enhancing economic development (Cai, 2018; Enderwick, 2018; Huang, 2016; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Essentially, the BRI was meant to develop infrastructure and transportation for better connectivity throughout Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe (Enderwick, 2018; Huang, 2016; Kaczmarek, 2017). China has emphasised the open nature of its initiative by welcoming all interested parties to participate (Ferdinand, 2016; Huang, 2016; Liu & Dunford, 2016). Apart from increasing economic cooperation, the nation seeks to increase ties with both member countries and existing intergovernmental organisations in terms of politics and culture (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). With the global economy now experiencing downward pressure, the BRI is presented by China as an inclusive path towards growth (Liu & Dunford, 2016; Tekdal, 2018; Zhou & Esteban, 2018; Zhouying, Shuyun & Yu, 2018).

One of the most significant BRI projects is the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), located in the South Asian region on a shared border between Pakistan and India (Blah, 2018; Blanco Pilto & Karambelkar, 2015; Jacob, 2017; Minwang, 2017). Importantly, this is considered a dispute area since both India and Pakistan claim it as their own territory. Geographically, India is China's largest neighbour, whose size and economic potential make it a vital ally in South Asia (Lu, 2017; Wojcowski, 2016). In fact, the rise of both nations, which occurred simultaneously but not to the same extent, can be considered as an essential aspect contributing to the development of world politics (Wojcowski, 2016). Therefore, questions of power, aspiration and relations between the two will have significant implications for the Asian region and beyond (Wojcowski, 2016). In particular, the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions are strategic areas where India has (self-appointed) prime importance (Lu, 2017; Paul, 2018). Its government seeks to impede the growing influence of external intervention in this area as well as increase India's ties with small- and medium-sized neighbouring countries in South Asia (Lu, 2017; Wojcowski, 2016). Indeed, China's proportion and the promotion of regional connectivity could lead to better economic and social development in India.

That said, implementation of the BRI has enabled China to cultivate its presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Not only does this initiative offer development opportunities to India's neighbours by constructing and developing infrastructure, but also Chinese capital is enormous and virtually unmatched. As far as the international literature is concerned, India has been absent from the BRI since its establishment (Blanco Pilto & Karambelkar, 2015; Enderwick, 2018; Jacob, 2017). Now in its seventh year, it is important to understand how the initiative has developed and how it has been, and continues to be, perceived in India. Primarily, this is because China might change its approach to the BRI. Further, perceptions throughout both



countries may have shifted, especially in terms of China's policies towards practical implementation. Therefore, this study chiefly concerns current perceptions of the BRI in India, including whether this position has or is set to change. The research question is 'How is the Belt and Road Initiative perceived in India?'. This study will not seek to provide a comprehensive analysis of India's official position. However, it will critically analyse key discussions in the media in India.

This dissertation is divided into six parts. Next, Chapter 2 is a literature review that provides an overview of the BRI, its expected outcomes, the challenges facing the initiative and how it has been perceived in other countries. Then, Chapter 3 offers background information, including the respective development paths of both China and India, their historical relationship and previous literature on India and the BRI. Chapter 4 presents the research methodology and method, and Chapter 5 provides the findings and discussion. Chapter 6 concludes the study and discusses the contributions and limitations of the research, while offering recommendations for future study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

As evident in Chapter 1, traditional hegemons, such as the US, have dwindling interest in international affairs, sparking volatility within the global economic environment. Enter the rising power that is China, which has attempted in the meantime to strengthen multilateralism by promoting development through initiatives such as the BRI. However, the launch of the BRI was not without challenge, with India being among the first and most prominent emerging powers to oppose the initiative since its inception.

A large body of literature in the newly emerging field of BRI has sought to provide research on the implications of the project for the international business environment. Essentially, the project is expected to increase cooperation between China and the participant countries in terms of economics and politics. Despite the fact that the BRI invites global involvement, the rule of law and the range of related operational practices are based on China's vision alone. Although the nation has promoted win-win cooperation, there remains suspicion about the initiative's supposed mutual benefits. After all, utilisation of the BRI is purportedly part of China's strategy to project its global influence. As such, India is leading the charge against the project, expressing its distrust in the lack of transparency in China's operational practices. Now in its seventh year, it is essential that stakeholders understand the BRI's evolution, as well as how it is being perceived in neighbouring India.

To further understand the project's progress and national reception, this chapter analyses the relevant literature to craft a solid academic background for the study. First, Sections 2.2 and 2.3 provide an overview of the BRI, including the expected outcomes of the initiative. Thereafter, Section 2.4 outlines China's motivation for implementing the BRI and further explains four key elements of the initiative. Section 2.5 then demonstrates how other countries perceive the BRI, and Section 2.6 presents the challenges.

### **2.2 Overview of the Belt and Road Initiative**

The US has demonstrated clear disinterest in multilateral engagement, while China, an emerging market economy, has attempted to uphold economic globalisation (Andornino, 2017; Blah, 2018). In 2013, China launched its most ambitious foreign policy under the BRI to promote both regional integration and multilateral cooperation for the advancement of economic development (Cai, 2018; Shahriar et al., 2018; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). The fundamental purpose of the BRI is to enhance connectivity between China and other countries across Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe through the development of infrastructure and transportation (Callahan, 2016; Enderwick, 2018; Huang, 2016; Kaczmariski, 2017; Roy, 2019).

The proposed initiative comprises two key elements: the Belt, which refers to land-based economic corridors and involves the development of road and rail transportation; and the Road, which refers to sea routes that include maritime infrastructure (Chen, 2016; Chung, 2018; Enderwick, 2018 Liu & Dunford, 2016). This section addresses the scale and scope of the BRI, China's intentions on the global stage, international efforts at cooperation, a comparison between China's BRI and the US Marshall Plan, and the initiative's geostrategic aspects.

First, it is worth noting that the scale and complexity of the BRI have resulted from China's access to key cities and ports. There are six international economic corridors in the Belt: the New Eurasian Land Bridge, China–Central Asia–West Asia, China–Pakistan, China–Mongolia–Russia, China–Indochina Peninsula, and the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar corridors (Cai, 2018; Enderwick, 2018; Herrero & Xu, 2017). These new overland networks leverage existing transport routes and rely on cooperation platforms through the use of economic industrial parks and newly developed free trade zones in core cities along BRI confines (Casarini, 2016; Huang, 2016). For the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), focus is on extending sea routes in the form of port networks from South and South-East Asia to the Northern Mediterranean Sea (Nordin & Weissmann, 2018; Rolland, 2017; Tekdal, 2018). So far, more than 65 countries are involved in the project, which accounts for a quarter of world trade, one-third of global gross domestic product (GDP) and two-thirds of the global population (Chan, 2017; Ferdinand, 2016; Herrero & Xu, 2017; Li & Taube, 2018; Wang, 2019; Zhou & Esteban, 2018).

Second, several intentions drive China's push for the BRI, particularly since its image in the international arena has been relatively passive. Today, the Chinese government is seeking to redefine its reputation and position in the global order as a significant stakeholder by assuming international responsibilities and obligations (Andornino, 2017). The nation hopes to achieve this in part through the connective leadership role that it plays in the BRI (Andornino, 2017; Pu, 2017). Along the same line, Casarini (2016) and Enderwick (2018) suggest that another reason for the BRI is to export China's development model to other developing member countries. Based on its economic trajectory, China's economic growth has, since economic reform, sustained through increased emphasis on infrastructure-driven economic development (Casarini, 2016).

China has considered infrastructure construction as a strategic objective for advancing future cooperation and spurring development in the region (Vangeli, 2017). Together with physical infrastructure, China also attempts to develop a 'soft' digital infrastructure under the BRI, such as diffusion of technology standards, expansion of satellite data networks and manufacture of ecommerce networks (Ito, 2019; Yu, 2019). To address investment and economic development, there is a need to further promote economic partnerships and multilateral credit (Liu & Dunford,

2016; Vangeli, 2017). Hence, through the BRI, China's journey towards economic globalisation can materialise under a new and inclusive international platform.

Third, China incorporates different areas for collaboration under the BRI. This includes development policy coordination, financial integration, construction of networks and infrastructure, trade and investment facilitation, and social exchanges (Casarini, 2018; Li & Taube, 2018; Nordin & Weissmann, 2018; Tekdal, 2018). This collaborative process will increase ties in the spheres of economics, politics and culture between China and fellow BRI members (Cai, 2018). The initiative also offers a means to strengthen cooperation between China and existing intergovernmental organisations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU) and the Eurasian Economic Union (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Besides this, the BRI also takes market tools of governance into account. Therefore, Liu and Dunford (2016) consider the initiative as a framework promoting socio-economic cooperation, which upholds both international cooperation as well as global trade.

The fourth aspect of discussion draws comparisons between the BRI and the US Marshall Plan. Effectuated in 1948, the latter was intended to provide economic assistance to rebuild economies of Western Europe following World War II. This was in exchange for the expansion of US geopolitical influence in the region (Enderwick, 2018; Summers, 2016; Yu, 2017, 2019). Conversely, China has denied any ideological intentions related to the BRI (Summers, 2016; Enderwick, 2018), and instead wishes to promote the project as a win-win solution following the principles of equality, inclusiveness and mutual benefit (Liu, Dunford & Boyang, 2018). In addition, Liu and Dunford (2016) and Vangeli (2017) suggest that the Chinese government's efforts to engage both the developed and developing countries' participation in the BRI without political strings attached shows China's globally oriented approach. If all multilateral BRI projects are fully implemented, the total scale of the investment will range from USD\$1 to USD\$8 trillion (Cai, 2018; Enderwick, 2018; Yu, 2019). As the plan's geographical and financial scale is significantly larger than the Marshall Plan's, its international effect could potentially eclipse its US predecessor (Cai, 2018; Enderwick, 2018; Yu, 2017; Yu, 2019).

The fifth aspect regards China's geostrategic ambitions. There is discussion that the BRI consists of geostrategic or geopolitical elements that empower China to counterbalance the US pivot to Asia (Clarke, 2018; Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). America seeks to pursue a central role in the region by increasing diplomatic, economic and military cooperation with the Asia-Pacific—which is perhaps reflective of US intentions to contain China's rising economic power (Wang, 2016; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Fraught with insecurity, China seeks to build a stronger position to address these pressures using a westward strategy (Ohashi, 2018; Wang, 2016). By taking an investment approach that emphasises the supposed 'win-win' nature of the BRI, China can assure its benign and peaceful rise by seeking new partnerships and

regaining trust from existing ones (Andornino, 2017; Huang, 2016; Kaczmariski, 2017). In essence, this initiative highlights the nation's attempts to transform itself from passive subject to active rule maker. This is made possible because the current international order would merge with China's ambitions—all the while ignoring the founding hegemon that is the US (Andornino, 2017; Wang, 2016)—and further reflects the possibility of reshaping global governance. Thus, Heiduk and Sakaki (2019) regard the BRI as a direct challenge to America's control in the globalised world.

Overall, China intends to play a more active role in global governance while the US focuses on its protectionist agenda. To do so, China has implemented the BRI to forge infrastructure networks that unlock development potential across Eurasia. With emphasis on several collaborative areas, the BRI offers an international platform for promoting economic and cultural cooperation. Despite comparisons to the US Marshall Plan, the BRI is larger and supposedly without ideological intent. However, it has been argued that certain geostrategic aspects were embedded at inception due to the project's overtly westward strategy, which could enable China to balance the US power in Asia through regional partnerships. Now, posing a significant challenge to US hegemony, it is critical to address the possible outcomes of BRI implementation.

### **2.3 Expected outcomes of the BRI**

As the most ambitious and expansive development initiative to date, it is important to scrutinise the project's outcomes for the world's economy. Its explicit effects are difficult to assess since the BRI is at an early stage of implementation (Huang, 2016), and given China's attempts to integrate the existing international order without cooperation from its founders (Andornino, 2017). This lends support from Stiglitz (2018b), who suggests that both geo-economic and geopolitical landscapes would shift if the BRI were successful. Generally, there are five key outcomes of enactment. These include reduction in the infrastructure gap, increased economic integration, reorganisation of industrial networks, the growing influence of China, and greater volatility in international affairs.

The first and most important aspect that the BRI addresses is the infrastructure gap. Since the initiative focuses on inclusive growth through greater infrastructural connectivity across Eurasia, a range of development activities could fill the critical gap in the global economic architecture (Chan, 2017; Chen, 2016; Huang, 2016). Poor infrastructure is considered one key obstacle to regional development (Li & Taube, 2018; Weidong et al., 2018). In particular, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has argued that Asia urgently needs to develop more infrastructure projects, as investments have the potential to reach USD\$730 billion annually, far surpassing the USD\$10 billion average (Chan, 2017; Huang, 2016; Li & Taube, 2018; Wang, 2016). The BRI could also generate positive spillover effects from regional integration and

economic development through increased construction and improved infrastructure (Li & Taube, 2018). Since China's activities of mergers and acquisitions towards both infrastructure and logistics development are expected to increase, it is widely believed that there are opportunities for mutual benefit on regional multilateral cooperation (Chan, 2017; Wang, 2016). Also, the mobilisation of capital, from both public and private sectors within the BRI, is expected to increase (Cai, 2018; Huang, 2016; Li & Taube, 2018). Therefore, the BRI could help close the infrastructure gap within project areas.

The second expected outcome is the facilitation of economic integration. Successful implementation could lead to increases in economic integration and flows of capital and trade in the vast BRI areas (Cai, 2018; Chan, 2017; Chen, 2016; Li & Schmerer, 2017). With regard to the development of physical infrastructure, BRI economies and the rest of the world could benefit from a reduction in shipment times and cost towards both trade routes over land and sea (Bin, 2017; Herrero & Xu, 2017; Li & Taube, 2018; Palit, 2017). This, together with regional cooperation, could increase the value of trade among project members from USD\$5 billion to USD\$135 billion (Chan, 2017; Enderwick, 2018).

The work of Herrero and Xu (2017) and Enderwick (2018), both of which employed a simulation approach, reveal that more distant and non-BRI economies (particularly the EU countries) could become major BRI beneficiaries. Notably, their trade is projected to increase by 6% to 8% due to a reduction in transport cost. As economic development could be a product of multilateral cooperation across Eurasia, Huang (2016) suggests that more underdeveloped economies and unstable countries along the BRI region could become new pillars for the global economy. Stronger trade links between Europe and China could then offset the imbalance of Europe's transatlantic trade and positively affect the world's economic balance (Enderwick, 2018). In addition, China's leading telecommunication standards, such as 5G technology, and emphasis on developing a digital infrastructure, including data transmission and the internet (see section 5.7 for information on 5G capability) (Bin, 2017; Yu, 2019), could see patterns of economic development permeate BRI regions (Yu, 2017). This modern communication technology along with higher rates of productivity would generate greater return than physical infrastructure ever has (Yu, 2019). According to Seele and Lock (2017), digitalisation (big data) has potential to promote sustainability in the spheres of the environment, society and economy. Hence, Enderwick (2018) argues that the exchange of information and tech among BRI members could result in increased rates of sustainable growth.

The third outcome addresses the BRI's effect on global industrial networks. Foremost, various modes of infrastructure and connectivity would accelerate the rate of trade associated with economic growth (Du & Zhang, 2018). This is because the incentives of having good infrastructure facilities would attract MNEs to shift their manufacturing and service operations

into local areas (Li & Taube, 2018). More specifically, the BRI will significantly encourage China's outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) in developing nations (Chen, 2016; Du & Zhang, 2018). China's upgrades in industrial production combined with increased labour costs, which impede cost competitiveness in labour-intensive industries, typically lead to relocation of economic activity (Ehizuelen, 2017; Johnston, 2018; Liu & Dunford, 2016). This means that more opportunities—including jobs, and higher household income and tax revenues—will arise in other countries with lower GDP per capita, improving national living standards, in turn. Increases in either domestic or cross-border value chain linkage are also expected (Li & Taube, 2018). In context, this could see ASEAN economies, including Vietnam and Cambodia, benefit from the shift in China's low-value-added activities. With greater structural changes, the BRI would subsequently facilitate the integration and reorganisation of regional production networks (Chan, 2017).

The fourth expected outcome is an increase in Chinese influence. Although the nation has promoted the BRI as a win-win scenario, it mainly benefits China. As the initiative provides access to new markets and trade routes (Enderwick, 2018; Holslag, 2017; Kaczmariski, 2017), the BRI will enable free movement of domestic ('made in China') products and Chinese-invested products (which are made in other countries) across Western markets at cheaper costs (Cai, 2018). Although consumers in participant countries will enjoy inexpensive commodities, local businesses might suffer from high competition due to China's competitive advantage (Blanchard & Flint, 2017). In terms of regional economic relations, China would be able to maintain dominance and likewise boost its diplomatic and cultural influence throughout the region (Cai, 2018; Mitrovic, 2016; Tekdal, 2018; Yu, 2017). Despite claiming that the BRI contains no specific ideological interests, China's political influence can be observed in some countries such as Pakistan, where only Chinese companies can bid for the Karakoram Highway (part of the CPEC project) (Jacob, 2017). Therefore, growing economic dependence implies that participants' sovereignty could be influenced by China's massive infrastructural investments—by and through the BRI (Kaczmariski, 2017).

The fifth implication addresses political and economic uncertainty. Traditionally, globalisation has been driven by western countries (Nordin & Weissmann, 2018). If the BRI were successful, China's role in global governance and development would increase, and its geo-economic power could surge. Geo-economics covers how economic conditions and geographies contribute to economic development (Palit, 2017). In the contemporary economic environment, the balance of power in either economics or politics could be transformed should the US decrease its multilateral participation (Rolland, 2017; Stiglitz, 2018b; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Ideally, this invites China to assume a more significant role in global relations and, through the BRI, establish a new global order (Cai, 2018; Ferdinand, 2016; Kaczmariski, 2017; Silin, Kapustina, Trevisan & Drevalov, 2018). Essentially, the project emphasises the collective

cooperation between and inclusive growth of developed and developing countries. Hence, Kaczmarski (2017) and Zhou and Esteban (2018) describe the BRI as a *new wave* of globalisation.

Understandably, the great power nations, including the US, Japan, Russia and India, are not without concern. Acknowledging the implications on foreign policy, the existing regional powers have also launched regional infrastructural schemes, which, in some cases, aim to compete with the BRI (Li & Taube, 2018). With China now facing an increase in geopolitical rivalry, this means that regional political, security and economic situations are prone to volatility (Cai, 2018).

Thus, while the BRI has the potential to fill gaps in the global economy—facilitating economic integration, accelerating the flow of trade throughout BRI regions, and even empowering non-members to benefit from economic integration (with Chinese OFDI facilitating the reorganisation of production networks)—China alone remains the primary political, economic and ideological benefactor of BRI implementation. Understandably, its expected rise has sparked international concern among traditional power countries. China's political and economic volatility will, above all, affect the global economic environment more than ever before.

## **2.4 Motives behind the BRI**

China is seeking new opportunities to sustain its economic development by reconfiguring domestic and foreign policies. This is because it fears a domestic and global economic slowdown (Holslag, 2017; Ito, 2019; Wang, 2016; Weidong, Dunford & Boyang, 2018; Yu, 2017). Yet, the motives behind the BRI surpass China's attempts at improving the economic environment. Notably, four key drivers are in place to promote multilateral cooperation through the project, including trade improvements, the opportunity to address national development imbalances, industrial overcapacity and currency internationalisation (Cai, 2018; Enderwick, 2018; Huang, 2016; Kaczmarski, 2017; Shahriar et al., 2018; Yu, 2017).

First, China intends to strengthen global connectivity to improve its trading network. Currently, the country's national trade structure with key markets is overly dependent on its eastern seaboard and the Strait of Malacca, prioritising a reduction in transportation distance (Blah, 2018; Blanchard & Flint, 2017; Cai, 2018; Enderwick, 2018). Based on past experience, China also believes that mutual benefits could be provided through greater regional infrastructure development and cross-border transportation along BRI countries and economic corridors (Flint & Zhu, 2019; Holslag, 2017; Huang, 2016; Kaczmarski, 2017). Particularly, the accessibility of Pakistan's and Central Asia's corridors will enable China to diversify its trade routes and reduce the risk of trade disruption (Enderwick, 2018; Mitrovic, 2016). China could also strengthen



supply chains and international trade flows through bilateral trade and regional integration by upgrading neighbouring economies associated with its own market potential (Summers, 2016; Vangeli, 2017). In turn, the BRI helps China to secure new trade routes and simultaneously maintain export-led growth (Chung, 2018; Enderwick, 2018; Mitrovic, 2016).

The second driving force behind the BRI is addressing the national economic imbalance. More specifically, the development of western provinces, which suffer from poor infrastructure and inadequate investment, has been prioritised by many Chinese leaders (Tekdal, 2018; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). In the past, Western China has lagged behind due to continued emphasis on strengthening eastward exports (Ahmed, 2019; Chung, 2018; Ferdinand, 2016; Tekdal, 2018). In fact, the geographical challenge from the East facing the West is inevitable, as the latter is situated further from the coast (Ferdinand, 2016; Tekdal, 2018; Yu, 2017). Moreover, Tekdal (2018) and Zhou and Esteban (2018) suggest that political instability in Western China has resulted from the high level of regional disparity and income inequality associated with uneven development.

To catch up with the rest of China, the western region still needs approximately 30 to 50 years of development, despite passing the 1999 Western Development Strategy (i.e. initiating investment incentives for a better linkage between the region and the global economy) (Ferdinand, 2016; Flint & Zhu, 2019; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). However, Summer (2016) asserts that the BRI could help Western China become a key transportation, trade, logistics and education hub due to its core position on the Belt, which permits better communication and cooperation with Central, South and West Asia. Regional connectivity will, therefore, facilitate the development of both internal economic integration and global trade participation for Western China (Mitrovic, 2016; Yu, 2017). In this sense, Blanchard and Flint (2017), Tekdal (2018) and Zhou and Esteban (2018) consider the BRI an economic tool for stimulating the nation's internal development, inviting new trade and investment opportunities across even the most disempowered regions.

The third key motivation driving the BRI is overcoming the economic imbalance from overcapacity. Although China is attempting to reshape its development pattern from over-reliance on exports and investment—instead pursuing a domestic, consumption-driven economy to equalise its economic growth—such a task is both challenging and time consuming (Holslag, 2017; Mitrovic, 2016; Yu, 2017). Nevertheless, expansion of the export sector will remain important for the development of China's economy and various industries (Tekdal, 2018; Yu, 2017). In particular, excess capacity of some sectors (such as steel, cement and aluminium) has threatened economic growth (Enderwick, 2018; Herrero & Xu, 2017; Mitrovic, 2016; Wang, 2016). The overcapacity problem was spurred initially by debt-driven and low-efficiency investments, which the government employed to counter the effects of the global financial crisis

(Liu & Dunford, 2016; Tekdal, 2018). Currently, the banking system in China has also constituted a financial risk due to oversized and over-indebted state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Tekdal, 2018). Thus, to avoid bankruptcy, China is in the process of reducing industrial overcapacity through overseas expansion (Clarke, 2018; Ferdinand, 2016; Holslag, 2017; Yu, 2017).

Importantly, the BRI forms key infrastructure networks between China and member countries by combining a newly constructed or upgraded infrastructure with the existing one (Mitrovic, 2016). Due to significant demand for infrastructural growth in both developing and transitional economies along the BRI, China has inroads to export its technology, management skills and materials en masse (Holslag, 2017; Mitrovic, 2016; Ohashi, 2018; Yu, 2017). However, according to Rolland (2017) and Tekdal (2018), ambiguity surrounds the sufficient demand of BRI-related projects and the absorption of Chinese overcapacity. Despite circling doubt in the market capacity of less-developed countries, the initiative provides alternative opportunities for Chinese enterprises—particularly construction-related sectors—to invest in countries occupied by BRI development (Holslag, 2017; Rolland, 2017; Tekdal, 2018). In addition, Tekdal (2018) argues that competitive advantages could funnel into Chinese control, as peripheral regions, such as Central Asia, could offer a low-cost labour pool to Chinese labour-intensive industries. Thus, addressing the commercial risks of Chinese business, particularly concerning ongoing domestic economic imbalances, has and continues to spur BRI implementation (Enderwick, 2018).

The fourth motivation driving the BRI is the internationalisation of Chinese currency. Despite China's reign as the world's second-largest and top trading economy, use of the renminbi (RMB) as settlement or transaction currency remains low in the global economy (Johnston, 2018; Liao & McDowell, 2015; Tekdal, 2018). This is due to its comparatively weak international status, resulting from underdeveloped financial markets combined with the controlled exchange rate and capital control policies (Liao & McDowell, 2015). Further, note that despite China's significant amount of foreign-exchange reserves, most remain dominated by US dollar-related assets (Johnston, 2018; Tekdal, 2018; Wang, 2016; Wang 2019).

Apart from diversified reserves and dependence on the US dollar, China also makes concerted efforts to promote the RMB as a global currency to boost the nation's soft and normative power (Ferdinand, 2016; Liu & Dunford, 2016; Ohashi, 2018; Tekdal, 2018; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Particularly, implementation of bilateral RMB currency swaps in trade and financial transactions may encourage the global use of RMB instead of US capital (Johnston, 2018; Tekdal, 2018). Indeed, the volume of these swap agreements is likely to increase due to China's position as the world's largest loan provider and its prominence in the BRI (Cai, 2018). Moreover, increased share of the RMB in financing trade and investment throughout Eurasia

will enable lower transaction costs and help facilitate China's OFDI (Cai, 2018; Casarini, 2018; Summers, 2016). Hence, given China's major trading position, Chan (2017) and Johnston (2018) view the BRI as a platform upon which to expand the role of the RMB in the global economy.

Overall, this section has argued that the BRI could assist China in diversifying new trade routes by developing infrastructure and transport facilities in neighbouring countries. Moreover, China could accelerate its national economic development by connecting its more disadvantageous regions (i.e., Western China) to Central, South and West Asia. Besides this, the country might be able to transfer its excess capacity through existing demands for infrastructure along BRI regions, while providing a platform upon which to internationalise the RMB. Hence, the project has, above all, been implemented to address issues of domestic economic concern.

## **2.5 Perceptions of the BRI in other countries**

The literature generally agrees that China's position on the world stage has intensified as a result of the BRI. This is primarily due to increased engagement with international organisations, earning recognition and legitimacy for the initiative (Blah, 2018; Wang, 2019). For example, in September 2016, the United Nations (UN) adopted a resolution to support connectivity and international cooperation through the BRI (Blah, 2018; Cai, 2018; Wang, 2019). However, this did not stop the wave of mixed responses the project would receive at a global level, depending on the respective economy and relation to China (Cai, 2018). Across the board, developing countries seem to welcome the BRI, as they actively seek more development opportunities, while more established nations are wary, since China's economic influence could threaten their sovereignty. As such, this section addresses perceptions across the developing and developed world regarding BRI implementation.

First, positive responses can be observed in many developing regions, which welcome the BRI from an economic development perspective (Cai, 2018). Developing countries, such as Thailand, Cambodia, Bangladesh and the Maldives seek to increase the importance of their economies in the region through the BRI (Chen, 2018; Chung, 2018; Ehizuelen, 2017; Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018). Infrastructure plays a crucial role in economic growth and integration by facilitating flows of trade and investment (Chan, 2017; Soong & Nguyen, 2018). Due to insufficient domestic resources, developing countries are comparatively more willing to join forces with China for financing and infrastructural investment (Chan, 2017; Soong & Nguyen, 2018). To enhance international cooperation, China has also prioritised developmental funding to less industrialised countries to accommodate interconnections by modernising infrastructure networks (Liu et al., 2018). In this sense, developing countries have recognised mutual benefits through strategic synergy with China (Ehizuelen, 2017; Gong, 2019).

However, South-East Asian countries have expressed concern over BRI implementation. As a group, ASEAN hopes that improved connectivity associated with the initiative could complement their existing multilateral and regional projects (Gong, 2019). At the same time, ASEAN has mused over the possibility that China's bilateral approach will undermine the centrality and unity of current South-East Asian regionalism (which awards China structural advantages) (Gong, 2019). Again, this is made possible because the country is chiefly responsible for defining (in the BRI) the terms as well as the economic and political future of Asia (Gong, 2019; Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019). China's ongoing dominance in regional trade has also added to growing concerns over its economic influence, which will inevitably expand following implementation (Gong, 2019; Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019). Gong (2019) suggests that China could attain its strategic purposes when its economic power is translated into political leverage through asymmetrical economic interdependence. In turn, this has raised among some South-East Asian countries concerns about national sovereignty and the negative effects of BRI engagement.

Apart from this, many countries are aware of China's maritime cooperation, evidenced by land-based projects proposed in most connectivity plans in South Asia (Gong, 2019). In particular, those engaged in territorial disputes with China worry that excess dependence on Chinese investments for infrastructure will have security implications (Gong, 2019; Soong & Nguyen, 2018). According to Heiduk and Sakaki (2019) and Yu (2017), since the BRI has been perceived as a tool for China to develop its maritime power and military capability, countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam are worried that geographical unrest would only be solved using Chinese force. In response, ASEAN countries have utilised a hedging strategy by welcoming the US pivot to Asia and further cooperating with other external powers to counterbalance China's rise (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019; Yu, 2017). This shows a reservoir of distrust among South-East Asia and ASEAN towards China.

Second, this section examines perceptions among developed countries regarding China's growth through the BRI. In and beyond Asia, Chinese expansion has urged major advanced economies to perceive the plan as a scheme for securing and propagating national influence (Cai, 2018; Chung, 2018; Gong, 2019) and further threaten local (and developing) economies. Due to the decline in EU funds, Central and Eastern Europe seek to cooperate with new partners in Asia. Nevertheless, scepticism and pessimism have grown in Europe due to China's continued failure to fully explain BRI-related issues (Blah, 2018; Casarini, 2016). After scrutinising a range of government-published documents, plans and projects, Holslag (2017) concluded that the BRI is meant only to serve China's offensive mercantilism. This means that the government shift to support Chinese industry is driven by the prospect of penetrating foreign markets rather than protecting domestic markets. As the BRI contains no transparent rules and/or financing deals, reciprocity in the region has also come into question (Casarini, 2016;

Silin et al., 2018), with the bidding process to secure infrastructure construction coming under Chinese SOE control (Mitrovic, 2016). Now, much of Europe fears that the BRI would, through China's financial assistance in infrastructural investment, undermine the competitiveness of local industries and companies (Casarini, 2016).

It is worth noting that China's major global and regional rivals (notably Japan and the US) have gradually adjusted their attitudes but remain absent from BRI involvement (Cai, 2018). That said, both countries are likely to view the initiative as reflecting China's geopolitical ambitions rather than as a primarily economic enterprise (Cai, 2018; Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019). In the first instance, the BRI project and its implications have raised concerns in Japan over China's expansion throughout and beyond Asia by economic, political and military means (Cai, 2018; Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019). Importantly, the BRI would, in terms of trade and investment, increase participants' dependency on China along its many trade routes (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019).

Despite these concerns, Japan has acknowledged the overall economic opportunities of BRI implementation. According to Ito (2019), the Japanese Government has, since mid-2017, shifted its approach from a 'disregard policy' to a 'conditional engagement policy'. In this sense, the nation seeks, through cooperation with the BRI (which enables increased access to cross-regional markets), to broaden its commercial prospects and pervade the Third World (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019; Ito, 2019). Indeed, Japan has acknowledged that political engagement with China at some level could tackle regional policy challenges as well as stabilise relations between both countries (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019; Ito, 2019). Japan has also prepared a concurrent risk-hedging approach in the form of an Indo-Pacific strategy, suggesting, if anything, that scepticism still shrouds the initiative, and that China must meet certain conditions to earn Japanese support.

In a similar vein, the US has also changed its perspective on the BRI. Cai (2018) argues that under the Obama administration the US's response was mostly negative due to mounting concerns that the project would enhance China's economic and political influence across and beyond Central Asia. In turn, both China's regional and international institutions would improve and, thus, impose significant challenges to the US (Wang, 2016). According to Cai (2018), the Trump administration has since reconfigured the nation's stance and policy towards the BRI by considering China's efforts for greater infrastructural development. This can be observed by ongoing attempts to enhance bilateral and economic relations between both nations.

Nevertheless, it is not clear why the US has changed its attitude. Cai (2018) suggests that the initiative would not find genuine US support, regardless of national stance, due to China's growing regional and global influence. This is primarily reflected in the emergence of an alternative regional infrastructure scheme—headed by China's major rivals in the US, Australia, Japan and India—to counter global expansion (see Section 5.6 for information on the

‘Quadrilateral Security Dialogue’ between these four nations). In geopolitical terms, the BRI’s ties with the rise of China otherwise deem it a global threat.

To conclude, it is important to acknowledge the differences in international perception regarding BRI implementation. Generally, national stance is formed by factors of economic and relational importance relative to China. Developing nations seem to view the initiative through a geo-economic lens and recognise the mutual benefits of participation, mainly in the form of increased infrastructural development. However, ASEAN regions and some South Asian nations have shown distrust for the BRI. Europe has also considered the project a threat to local economies and a vehicle driving the expanse of Chinese influence. Meanwhile, the US and Japan have shifted in stance due to China’s recent efforts towards infrastructural development. Nevertheless, the two countries remain sceptical, and distrust has since manifested in alternative schemes that combat the BRI’s enactment. Evidently, many global powers still consider the initiative as a threat.

## **2.6 Challenges facing the BRI**

Although the BRI appears to offer a new path for globalisation, its progress could be limited or slowed by four key challenges. These include financial challenges, project governance, political mistrust and the economic non-viability of some BRI-related projects.

First, note the massive amount of funding required for infrastructural development. According to Chung (2018) and Enderwick (2018), China has allocated USD\$100 billion, USD\$40 billion and USD\$100 billion to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Silk Road Fund and the New Development Bank, respectively, to help finance large-scale infrastructure projects. Despite China’s status as the largest BRI contributor, at least USD\$1 trillion is needed each year for infrastructure (Enderwick, 2018).

In response, China has encouraged cooperation between the public and private sector to develop a diversified financial structure that deploys a market-oriented and mutually beneficial system of investment and finance (Chan, 2017). In fact, only 30% of total investment derives from non-public sectors, while the remainder is covered by government backing (Gong, 2019; Nordin & Weissmann, 2018). Additionally, there is no precise institutional structure dedicated to infrastructural investment. Thus, complexities can and do occur in managing BRI funding due to various difficulties with capital and direct agencies (Enderwick, 2018).

The second challenge facing the BRI is project governance. Notably, the management of cross-border projects might be constrained by the diverse conditions of participants, including, economic systems, political administrations and infrastructure potential (Chan, 2017; Enderwick, 2018; Li & Taube, 2018). Moreover, the instability of politics and economics could negatively affect the BRI’s coordination mechanism (Ferdinand, 2016; Kaczmariski, 2017;

Wang, 2016). Although China has relied on bilateral diplomacy for ensuring cooperation with the host economies (Ito, 2019; Li & Schmerer, 2017), project consistency and uniform standards of efficiency, security and operation could be difficult to secure in all nations along the BRI regions (Huang, 2016). Along with this, territorial disputes could undermine China's efforts to promote the initiative (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). In BRI-related projects, China has lacked central leadership in both internal and external coordination, which could confuse participants (Yu, 2017). Particularly, the core of the MSR is the South China Sea, meaning that multilateral cooperation between China and other Asian countries (such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines) could be hampered by overlapping sovereignty claims (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Hence, policy reconciliation and reduction of institutional differences between regions remain crucial for successful economic integration. Therefore, the BRI might need a clearer international legal basis and greater resolution among territorial and maritime disputes for success (Enderwick, 2018).

The third key challenge regards the deficiency in global trust. Active cooperation among member countries will ultimately determine the success of the BRI, despite China's leading role in the project (Ferdinand, 2016). The nation has promoted connectivity improvements through implementation by pledging to establish economic cooperation across multiple regions (Yu, 2017). Nonetheless, some countries have questioned China's real intentions with the BRI, barring most of Europe to officially endorse the initiative—despite expressing their general support (Li & Schmerer, 2017; Nordin & Weissmann, 2018). According to Kaczmarek (2017) and Li and Schmerer (2017), the reasons for widespread unrest stem from China's inability to provide a concrete multilateral cooperation mechanism in the BRI, choosing instead to rely on its coalition relationships for legitimacy. That said, it is challenging to prove project transparency without codified legal rules and operational practices in place (Kaczmarek, 2017; Li & Schmerer, 2017). China's discretion has since prompted local resentment of Chinese business, mainly triggered by the nation's close ties with elite members in host economies. Foremost, this has facilitated preference among Chinese investors (Gong, 2019), and further demonstrates the strategic and political mistrust shared by member nations.

The fourth challenge facing implementation concerns the economic non-viability of BRI projects. Currently, the sovereignty credit rating of some participant nations falls below the investment grade, thus, posing high risk and uncertainty associated with future returns (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019). In addition, some member countries are geographically smaller than China's debt-driven investment projects. This, combined with a lack of prudent calculation, has caused growing concerns over the nation's ability to pay back participant loans (Blah, 2018; Ohashi, 2018). For example, railway infrastructure plans in Laos received investments greater than the projected total passenger volume of the project (Gong, 2019). This shows the possibility of slow and risky economic returns on large-scale investments related to the BRI. Since non-viable

projects could lead partner countries into debt, Gong (2019) considers the initiative a debt trap. Meanwhile, high-interest rates on loans could force participants to officially forfeit key national assets to Chinese investors (Gong, 2019; Johnston, 2018). For example, Beijing has earned the right to operate Hambantota port in Sri Lanka for 99 years, since the island country could not repay its debts (Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019; Johnston, 2018). It is unsurprising, then, to note the cancellation and/or suspension of many projects due to growing awareness of debt (Gong, 2019).

Overall, this section explored several challenges that face the BRI. Foremost, intense funding requirements coupled with lacking investment structures have prompted great financial challenges to the project's prospective implementation. Also, the absence of a reliable international legal basis that accounts for different regional conditions has complicated project governance. The added lack of transparency (from China's end) has further resulted in political mistrust among participating countries, while concern about the economic non-viability of BRI projects highlight China's debt-trap diplomacy. As such, many development plans have been cancelled.

## **2.7 Summary**

To date, China's BRI is the most ambitious global initiative towards international collaboration. Although in its infancy, many scholars have suggested that the project is expected to fill global infrastructure gaps and improve trade between China and other participating nations through its focus on inclusive growth. Yet, the rise of China has likewise threatened global power structures. Previous studies have recognised the nation's interests in pursuing the BRI to dominate the global economy. Unsurprisingly, the initiative has been met with mixed responses—some of which have been explored in previous studies. Accordingly, this research aims to contribute to the discussion by analysing India's current perceptions of the BRI. As such, Chapter 3 provides background information on China–India relations, and further explores previous literature on BRI perceptions therein.



## **Chapter 3: Research Background**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Chapter 2 provided an overview of the BRI, its motivations as well as its perceptions in other countries. To gain a more in-depth understanding of its reception in neighbouring India, it is essential to acknowledge the country's historical relations with China. After all, past actions influence present behaviour.

Before the 1980s, both India and China were among the world's most closed economies. Having shared periods of financial turmoil, both countries decided to transform their economies through the gradual process of liberalisation. Since then, China and India have developed and exercised their economic influence in Asia as a result of careful and precise expansion into new markets. This chapter provides background information on their economic trajectory and (sometimes fraught) cooperation, including previous research on BRI perceptions in India. Overall, this might help to explain why and how India's position on the project affects its participation, and further informs the central research question concerning the nation's stance towards BRI implementation.

### **3.2 The rise of China**

China's global economic status has progressively developed through its efforts to achieve modernisation and foster economic development. Notably, utilisation of a development model that combined export-led and foreign direct investment (FDI) has seen China remarkably transform itself from being among the world's poorest nations to becoming the second-largest global economy within 30 years (later evidenced by a dramatic reduction in poverty) (Hong, 2018; Yueh, 2013). Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has focused on creating a market-oriented rather than centrally planned economy, which includes privatisation, infrastructure investments and industrialisation (Kroeber, 2016; Mohanty, 2017; Yueh, 2013). Together with domestic economic reform, open systems for trade and investment have also been adopted to maximise the nation's export opportunities (Kroeber, 2016). Due to plentiful low-cost labour, the government has logically structured the Chinese economy around the labour-intensive light industry. Therefore, China had by the early 2000s created a platform for export-oriented manufacturing, with greater emphasis on infrastructural construction (Kroeber, 2016).

Following admission in 2001 to the World Trade Organization (WTO), China leveraged both inward and outward FDI to reap the benefits of a globalised economic environment (Hong, 2018). With respect to WTO obligations, China had diminished the complexity of import control regimes to improve market access (Grare, 2017). The comparative advantage in securing resource endowments, such as infrastructure and a large pool of labour reserves, have since

enabled China to attract MNEs to relocate their value-added activities (Hong, 2018). In this sense, China's engagement in global production networks has increased, generating high industrial outputs but equally low profits for Chinese enterprise. Most firms have also benefited from economic globalisation through the transfer of knowledge (which occurs in global value chains) in advanced technology and management (Hong, 2018). Buckley, Clegg and Wang (2002) provided empirical evidence that reveals how a combination of spillover effects (such as learning by doing and imitation and innovation) from high-tech production (crafted by MNEs and China's absorptive capacities) has led to increased productivity and superior export performance. As such, China has become the world's largest exporter through the use of both low- and high-skilled labour coupled with capital, technology and management associated with foreign investment (Chen, 2017; Grare, 2017; Kroeber, 2016).

China's government has also turned its focus on globalisation. According to Luo, Xue and Han (2010), the country has since the early twenty-first century promoted OFDI due to growing interest in economic efficiency. Buckley (2019) points out that China's government tends to emphasise the crucial role of enterprise in accommodating national, social and economic concerns, since there is a continuous flow of global resources, capital and information. In response, the government provides strong incentives, such as tax concessions and capital accessibility, to facilitate international expansion and modernisation of domestic enterprise (Lu, Liu & Wang, 2011). China has also encouraged firms to enhance their technological competencies by seeking markets and acquiring strategic overseas assets to engage in global competition (Anderson, Sutherland & Severe, 2015). Foremost, such internationalisation fosters the growth of global strategic alliances (Buckley, 2019; Sun & Shao, 2017), thus, leading to greater production efficiency. Recently, the rise of Chinese multinationals, including both state-owned and private enterprises, in the global economic landscape (Luo et al., 2010) has strengthened the interplay between government and corporate entities, as well as the competitiveness of Chinese enterprise beyond national boundaries.

Although economic reforms coupled with low-cost labour advantages have provided unprecedented development experience to China, there remains a question around social costs and the long-term sustainability of its growth model (Hutschereiter & Zhang, 2007; Shen, Lin & Wu, 2019; Yansheng, 2015). Under the Xi Jinping regime, the growth pattern and international competitiveness of China's economy has shifted the focus to innovation-driven economics in pursuit of greater sustainable development (Mohanty, 2017; Shen et al., 2019; Yansheng, 2015). This is most evident in China's preferential policies and massive investment efforts in research and development (R&D). In turn, mass domestic expenditure has meant that China's economy now ranks second in the world (Hong, 2018).

That said, China tops the list of the largest economies when taking purchasing parity into account (World Bank, 2019). Despite its historically inferior science and technology sectors, ongoing attempts at developing innovation have enabled China to catch up with more advanced nations and even lead in some industries (Hong, 2018). Moreover, Hong (2018) argues that technological advancements have promoted the role of Chinese enterprise in the global value chain. China has expanded the performance of both upper-stream parts (i.e., design and R&D) and lower-stream parts (brands and logistics), while more advanced technology and quality have contributed to the renewal of low-end processing and manufacturing (Grare, 2017; Hong, 2018). As a result, upgrades to the industrial sector have increased labour costs and permitted the rise of China's middle class (Hong, 2018).

### **3.3 The development of India**

Compared with China, India is considered a latecomer to the global economy. Despite experiencing economic liberalisation in the 1970s, India only initiated large-scale reform to its economy in 1991 (Gentimir & Gentimir, 2015). Where China's development emerged due to national concerns, the reform process in India was driven by a balance of payments crisis (Sardana & Zhu, 2017). Facing intense global competition, the protection of India's economy through limited private-sector activity, coupled with high tariffs and import controls, has resulted in historically poor economic growth (Mohan, 2018). In this regard, Sardana and Zhu (2017) reiterated the importance of external financial intervention following India's pledge to exchange its national gold reserves for International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans. Since then, the country has assumed a more market-oriented approach to economics following the 1991 restructuring of its government's role in accelerating the pace of development (Ahluwalia, 2002, 2019; Gentimir & Gentimir, 2015).

More specifically, the 1991 reforms sought to attract FDI and boost trade through fiscal deficit reduction and structural reform (Ahluwalia, 2002; Lu, 2017; Mohan, 2018). According to Ahluwalia (2019), India's approach to economic transformation was designed based on evolutionary rather than rapid restructuring. This is because a gradualist approach allowed the country to enforce policy consensus across political parties, despite the change in national administration. Subsequent reform involved a set of changes that mutually reinforced transformation, including the removal of industrial licensing, tax reforms, deregulation, a reduction in the reserved industries and the abolition of the *Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act 1969* (which used to restrict economic power of big companies by scrutinising all of their investments) (Ahluwalia, 2019; Mohan, 2018). Ahluwalia (2002) and Mohan (2018) also indicate that releasing the economy from governmental control sparked an increase in marketplace competition, resulting in technology upgrades, and further expanding and streamlining the scale of production across various industries. In other words, the potential for

domestic growth and entrepreneurial force was finally unlocked (Gentimir & Gentimir, 2015). Today, India is recognised as one of the world's top FDI countries due to the gradual removal of foreign ownership restrictions in many industries (Grare, 2017).

Another aspect of India's reform is the Look East policy, which has been considered a significant pillar of its current foreign strategy. The Indian government, formerly led by Prime Minister Narasimha, initiated the plan in 1991 to cultivate relations with the South-East and East Asian nations (Grare, 2017; Mohan, 2018). Grare (2017) argues that this strategy was chosen as a direct consequence of India's failure to sufficiently engage with regional and global integration (evidenced by the country's inferior political influence compared to China). Traditionally, India has dominated South Asia due to its population size, resources, military capacity and strategic location—given its centrality in the region (Lu, 2017). As such, the fundamental purpose of the Look East policy was to promote regional integration, facilitation of liberalisation and sustainability of economic growth. In turn, India could, through its locational advantage, develop economic and strategic relations with the world's most economically dynamic and capital-rich regions across South-East and East Asia (Grare, 2017). As argued by Grare (2017), India upgraded its relations with ASEAN to full dialogue in 1995, and to summit level partnership in 2002, and it then expanded the policy to include the participation of China, Korea and Japan in 2003. Moreover, India signed the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation (involving free trade) in 2003, and Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2011. Such a strategy has facilitated expansion in trade and investment, and further bolstered India's economic prominence in the region.

Apart from this, the 1991 reforms enabled India to significantly reduce poverty and become one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, with an 8% average annual growth rate (Ahluwalia, 2019; Lu, 2017; Mohan, 2018). India also prospers from its high-end services industry as a result of creating highly skilled human capital, which now drives the global revolution in information technology (IT) (Gentimir & Gentimir, 2015; Ahluwalia, 2019). That said, the country has failed to fully expand its labour-intensive manufacturing sector (Grare, 2017; Ahluwalia, 2019) due to the formation of its economic policy. While the focus has been on serving a growing middle class, India's export sector remains limited. This is likely because parts of the small-scale production and agricultural sector were reserved for domestic corporations (Ahluwalia, 2019). Further, an ongoing infrastructure deficit and an inflexible labour market have reduced India's competitiveness due to increased operational costs. Consequently, the export sector has struggled to fully industrialise, as inward FDIs continue to target the domestic market rather than allow for gross manufacture of exportable products (Ahluwalia, 2019; Gentimir & Gentimir, 2015; Grare, 2017).

To reverse these outcomes, India's current government under Prime Minister Modi initiated in 2014 the 'Make in India' scheme, which calls for foreign investors to transform India into a manufacturing hub (Grare, 2017). Despite its potential, the project requires additional efforts to attract export-oriented OFDI and promote industrial technology development to facilitate India's integration into global networks of production (Grare, 2017). That said, Modi has since transformed the Look East policy into the Act East policy to emphasise a more action-oriented approach to development (Grare, 2017). According to Lu (2017), India's power status is on the rise due to good economic performance (since the 1991 reforms) and the nuclear power status it achieved in 1998. Nevertheless, the country needs to leverage its capabilities to gain international prominence and attain greater or steady status in the current global system (which remains under US and predominately Western control). Due to the incomplete process of nation-building and national integration, the Indian government has prioritised sovereignty and territorial integrity as national security (Lu, 2017). In addition, India has taken strategic autonomy into consideration (relative to security) in an attempt to become a strong domestic power with global leadership prospects. Therefore, the country's primary interests remain on continued economic growth and superior developmental wellbeing (Lu, 2017).

### **3.4 China–India cooperation**

China and India are both leading emerging economies that advocate for a multipolar world order (Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015). Both countries have long engaged each other in cooperation and conflict (Kapur, 2016; Wojczewski, 2016; Yu, 2017). Diplomatic relations between China and India were formed in 1950, with India being the first non-Communist country to officially recognise China as a legitimate nation (Ahmad & Singh, 2017; Ruixiang, 2010). However, relations soon deteriorated following India's 1962 military defeat in a border war (known as the Sino-Indian War) in the northern frontier between both countries (Kapur, 2016; Paul, 2018; Yu, 2017).

Subsequent military assistance to India by the Soviet Union and the US threatened China's sense of security. Most notably, this spurred an alliance between China and (India's arch rival) Pakistan (Ahmad & Singh, 2017; Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015). Discord between India and Pakistan stems from a longstanding territorial dispute over the Kashmir region, with the former deeming the territory under illegal Pakistani occupation (Ahmad & Singh, 2017; Lu, 2017). As an unresolved conflict, the Kashmir dispute has continued to generate detestation and concern over stability and security in the region (Ahmad & Singh, 2017). Politically, the Indian government even constitutionally revoked in 2019 special status to Kashmir (Gettlement, Raj, Schultz & Kumar, 2019). As such, India considers the development of China–Pakistan economic and military cooperation a formal stand against the nation (Ahmad & Singh, 2017; Paul, 2018). Tensions further mount when considering the historical 1965 India–Pakistan War,

in which China lent open support to Pakistan and established both trade and air services agreements, as well as political alignment on the Kashmir dispute (Lu, 2017). In turn, this has resulted in a deficit of trust between China and India.

In the 1980s and 1990s, trade and economic development replaced rivalry and the threat of China–India relations (Kapur, 2016; Lu, 2017). Despite the unresolved northern border dispute, domestic reform in both countries created a new environment for strengthening economic ties as well as synergistic cooperation (Lu, 2017). According to Kapur (2016), India's desire to reinforce economic and military capacity, combined with the fear of China's power and encirclement in the South Asian region, have pushed India to open intergovernmental negotiations. Through burgeoning economic and political connections, China–India trade grew rapidly at the turn of the century, making China India's largest trading partner in 2008 (Wojczewski, 2016; Ahmad & Singh, 2017; Paul, 2018). That said, Grare (2017) suggests that bilateral trade between both countries seemed to produce uneven benefits. This is because China was allowed to leverage India and obtain asymmetric trading benefits due to high-tech product exports and cost advantages. In contrast, raw materials were the primary export from India. Consequently, trade agreements with China have exacerbated India's fear over a growing trade deficit.

Despite ongoing political mistrust, China and India have increased their roles in international and local affairs, as well as cooperation in multilateral areas. As developing nations, both have held similar stances in joining the UN's framework to tackle many major international issues, such as the Doha Round of negotiations (trade negotiations between the WTO members), climate change and the global financial crisis (Blah, 2018; Ruixiang, 2010; Wojczewski, 2016). Besides this, there has been cooperation between the two countries under BRICS (i.e., the association of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), and India also has participated in various Chinese initiatives, such as the AIIB and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Blah, 2018; Lu, 2017; Paul, 2018). Above all, these efforts create a greater venue for cooperation, as security concerns and other conflicts are less confused when they occur beyond the region (Lu, 2017; Paul, 2018). While China continues to view India's huge infrastructure deficit and market potential as economic opportunities, India's structural reform needs greater modernisation to improve its national competitiveness (Jha, 2017; Wojczewski, 2016). Therefore, it can be said that both China and India have reasons to build strategic relations with each other.

At a regional level, cooperation has been constrained by concerns over the other's influence (Lu, 2017). The simultaneous rise of China and India has created competition in the region due to unresolved bilateral issues. Each has also involved in this rivalry third parties to balance the

other power (Minwang, 2017). Consequently, the development of ties between the two have suffered.

China's efforts to increase its presence in the Pacific and Indian oceans have further aggravated tensions with India. The latter region has proven significant in serving India's development of a maritime strategy to modernise and expand its blue-water navy (Lu, 2017). Conversely, China has adopted a slow penetration strategy in South Asia through infrastructural development projects that foster strong and multidimensional relations with India's neighbours (Blah, 2018; Paul, 2018). According to Paul (2018), greater expansion of China's naval presence in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean has also occurred following the construction of islets and ports in multiple countries, including Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Due to increased globalisation, India has realised the limitations of resisting Chinese investment into the South Asian region. Unable to independently satisfy the economic needs of its neighbours (Paul, 2018), India must, therefore, endure its concerns over China's growing influence.

To counter China's rise, India has attempted to strengthen its strategic ties with the US, Japan and ASEAN. Despite competition in the Indo-Pacific region, India could still maintain its advantageous position by utilising both US and Japanese power (Jha, 2017; Minwang, 2017; Ying, 2018). India has begun to cooperate with America in terms of naval exercises and by reinforcing its naval vessels, while planning with Japan to develop an alternative project that counters the BRI, notably along the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) (Gong, 2019; Paul, 2018). Given that relations between China and India have been shaped by a mutual deficit in trust (Wojczewski, 2016), the seemingly fruitless plight to encourage cooperation will prove essential to survival and success. To better manage this competitive rivalry and contain ongoing disputes, reconciliation will inevitably involve the development of more robust institutional frameworks (Ruixiang, 2010; Wojczewski, 2016).

### **3.5 Previous research on BRI perceptions in India**

Across the literature, many scholars have focused on India's stance on the BRI, as it is the largest country with which China interacts in South Asia. As such, this section outlines previous research on the topic.

Previous studies have established that India's absence from BRI involvement stems from its links with Chinese expansion (Blah, 2018; Gong, 2019; Jacob, 2017; Yu, 2017). The increase in China's presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean (which India considers its backyard) has raised concerns over security and dominance in the region (Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015; Blah, 2018; Cai, 2018; Chung, 2018; Hazarika, 2018; Yu, 2017). Evidently, China can, by way of the BRI, provide financial support to its South Asian neighbours—with which India cannot compare (Chung, 2018). China might also use cross-border infrastructure projects to expand its

maritime and political interests, as well as build its international navy power (Yu, 2017). Despite the BRI's emphasis on win-win cooperation and inclusive growth, India believes that China lacks good governance, transparency and equality in relation to international norms (Blah, 2018; Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015). Thus, China's unilateral rules, schemes and visions have led to a deficit in trust.

Upon analysing the media's take on BRI implementation, Jacob (2017) found that the government and various industry sectors in India tend to focus on the geopolitical instead of economic dimensions of the initiative. More specifically, India's dissatisfaction with and suspicion of the BRI relate to the establishment of the CPEC, which passes through Kashmir (Blah, 2018; Jacob, 2017; Minwang, 2017). In essence, close cooperation between China and Pakistan has led India to deem the initiative a direct violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Blah, 2018; Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015; Gong, 2019; Jacob, 2017; Nordin & Weissmann, 2018). Since Kashmir has been for several decades a source of territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, Chung (2018) asserts that India's acceptance of the CPEC would, by default, imply that it accepts Kashmir as Pakistan's rightful land. Alongside a widening trust deficit, meaningful negotiations consistent with regional stability could be undermined by China ignoring this territorial concern (Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015; Jacob, 2017). As such, India has so far perceived the BRI as a direct threat to national security.

Due to India's strategic location and dominant position in South Asia, its participation is vital to BRI success (Jacob, 2017; Yu, 2017). India is a prime target for the initiative as China expects that mutual benefits are likely to be generated by deepening cooperation between the two (Jha, 2017). As interconnectedness is a key element to improving global trading orders (Chung, 2018), China can no longer ignore India due to mounting infrastructure deficits and increasing economic growth rates, which could play a crucial role in improving connectivity across Asia (Jacob, 2017). In spite of politics and security, Hazarika (2018) argues that possible deleterious outcomes could be outweighed by the benefits of India's participation in the BRI. To strengthen its economy and security, it is necessary that India now delinks the CPEC from a host of proposed infrastructure projects (Hazarika, 2018; Palit, 2017). If on board, India could strengthen its economy through greater infrastructural networks (Hazarika, 2018). Likewise, China's production and infrastructure capabilities could subsequently complement India's capability to deliver more services and IT, or vice versa (Chung, 2018). Greater investment, coupled with the development of its current capacities would also help India address its deficit in infrastructure and logistics capabilities (Palit, 2017). As a result, India could increase comparative advantages through participation in the BRI.

That said, India could benefit politically from participation. As the primary product of governmental intervention, China would rely on the BRI and its many partners more than any



other member country (Hazarika, 2018). In essence, greater Chinese investments into India through the BRI would no longer allow historical conflicts to harm future relations (Jha, 2017). India's participation would also likely influence decision-making on such factors as CPEC construction—which could, in turn, compromise territorial disputes between India and Pakistan (Hazarika, 2018). India could even enhance its partnerships with other member nations, as the BRI would provide the country with greater access to markets and attract more foreign investment, where its existing infrastructure cannot (Hazarika, 2018; Jha, 2017). Consequently, the rise of Chinese influence could be offset by greater Indian presence in BRI-affiliated zones.

### **3.6 Summary**

This chapter contextualised past and present China–India relations. Given that the BRI is the most ambitious infrastructure project of this century, India's participation will affect both its own national economic development and the global economy (more broadly). However, lacking trust in China (spurred by historical conflict) has led to India's absence in BRI negotiations. In fact, despite the country's official opposition to the CPEC, India could actually benefit politically by engaging in the project. Now in its seventh year of implementation, China might soon change its operational practices to include more favourable conditions of participation. Growing in both complexity and scale, it is, therefore, important to study how the BRI is currently perceived in modern-day India.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Chapter 3 outlined the focus of the study by providing background information on China–India relations. Evidently, China’s attempts to promote regional integration and multilateral cooperation through the BRI have proven vital for the global economy. However, its success wholly depends on the country’s ability to overcome growing challenges and criticism. Thus, investigating how member nations perceive the BRI is essential, since it is in the early stages of implementation. In particular, exploring India’s approval (or lack thereof) will provide more valuable insights to the emerging field of BRI academia, given the country’s political and economic importance to the Asian region. This study is framed around the research question ‘How is the Belt and Road Initiative perceived in India?’

To begin, it was important to have an appropriate and effective research methodology, or philosophical framework, to approach the study (Brown, 2006). Researchers regard the methodology as the lens through which to understand a particular subject, and often make important decisions about which methods to employ to address the research question effectively (Mills & Birks, 2014). The method also covers the procedures and techniques for gathering, generating and analysing data for the discovery of knowledge (Mills & Birks, 2014), and further stems from the research purpose, including what kinds of information are required. For this study, analysis relied on collecting qualitative, text-based data to produce a narrative description of the findings. Thus, this chapter discusses the research methodology and methods used for data collection and analysis.

### **4.2 Research design**

A qualitative research design was used to address the research question. Qualitative research often involves the exploration of specific settings (Eriksson & Kavalainen, 2016) and primarily focuses on understanding reality through investigation and interpretation of social and cultural meanings in relation to a chosen phenomenon. In contrast to quantitative research, the unit of qualitative study is non-numerical data associated with people’s opinions and experiences. These are important because they affect how India officially engages with the BRI. In turn, the research outcomes would provide in-depth insights into the issues studied instead of the correlative relationships between data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Gray, 2018). Indeed, with such an intensively social and geographically specific subject, a qualitative research design proved most appropriate.

Qualitative research can also provide researchers with a certain level of flexibility in balancing a study through data inquiry and self-reflection (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The malleability and

openness of qualitative research accommodates the analysis of specific events, experiences and perspectives (Gray, 2018). As this research sought to provide description rather than quantification of data, a qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate method to explore the conditions surrounding current perceptions in India towards the BRI.

### **4.3 Research paradigm**

A research paradigm can be described as a set of beliefs or assumptions that guides a researcher's actions and how they view the world (Jonker & Pennink, 2010; Kivunja & Kiyuni, 2017). This, in turn, influences what issues are examined and how such a study is implemented (Kivunja & Kiyuni, 2017). The process involves the justification of methodologies and methods to appropriately collect and analyse data directly related to the research question. Indeed, different paradigms present different characteristics of one's assumptions, beliefs and norms (Gray, 2018; Kivunja & Kiyuni, 2017), meaning that researchers must select the right research paradigm to achieve a specific study objective (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012).

This research is aligned with the interpretive paradigm, which values human experiences and views reality as a social construct (Kivunja & Kiyuni, 2017). As human interaction constructs reality and knowledge, interpretive researchers attempt to understand and *interpret* one's 'world' by assuming the role of an insider (Kivunja & Kiyuni, 2017; Wahyuni, 2012). Interpretivism also recognises that human perspectives vary based on background, experience and assumption, and, as such, acknowledge that the same objective reality can be understood and experienced differently by different people (Kivunja & Kiyuni, 2017; Wahyuni, 2012). The concept further enables exploration and understanding of phenomena currently limited in or by a particular context (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2006), and even provides a degree of openness in terms of data collection and knowledge development (Gray, 2018). Importantly, 'perception', defined as the way people see things in reality, influences opinion, experience, judgement and responses to situations experienced by one or many individuals (Given, 2008). For this research, studying Indian perceptions was crucial, as this provides direct insight into how individual opinion affects the wider position and actions of an entire country. Thus, the interpretive paradigm proved the most effective approach to explore current perceptions in India towards the BRI.

### **4.4 Data collection**

Empirical data for this study were drawn from secondary sources, including newspaper articles and other media coverage. In business research, in-depth interviews are often viewed as the key method of primary data collection, while other sources of information are considered complementary (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). However, in this context, secondary data sources were equally appropriate to analyse current BRI perceptions. This is because news

media generally distributes recent project- and/or event-related information to the public; hence, media discussion in India could provide valuable information for the study. Use of secondary data, which were collected over a long period, also allows for in-depth understanding of specific phenomena and offers one or multiple explanations for changes that occur in certain contexts (Gray, 2014). Thus, documents that provide BRI information and different perspectives for data analysis were appropriate.

The research also involved analysis of publicly available and/or up-to-date documents, regardless of document type, as *all* content may offer valuable meaning or insight into a particular context or phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). According to Coffey (2013), gathering various kinds of documents, modes and media, and then critically analysing the collected data, can improve the quality of qualitative research. Particularly, questions surrounding controversies related to public concern can be answered by news media due to its generalised nature and focus on different (individual- or civilian-level) perspectives (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2013). Additionally, consulting multiple sources facilitates the triangulation of data and provides more in-depth understanding of certain topics (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Ultimately, this study cannot present a comprehensive overview of *all* positions but can document some differences in opinion, including the evolving nature of perceptions in India, across the research time frame.

This research draws on recent discussions by Jacob (2017), who highlighted the transient nature of the subject area. Having studied Indian perspectives on the BRI up to 2017, a lot has changed in the three years since Jacob's work. To illustrate, China has engaged in a trade war with the US (Tan, 2018), and India joined SCO in 2017 as a permanent member following 15-year observation (Observer Research Foundation, 2016). Importantly, SCO is a multilateral, Chinese-led association for the enhancement of trade and humanitarian cooperation, whose establishment ensures both security and stability throughout the Eurasian region (UN, n.d.). As such, data for this study were either published in and after 2017. This allowed the researcher to observe the extent to which China's BRI operation has changed over the three-year study period, including whether perceptions in India have shifted.

Data collection was carried out using various internet resources and the Auckland University of Technology database. Factiva's global news database and Google were used as the primary search engines for data collection, as each facilitates access to the public domain. Moreover, the research scope was narrowed using each platform's advanced settings to restrict the search to the specific study region and effectively obtain only relevant information. This included news articles containing factual information, as well as op-eds.

Several keywords were employed for the desk research process. These included:

- ‘India’ and ‘Belt and Road Initiative’
- ‘India’ and ‘BRI’
- ‘India’ and ‘One Belt One Road’
- ‘India’ and ‘OBOR’
- ‘India and ‘New Silk Road’
- ‘India’ and ‘perception’ and ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ or ‘BRI’
- ‘India’ and ‘perception’ and ‘One Belt One Road’ or ‘OBOR’
- ‘India’ and ‘China–Pakistan Economic Corridor’ or ‘CPEC’.

Mainstream media publications in India were also consulted. This involved English-language news outlets such as *The Times of India*, *The Economic Times*, *The Indian Express*, *The Hindu*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Wire* and *Livemint*. In addition, data were also gathered from other media sources including reports and feature articles. These were largely written by former senior diplomats, former defence attaché, independent analysts, strategic and public policy think tanks, and/or professors at Indian universities. Articles of less than 200 words were excluded from analysis, as more adequate development of the themes requires greater detail. Articles that mentioned India but did not focus on the BRI were also omitted, including duplicates. As shown in Table 1, the data collection resulted in 200 relevant articles.

**Table 1: Sources of Data**

Sources	Categories of documents		
	News items	Editorial commentary	Report
The Economic Times	26	8	
The Times of India	10	10	
The Indian Express	13	8	
The Hindu	10	11	
Hindustan Times	17	7	
The Wire	2	12	
The Telegraph	5	7	
Livemint		4	
Others	20	24	6
<b>Total</b>		<b>200</b>	

## 4.5 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this method as a form of data pattern identification, analysis and reportage, which are equally critical for understanding certain phenomena. Thematic analysis is one of the most common methods of qualitative data analysis that involves the systematic organisation of data to find meaning (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Guest, Macqueen & Namey, 2012; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Close examination of text-based materials then enables the coding of data, allowing for the inductive emergence of meaningful themes from texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to its flexibility, thematic analysis enables researchers to generate rich, detailed and complex interpretations of data. Throughout analysis, data are coded and the interrelations of developed codes enable themes to be constructed. As a result, researchers identify overarching themes across data to address the given research question.

This study closely followed the steps described in Braun and Clarke (2006) to approach the thematic analysis. Instead of a linear process, this form of study uses repetition between stages to find deeper and more nuanced meanings (Neuman, 2011). The first phase of thematic analysis is to become familiarised with the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that it is necessary to actively read an entire dataset to examine its quality and search for meanings. In accordance, the researcher individually skimmed through all of the documents collected. During the reading process, notes on salient words or phrases were taken, including initial ideas regarding the particular context (see Appendix 1). This in-depth familiarisation with the data enables the researcher to identify meanings and possible patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and, thus, paves the way for upcoming analysis.

The second phase involved generating initial codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that the coding process involves organising raw data into meaningful groups. Accordingly, the researcher first produced initial codes by critically evaluating the entire dataset, with manual coding then applied to capture data that offered meaningful information. In this context, a code refers to a label that researchers give to key data (Silverman, 2015). To code effectively, the researcher assigned words or phrases to a chunk of words or a sentence based on interesting features and/or repetition within the data, including their potential for additional assessment—particularly in relation to the research question. For example, the codes used in this study included ‘aggressive acquisition’, ‘alternative project’, ‘asymmetric relations’, ‘BRI backlash’, ‘China’s economic tool’ and ‘sovereignty violation’. Highlighters were used to emphasise significant caveats within the analysed texts, primarily to indicate regularity and potential patterns. Thereafter, the researcher collated all the codes and relevant data extracts, such as quotations that read important and which represented perceptions in India towards the BRI. This facilitated the later stages of analysis.

The third step involved searching for themes; this sees different codes being sorted into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) conceptualised a theme as a pattern of shared meanings within a dataset in relation to the research question. After the data in this study were initially coded, the researcher considered how overarching themes could be formed using a combination of different codes by refocusing and analysing them. In addition to this, analytic memos were written to facilitate reflection on the coding process and the emergent

patterns (see Appendix 3). Here, 'memos' refer to journal entries used to record the researcher's thoughts on the data (Saldana, 2016), and generally help to document the ideas and problems that occurred during data analysis (Saldana, 2016). Apart from this, visual representations such as diagrams and mind maps were used to systematically organise the various codes. Once reorganised based on similarity and connection, main themes or sub-themes began to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coded data were then categorised based on similarity, regularity and difference to discover themes. For example, the researcher grouped China's economic tool, economic opportunity, economic cooperation, neo-colonialism, connectivity project, trade agreement, Chinese loans, China's unilateral project and BRI flexibility under the theme 'BRI benefits'.

Phase four was reviewing the themes. Here, researchers need to critically analyse a set of candidate themes to check whether refinement is required (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the candidate themes were examined against the data to gauge whether they could represent a compelling story. As themes typically form around coherent patterns, evaluation of the collated extracts is needed for each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once confident that the candidates adequately covered the coded data, the entire dataset in this study underwent reassessment. Doing this enabled the researcher to review whether any additional data within the themes required re-coding. The refinement process ended when nothing substantial could be added. That is to say that the relevant data collected and collated were deemed important enough to accurately represent each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, in this study, all the information for each code was thoroughly checked in relation to the commercial advantage theme. With further analysis, it clarified that the codes 'Chinese loans', 'China's unilateral project', neo-colonialism and 'BRI flexibility' were not suitable in this context and, were, thus, removed (see Appendix 2).

Once the satisfactory themes were established, phase five meant defining and naming each theme. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that detailed analysis of each theme must be presented to tell an overall story. As such, it was important to consider the compatibility of the themes and data collected. The researcher then determined and identified the 'story' by considering, individually, how each topic related to one another relative to the research question. Sub-themes were also identified, as they offered ideas about structure and hierarchal meaning within the data. This meant that the final refinement stage depended on ensuring consistency between the themes and aspects of the data captured (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, the theme 'commercial advantages' was created by gauging the prospective benefits of China's BRI. This is because the theme involved economic opportunities for China and the possible benefits that India could gain. The overall 'story' of the data then materialised upon judging the commercial benefits China would receive following BRI implementation, and by further recognising India's concerns about free trade.

The sixth step was to report the findings. The ‘story’ of the data within and across the themes should be interesting, concise, logical, coherent and non-repetitive, and must clearly address the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout the analysis process, it proved necessary to return and re-return to the data to ensure minimal thematic overlap occurred. Alongside this, the researcher formed arguments based on the data in relation to the findings across and within the themes. Therefore, come the write-up process, an analytical narrative, rather than mere data description, had emerged.

## **4.6 Summary**

This chapter described the methodology and methods applied in this study. It utilised an interpretive paradigm to address the research question, and sought desk research to collect secondary data from multiple sources. Then, all empirical material was thematically analysed, and the key themes emerged. The findings are discussed in Chapter 5.



## **Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapter 4 outlined the research design to study BRI perceptions in India. Now, this chapter provides an overview of the key themes that emerged from the empirical data analysis, and further discusses the findings in relation to the international literature.

Despite the BRI being in its infancy, it faces many criticisms—notably regarding China’s approach to the initiative and wider concerns about the economic viability of BRI-related projects. India was the first high-profile country to refuse involvement since the initiative’s establishment in 2013. In particular, the CPEC, which was designed as the BRI’s flagship project, has remained the primary reason for India’s longstanding opposition. That said, the country has participated in other Chinese-led initiatives, such as SCO and AIIB, and China has attempted to address mounting concerns by hosting in April 2019 the Second Belt and Road Forum (BRF). Now, it is essential to investigate and understand the evolution of India’s position and the conditions surrounding its (potential) evolution. This chapter will outline the key points discussed by multiple Indian media outlets regarding national BRI sentiments.

Data analysis uncovered six key themes. These pertain to (1) commercial advantages of the BRI, (2) political tensions relating to the CPEC, (3) China’s geostrategic ambitions, (4) India’s balancing act given the rise of China, (5) alternative to joining the BRI, (6) and the new phase of BRI implementation.

### **5.2 Commercial advantages**

The Indian media tends to focus its attention on who benefits commercially from the BRI. Articles on the theme ‘commercial advantages’ typically emphasised the importance of strengthening China’s leadership role and establishing a new set of standards in the global economy through international trade. As such, this theme addresses who the BRI benefits and how. Three key sub-themes emerged. These include China’s growing role in the global economy, a scheme for addressing China’s economic imbalance, and conflicting views on the benefits that India could receive from participation.

The first key sub-theme is about facilitating the expansion of China’s role in the global economy. This was widely covered by the Indian news media. According to Menon (2017), China’s multibillion-dollar BRI has a robust economic logic since it aims to develop transnational connectivity when protectionism is globally rife. With emphasis on collective collaboration, host countries must, then, adopt BRI-related projects to become part of China’s national development plans (Ahmad, 2018). In addition, the BRI is likely to set new

marketplace standards for countries locked into coordinated efforts with China (Menon, 2017). These findings suggest that the BRI is perceived in the Indian media as likely to facilitate a China-centric global economy. As Menon (2017) explained:

‘the economic logic of connectivity on a trans-continental scale envisaged by the BRI is strong, particularly at a time when globalisation appears to be in retreat in the face of rising protectionism and economic nationalism in the US and the West’ (para. 2)

The international literature shows that China intends to promote its development model across BRI regions (Casarini, 2016; Enderwick, 2018) to create a new path for globalisation (Cai, 2018; Ferdinand, 2016; Kaczmariski, 2017; Silin et al., 2018; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Unsurprisingly, international concern around this forms a key component of BRI discussion in the academic literature, particularly regarding China’s intentions to become a global hegemon by and through its development initiative.

The second sub-theme addresses the BRI as a scheme for tackling China’s economic problems. According to multiple Indian media outlets, the project is driven by the need to address imbalances in Chinese regional development (Dwivedi, 2019; Hajari, 2018; Venkataramakrishnan, 2017)—which has, in the past, focused westward due to historically uneven development (Baruah, 2018). In essence, the BRI could provide China’s western provinces with new businesses and jobs through increased infrastructure opportunities and greater connectivity with Eurasia (Baruah, 2018; Hajari, 2018). Apart from this, the media emphasised China’s reliance on the BRI to channel its overproduction and surplus foreign reserves into more lucrative outlets (Khasru, 2019). According to Nayyar (2017), the project could create a new source of demand, as regional cooperation requires infrastructure. While China has financed connectivity projects, excess capacity can be used for prospective construction. Hence, the findings suggest that the press in India perceives the BRI as an instrument that China can use to relieve its industrial overcapacity through growing demand for infrastructure in neighbouring countries.

Previous studies have shown that overcapacity is an issue that has long suppressed China’s economic growth (Enderwick, 2018; Herrero & Xu, 2017; Mitrovic, 2016; Wang, 2016). Forced to outsource opportunities to reduce overcapacity (Clarke, 2018; Ferdinand, 2016; Holslag, 2017; Yu, 2017), analysis revealed that the BRI is more than capable of addressing such an issue, while simultaneously spurring the rise of (and concern about) Western China (see Tekdal, 2018; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). This is to say that the BRI is seen as an active attempt at addressing domestic economic turmoil by cultivating external opportunities.

The third sub-theme covers ongoing debates in the media regarding the possible benefits of BRI involvement. Two main positives recurred in media discussions, including increases in investment and economic integration. According to Baruah (2018) India's infrastructure deficit and savings investment gap, which resulted from declining domestic savings combined with a rise in unproductive public spending, could be addressed through the BRI. Singh (2019) note that 'domestic savings are declining, [so] the only way to boost overall investment is through tapping foreign savings and here China could be a large source' (para. 12). Moreover, increased wages coupled with a shrinking working-age population have prompted China to look abroad for external opportunities (Sanwal, 2019; Singh, 2019).

These issues were also highlighted in the literature. The development of a labour-intensive manufacturing sector in India has suffered from economic policies that restrict export (Ahluwalia, 2019; Grare, 2017). Regarding the BRI, the country's locational advantage could contribute to the successful implementation of many regional projects (Jacob, 2017; Yu, 2017). Also, the combination of increased investment and upgraded capacity could assist India in addressing its infrastructure and logistics capabilities (Palit, 2017). In this sense, the discussions in the Indian news media align with the literature, in that India's strategic location and labour pool (which is both large and cheap) could make the country an attractive destination for Chinese OFDI. In turn, India's export sector could, by joining the BRI, receive ample opportunities for greater industrialisation.

Apart from investment, the BRI could facilitate India's economic integration. Many news outlets reported that the high-end infrastructure of the BRI could grant India's private sector greater access to Eurasia (Parahi, 2018). Additionally, India could leverage improved connectivity through BRI participation to address its trade deficit with China (Dwivedi, 2019). Nonetheless, concerns were raised regarding's India's fixation on CPEC geopolitics (Sachdeva, 2019). It was also reported in the news that the breadth of negativity might prevent its private sector from exploring the positive side of BRI involvement.

In the literature, several scholars also suggested that India could realise its commercial advantages when approaching the matter through a geo-economic lens (Hazarika, 2018; Jacob, 2017; Yu, 2017). In light of the literature, then, another important point that emerged from the analysis of discussions in the Indian media concerned the potentially rocky politics behind BRI enactment, which could singlehandedly prevent India's private sector from exploring the full range of BRI opportunities. Hence, selective participation (e.g., the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor [BCIM]) might be an option for India to consider in the future.

In contrast, another strand of debate in the media addresses the BRI's failure to offer targeted opportunities for Indian growth. Despite funnelling USD\$800 million into India between April

2014 and September 2015, China matched its investment in the CPEC during the same period (Jaishankar, 2018). This means that the BRI could not provide India with notable funding. Moreover, there was widespread speculation that ‘Beijing’s regulations for projects under BRI around the world favour Chinese firms’ (Hindustan Times, 2019, para. 6). For example, contract deals for BRI-related projects often involve uncompetitive bidding processes (Joshi, 2019). Discussions in the Indian news media represent the BRI as providing an unbalanced playing field for Indian firms (which are otherwise aligned with international norms).

The current findings also correspond with previous studies in showing that China could have structural advantages due to its bilateral approach (Gong, 2019; Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019). This compounds with India’s lacking trust in China’s operational practices (i.e., regarding BRI governance, despite continued emphasis on win-win cooperation) (Blah, 2018; Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015). Hence, India seems to have little choice but to boycott BRI operations.

Media discussions also expressed concerns over the economic imbalance between China and India regarding regional economic integration. Choukroune and Nedumpara (2018) report that China intends to deploy the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to address the goals of integration and market access in the Asia-Pacific between 16 countries, including India. With RCEP obligations, India would have to eliminate tariffs on items by 74% to 90% in trade with member countries (Majarni, 2019). However, persisting concerns still surround the country’s trade deficit with China, which covered 45% of its total trade deficit (Mohan, 2018). As such, India’s media has criticised trade practices with China, as it offers dependence and floods the domestic market with cheap Chinese products, distressing small and medium enterprises (Marjani, 2019; Pant & Taneja, 2019). This highlights India’s recent decision in November 2019 to withdraw from the RCEP agreements (Marjani, 2019), suggesting that the nation is afraid that its trade deficit with China will escalate due to the influx of Chinese imports facilitated by free trade agreements. As commented in the news, ‘China’s mercantilism offers no room for partnership; only dependence. Despite multiple negotiations in which India has indicated its displeasure with the negative balance of trade, the difference has only gotten larger’ (Pant & Taneja, 2019, p. 21).

Further, as highlighted in the literature, India’s fear of a growing trade deficit stems from the China–India bilateral trade agreement, which provided asymmetric benefits to China (Grare, 2017). In accordance, the current findings align with existing academic discussions, which describe India’s broader concerns over regional economic integration. Essentially, doubt looms over India’s capacity to address domestic concerns over trade.

### **5.3 Political tensions related to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor**

One key subject that dominates India's news media is political tensions in the CPEC and its geopolitical implications for the region. Even if India is not yet part of the BRI, it remains an important player in the South Asian region. Controversy between India and Pakistan further intensifies when taking in account the location of the CPEC, particularly as the former is ever critical of China's intention to increase its stronghold therein. As such, this section discusses India's opposition to the BRI in relation to three key sub-themes, including sovereignty concerns, Pakistan's position on the CPEC, and China–Pakistan cooperation.

The first key point raised in media discussions regards India's concern over losing sovereignty. Along the CPEC corridor, construction on the Karakoram Highway traverses through Gilgit-Baltistan in the highly disputed Kashmir region, which is occupied (illegally, according to India) by Pakistan since 1947 (Baruah, 2018; Jaaved, 2019; Roche & Jain, 2017; The Wire, 2019). Concerns are compounded by the fact that China and Pakistan initiated joint construction on the CPEC without first consulting India (Pant, 2017). According to a spokesperson from the Ministry of External Affairs, Gopal Baglay, India has called for Chinese engagement in a meaningful dialogue, so far, there has been no response (The Economic Times, 2018). Indian media also widely announced that India would not accept a project that does not respect the nation's concerns (Jha, 2018; The Wire, 2017; Venkataramakrishnan, 2017). Evident from the data, China actively disregards or makes little effort to accommodate India's core concerns despite anticipating its certain objections. In fact, Prime Minister Modi stated that 'only by respecting the sovereignty of countries involved, can regional connectivity corridors fulfil their promise and avoid differences and discord' (Venkataramakrishnan, 2017, para. 6).

According to the literature, also India views the CPEC as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Blah, 2018; Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015; Gong, 2019; Jacob, 2017; Nordin & Weissmann, 2018). Indeed, its government has prioritised both factors in pending concerns over India's strategic autonomy (Lu, 2017). China's continued disregard over regional instability (Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015; Jacob, 2017). In essence, the analysis of media discussions in India suggests that China further encapsulates its historical indifference to Indian sensitivities. Therefore, the CPEC remains a key factor driving domestic concern in India over BRI involvement.

The second sub-theme that emerged from media discussions explores the CPEC as a potential game changer for Pakistan. Godbole (2019) notes that total investment in the region could reach USD\$62 billion and generate approximately one million jobs in Pakistan, increasing the country's GDP by 2.5% once all CPEC projects are completed (Ahmad, 2018). However, Baruah (2018) found that the CPEC has already changed the status quo in Kashmir, and that

India's position on the disputed territory could be undermined if it participated in the BRI. Moreover, industrial development in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) could grant Pakistan greater regional legitimacy (Jha, 2018). When Kashmir eventually becomes a significant economic corridor for China, it might no longer be possible to reach a resolution to the conflict between India and Pakistan through bilateral dialogues (The Telegraph, 2019). Above all, these findings indicate that the Indian media recognises that 'CPEC's potential success renders PoK more industrially developed, thus granting Pakistan greater legitimacy over the region' (Jha, 2018, para. 4), while simultaneously diminishing India's position in Kashmir.

India's media also focuses on China's military presence in PoK. Despite emphasising economic cooperation with the CPEC (secured without third-party involvement), China still deployed 30,000 security personnel to protect all CPEC-related projects (Ashok, 2019; Baruah, 2018; Kondapalli, 2017; Patranobis, 2018), and even granted Pakistan exclusive access to its military's satellite navigation system (Hindustan Times, 2019). Further, China's takeover of Gwadar—a port city and concurrent 3,000 km-long project connecting Pakistan's Gwadar deep-sea port and China's Xinjiang—will see it become a naval base in the (not-too-distant) future (Chaudhury, 2018; Varma, 2017). The analysis of the discussions in the Indian press indicates that China and Pakistan cannot deny their military cooperation in relation to the CPEC. Equally, China cannot deny its primary function as a political rather than purely commercial project for Chinese gain.

This was addressed in the literature also. Should India accept the CPEC, it will, by default, forfeit its claim over the PoK (Chung, 2019). Historically, India opposed China's explicit economic and military support for Pakistan during the 1965 India–Pakistan War—whose implications still resonate today (Lu, 2017). In this sense, the findings from the analysis of media discussion adds weight to Jacob's (2017) assertion that India has paid more attention to the geopolitics of the project than any other aspect of Chinese concern. This is to say that the Indian press perceives China's continued investment in Pakistan as, foremost, a political decision, which could further solidify its territorial occupation of Kashmir.

The third sub-theme is the strong ties between China and Pakistan. This was widely covered by the Indian news media. According to Roy (2019), cross-border violence in India is commonly viewed as Pakistani-sponsored terrorism. For example, 40 Indian troops were recently killed following a suicide bombing in Pulwama by Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)—a Pakistan-based Deobandi jihadist group—operating from Pakistani land (Patranobis, 2019). In its wake, India's decision to label JeM chief Masood Azhar a global terrorist faced Pakistani resistance (Roy, 2019). Even though China's position on the listing JeM has now changed, its isolated reluctance (earlier) was adamant to prove China's support for Pakistan (Pant, 2019). Besides this, China

has also supported Pakistan on globalising the Kashmir issue (Pant, 2019; The Wire, 2019), forcing India to push to change Jammu and Kashmir's constitutional status.

Overall, the discussions in the Indian media draw attention to China's continued prioritisation of Pakistan over India, further aligning the data with the literature. This suggests that the development of China–Pakistan relations, primarily in terms of economic and military cooperation, has been in mutual opposition to India (Ahmad & Singh, 2017; Paul, 2018).

## **5.4 China's geostrategic ambitions**

Another key area of discussion in the news in India regards China's geostrategic ambitions, which gained wide criticism from the Indian press. Essentially, this theme outlines China's approach to the BRI and its ambitions to reconfigure the international order. China has, through various development initiatives, shown historical attempts at engaging with the global economy. This section discusses four key sub-themes, including the political design of the BRI, criticisms of China's unilateral vision, China's debt-trap strategy, and the strategic implications of the BRI.

First, the Indian media has framed the BRI as a geopolitical tool for Chinese expansion, despite China's claims of it being a connectivity project. According to Sajjanhar (2017) and Bhoothalingam (2019), the BRI was based on a political design for establishing transnational dominance in the face of dwindling US interests in global affairs. In practice, this has seen China create infrastructure projects and establish physical assets in BRI member countries instead of it encouraging free-moving capital, as was the aim of Western globalisation (Bhoothalingam, 2019). Choukroune and Nedumpara (2018) also label the BRI a political project, with multilateralism comprising the joint concepts of 'shared interest' and 'shared growth'. Overall, these findings show that the media in India broadly see China as having clear political intentions with the BRI, and that it aims to stabilise globalisation through the cohesive arrangement of economics and politics across BRI regions.

The literature also draws attention to the initiative's geopolitical elements. In particular, China has utilised a westward strategy to build a stronger presence in and beyond Asia (Wang, 2016; Ohashi, 2018). This would chiefly allow China to counterbalance the US's pivot towards the region, because the BRI helps assure China's benign and peaceful rise through partnerships with participant countries (Andornino, 2017; Clarke, 2018; Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019; Huang, 2016; Kaczmarek, 2017; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). In this case, the key insight obtained from the analysis of the media coverage extends existing discussions by explaining China's unique approach to international affairs, which differs from that of traditional US or Western hegemony. Thus, it could be said that China's leading role in the BRI reflects its geostrategic ambitions.

Second, media discussions in India tend to criticise the BRI as a government-led unilateral project that contradicts China's historical emphasis on multilateralism. Venkataramakrishnan (2017) notes that the BRI design is based on national interests without external consultation from neighbouring countries. It was further labelled a Chinese colonial enterprise by the *Times of India* (2017), the BRI essentially burdening local economies with debt and fragmenting communities. Meanwhile, Chinese companies have claimed ownership of most BRI construction contracts (Khasru, 2019), placing project construction, labour and raw materials within China's control, and leaving host countries unable to gain profit and induce skills transfer (Shukla, 2019).

The findings overwhelmingly indicate that BRI connectivity functions are perceived in the Indian media, in part, as a ploy to mask China's hegemonic intentions. This further highlights two key discrepancies aligning with the literature—the multilateral mechanism associated with the BRI, which has not yet materialised, and China's approach through coalition relationships, exclusive of both codified legal and operational practices (Kaczmarek, 2017; Li & Scherer, 2017). Also, the host economies have not been given a transparent environment from the BRI (Gong, 2019). In essence, the findings echo previous studies in describing the initiative's asymmetrical power structure, configured solely to benefit Chinese businesses.

The third sub-theme extracted from media discussions is suspicion around China's debt-driven strategy. According to Baruah (2018), the BRI is only considered a lucrative project due to a lack of alternatives (Hindustan Times, 2019). Hajari (2018) mentions that China lends out huge sums of money with lower conditionalities than the World Bank or the ADB. Foremost, this encourages vulnerable developing nations to depend on China. The media in India has branded these loans exploitative due to unrealistic terms and high-interest rates (Chaudhury, 2019; Raghavan, 2019). For example, China will charge an interest rate of 3% on its government loans, while the interest rate of commercial loans typically ranges between 17% and 18% with the local government's sovereign guarantee (Gupta, 2019). If loans are not repaid, China can confiscate the strategic assets of recipient countries as a form of debt swap (De, 2019; Livemint, 2018; Khasru, 2019). These findings suggest that the BRI is perceived to offer beneficiaries increased development opportunities, but also imply a host of consequent financial troubles in the context of lacking economic viability and quality. Yet, despite the fact that 'India has not joined [the] BRI and has expressed strong reservation on the funding pattern', the country 'has made no bones about the fact that big Chinese loans under BRI are pushing countries towards a debt trap' (Chaudhury, 2019, para. 3).

As mentioned in prior studies, developing countries do believe that synergising their development strategies with the BRI *could* generate mutual benefits (Ehizuelen, 2017; Gong, 2019; Liu et al., 2018), despite the wealth of evidence showing that direct investment primarily



further spurs China's (political) expansion into Asia (Gong, 2019; Jonston, 2018). The key insight obtained from the analysis of media discussions echoes previous studies that highlight the possibility that more developing nations will turn to China for financial support. Therefore, the BRI, according to the Indian media, falls within the bounds of China's 'debt-trap diplomacy', geared to serve the nation's prospective political expanse across Asia.

The fourth sub-theme addresses the BRI's strategic implications. Much of the media discussion in India has griped over China extending its geopolitical influence by funding unsustainable projects in politically unstable countries (Aneja, 2019). This predatory financing model also endangers the sovereignty of smaller nations by introducing financially crippling debt burdens (Dwivedi, 2019). Chaudhuri (2019) demonstrated this with China's meddling in the 'domestic affairs' of BRI-funded nations, 'whether Hungary, Zimbabwe, Laos or Cambodia', which 'began to ring alarm bells' (para. 6). According to Parahi (2018), the sovereignty issue would hamper developing countries' growth potential, and further change the existing operation of their economies and societies dramatically. Jaaved (2019) cited China's aggressive acquisition of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka as a prominent example. Overall, these findings reveal that discussions in the press reinforce India's concerns about China's geostrategic ambitions, operating beneath the guise of infrastructural development, while leveraging external powers to expand influence on a global scale.

The findings further align with those of Johnston (2018), Heiduk and Sakaki (2019), Huang (2016) and Andornino (2017). Generally, these studies suggest that the BRI could change the global geo-economic and geopolitical landscape, as China's efforts to integrate the existing global order through its BRI have not yet included cooperation with the world's leading hegemon(s). Discussions in the Indian media also indicate a concern about China's exercise of control through sovereign debt to assemble institutional power and alliances under the BRI. This strategy could enable China to strategically oversee infrastructure assets from a distance.

## **5.5 India's balancing act with the rise of China**

Across the board, India's media tends to focus on the country's historically rocky relations with China. This theme demonstrates how China's growing presence poses many challenges to India's strategic interests in the South Asian and Indian Ocean region. Further explored is China's importance in India's development, including the latter's increased participation in China-led initiatives (e.g., the AIIB and SCO) and why these countries need to work together.

### **5.5.1 A clash of strategic interests**

Three key concerns dominate India's media discussions around clashing strategic interests. These include China's growing presence in South Asia, its interest in the Indian Ocean region, and the wider security environment.

First, it was widely discussed in the Indian press that the deepening engagement between China and various South Asian countries heightens Indian discomfort. According to Patranobis (2019), China has recently increased investment in the region and attempted to strike bilateral deals with many of India's neighbours. Moreover, Mohan (2018) asserts that the BRI could help to diversify these partnerships as well as facilitate neighbours' desire for lessening dependence on India. For example, Nepal's dependence on Indian ports, which facilitates Nepal's trade with Third World countries, could cease because its Transit and Transportation Agreement with China (which was signed in 2016) has granted Nepal access to seven Chinese ports (Chalise, 2019; The Times of India, 2019). Evidently, the press in India is concerned about the development assistance that China offers through the BRI to India's more vulnerable neighbouring countries attracts their blind acceptance of the project.

As also mentioned in the literature, India has always claimed that it is the (legitimate) dominant power in South Asia due to its size, strategic location and military capacities (Blah, 2018; Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015; Lu, 2017). In this sense, this analysis of the media discussions in India extends existing discussions by exploring in greater detail China's rising influence in South Asia through the BRI, effectively weakening India's ties with its immediate neighbours.

The second key concern raised in media discussions regards China's interests in the Indian Ocean. According to Jaaved (2019), India wants to dominate the region and acquire the status of world power through the development of a blue-water navy, a military-industry complex and missile capabilities. At the same time, Baruah (2018) reports that the MSR (which forms part of the BRI) could address the so-called Malacca Dilemma and the steady presence of China in the Indian Ocean. China could, following BRI implementation, also diversify trade routes and increase its navy's capacity to protect its existing shipping lanes (Baruah, 2018; The Economic Times, 2018). Moreover, the CPEC is expected to provide a substantial naval base, despite Gwadar's current status as a civilian port (Baruah, 2018), and China's naval expansion could overlap with an operational area of interest for the Indian navy (Hooda, 2019; Singh, 2019). Overall, these findings indicate that the BRI is perceived in the Indian media as increasing the competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean through the development of commercial and naval facilities in strategic ports.

As highlighted in the literature, China has mainly relied on the Malacca Strait for trading with key markets (Blah, 2018; Blanchard & Flint, 2017; Cai, 2018; Enderwick, 2018), requiring it to seek more options to avoid potential trade disruption. Moreover, Paul (2018) suggests that China has increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea despite consensus that the former region is considered India's 'playground' (Blah, 2018; Blanco Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015; Chung, 2018). That said, India still wishes to develop its blue-navy to

maintain dominance (Lu, 2017). In essence, in exploring both nations' intentions in both the academic literature and India's media, mutually agree that China's rising presence in the Indian Ocean directly challenges India's strategic interests.

Security is the third concern expressed in the Indian news. Mukherjee (2019) asserts that India's national security concerns not just its homeland, but also the power to influence events in neighbouring countries. Strong economic interventions and Chinese forays into South Asia and the Indian Ocean have prompted Indian worry (Parahi, 2018; Patranobis, 2018). Specifically, many BRI projects directly complement the deployment of warships and submarines in the Indian Ocean (Pandit, 2018; Singh, 2018), granting access, through China's String of Pearls (Chinese policy for encircling India commercially and militarily), to India's backyard territories and strategic ports, including Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar and the Maldives (Aghi, 2018; Das, 2019; Kamdar, 2019). The findings show that the BRI is interpreted in the Indian press as providing opportunities for China to expand and exercise political leverage in key Indian regions.

This aligns with the literature, in which many scholars point out that India's security concerns stem from the unmatched financial support China funnels into its neighbouring countries (Blah, 2018; Blanco Pitlo & Karembelkar; Cai, 2018; Chung, 2018; Hazarika, 2018; Yu, 2017). Evidently, then, China's growing naval power and political influence have raised fears over India's exclusion from many of its surrounding strategic locations and subsequent loss of national security.

### **5.5.2 China–India strategic cooperation**

Three key sub-themes emerged from the analysis of press discussions relating to the strategic cooperation between China and India. These include the reason for a China–India partnership, incentives for cooperation and India's participation in other Chinese-led initiatives, such as the AIIB and SCO.

The first sub-theme that emerged from media discussion is the necessity for an alliance. Despite India's rejection of the BRI, disagreement between both nations has not affected the development of China–India bilateral relations (Jacob, 2019; Patranobis, 2018; The Times of India, 2019). Both countries make concerted efforts to manage their differences and find ways to strengthen trust in light of each other's sensitivities (The Times of India, 2019). Their leaders have also realised the benefits of collaboration in facilitating the development needs of their respective populations (The Indian Express, 2019). India has worked with China to address market entry barriers to increase the export of Indian goods as well as Chinese investment (Patranobis, 2019). Thus, the findings show that bilateral relations with China are seen as significant to India's development in the Indian media discussions.

In the literature, Kapur (2016) and Lu (2017) suggest that India has opened intergovernmental negotiations with China to increase its own capabilities and in fear of the latter's growing power, despite the northern border disputes (Kapur, 2016; Lu, 2017). Besides this, development of an institutional framework would help the two better manage their competition (Ruixiang, 2010; Wojczewski, 2016). In accordance, the findings from the media analysis support the literature by noting that India has not looked at its relations with China through the prism of the BRI. Hence, it could be said that strengthening confidence between both nations could lead to more fruitful cooperation.

Second, global circumstances require China and India to work on the same side. According to past media reports, the two countries have shared common interests in trade and increased trade cooperation beyond the BRI. This seeks to strengthen the globalisation process against all forms of protectionism despite India's absence from the RCEP (Jacob, 2019; Laskar, 2019; Marjani, 2019). Since the bitter trade war between the US and China, cooperation with India remains essential for China (Bhaumik, 2019). Conversely, India needs another 'string' on which to rely following the US decision to end sanctions exemptions to Iranian oil, which could hurt India's economy (The Times of India, 2019). In response, the country has expressed interest in teaming with China to form an oil-purchaser cartel for stabilising the price of crude oil (Bhaumik, 2019). This key insight reveals that the press in India recognises that cooperation incentives do exist between the two.

As highlighted in prior studies, both China and India—as two of the world's leading emerging economies—have gradually assumed more prominent roles in international affairs (Blah, 2018; Ruixiang, 2010; Wojczewski, 2016). Here, India's media echoes the literature in its concern over trade and both nations' inability to wholly ignore the other with respect to global affairs.

The third sub-theme raised in media discussion regards India's participation in other China-led initiatives. Despite opposing the BRI, Jaishankar (2018) report that India cooperates with China to reform global governance by creating some promising space for rising powers to emerge. In particular, the AIIB's principle of promoting universal values and internationalism encouraged India's responsiveness to collaboration (Panda, 2019) and fading concerns with the bank's structure, as no members were given veto over others (Krishnan, 2018). Above all, this ensures multilateralism. In addition, the AIIB policy tends not to interfere in the internal and political affairs of its members (The Indian Express, 2018). According to Misri (India's ambassador to China), 'each project is assessed based on certain parameters' (NDTV, 2019, para. 16), with India being its 'largest client' (para. 17). As such, 'every project is subjected to a study and if it passes those tests they are approved', and approved equally by member nations according to high international standards (para. 17). Hence, the analysis of media discussions imply that

India would likely not object to funding BRI projects that pass AIIB assessment, despite the bank's ties with China.

Another China-led initiative involves India is the SCO. The media reported its commitment to extending full cooperation with SCO upon becoming a fully-fledged member of it in 2017 (Patranobis, 2018). The organisation is expected to provide a platform for superior cooperation between India and South Asia as well as various Central Asian countries (Rasheed, 2017; The Wire, 2018). Accordingly, Shaikh (2018) notes that India tends to prioritise connectivity projects with SCO and its regional neighbours, and further welcomes 'new connectivity projects that are inclusive, sustainable and transparent and which respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations' (para. 6). Although most SCO members have provided the BRI transnational connectivity with unqualified support, India remains the only country to refuse endorsement (Sajjanhar, 2017). As such, the findings show that India has reinforced connectivity with other SCO members, but remains unflinching in its stance on the BRI in the international arena.

Overall, the findings support previous studies on India's participation and support for Chinese initiatives, such as the AIIB and SCO (Blah, 2018; Lu, 2017; Paul, 2018). Indeed, Lu (2017) and Paul (2018) both argue that greater alliance could be gained through increased cooperation, as external (i.e., not strictly BRI) initiatives tend to operate beyond the region, lessening cross-border concerns and conflicts. In this sense, data gathered from various Indian news media advance the literature by explaining how India interacts with other Chinese initiatives. Therefore, it could be said that joining the AIIB and SCO does not outwardly affect India's decision to participate in the BRI.

## **5.6 Alternatives to joining the BRI**

This theme demonstrates how perceptions of the BRI have evolved into actioned response by India. As demonstrated, media discussions in India have expressed ongoing concern with China's growing leverage. Now threatening the country's strategic interests, this debate has resulted in the need to counterbalance Chinese influence. Despite India's unofficial role as regional balancer to China, the media has recognised the significant gap between both nations in terms of resources and capability (Ranade, 2019). As such, India needs to secure more strategic alignments with other major powers to contain China's rise in key areas (Hashmi, 2019; Luthra, 2019; Saran, 2019). As such, this theme contains three key sub-themes sourced from the data. These include quadrilateral cooperation, India's bilateral ties with the US and Japan (in particular), and how India attempts to promote its own initiatives.

Firstly, known also as the Quad, the 'quadrilateral initiative' is a strategic dialogue between India, the US, Japan and Australia. The media reported that, together, the aim is to combine

capabilities and promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, while calming Chinese influence (Pant & Taneja, 2019; Singh, 2018; Unjhwala, 2018). Essentially, the ‘Quadrilateral Security Dialogue’ occurring between these four nations inevitably arrived ‘at a counter-narrative of “sustainable infrastructure” (BRI promotes indebtedness) and “skill and technology transfer” (China brings its own workers for projects, giving no jobs to locals)’ (Sihori, 2018, para. 13). These findings suggest that the Quad is perceived as the better-quality alternative to the BRI in the Indian press.

Prior studies have suggested that major advanced economies have, alongside India, perceived the BRI as a tool for China to expand its political influence globally (Blah, 2018; Cai, 2018; Chung, 2018; Gong, 2019; Jacob, 2017; Yu, 2017). In response, there has been a decision to invest in an alternative connectivity scheme to the BRI (Cai, 2018). In essence, the current findings in relation to Indian media perceptions lend support to the literature by describing the intention of the Quad. This is to say that it is not just India that considers the BRI a threat but other major powers do so as well.

The second sub-theme regards the strong bilateral ties between India and other major powers, excluding China. Particularly, press discussions revealed that growing strategic relations with the US would help India counter a host of regional threats (Aghi, 2018). Moreover, both nations could jointly seize opportunities to deepen security ties through increased operational cooperation and the alignment of capabilities in maritime security (Roche, 2018). According to Aghi (2018), apart from development assistance, the US has long supported India’s defence industry, sovereignty and regional power aspirations (Aghi, 2018). Hence, the findings indicate that the Indian press regards the US as a worthy companion through which to counter China’s military encirclement.

Further, Japan is another country with which India has strengthened its diplomatic engagements. The media has emphasised the importance of balancing China’s rise in the Indo-Pacific (Singh, 2018), with both Japan’s and India’s governments sharing concerns over various operational practices of the BRI, including lacking transparency and disregard for territorial integrity and national sovereignty (Baruah, 2018). In this sense, the findings show that the BRI outwardly challenges the security environment and architecture in India and Japan. Hence, converging strategic interests in India and Japan require close collaboration to counter the project’s operation.

India’s media has also reported that the AAGC was touted (by both India and Japan) as a tool to improve developmental cooperation in Africa (Unjhwala, 2018; Warriar, 2018). Additionally, both countries pledged to work with Sri Lanka to develop the East Container Terminal at the Colombo Port, where, according to Indian media, ongoing political tensions with respect to BRI

investment is rife (Herskovitz & Marlow, 2019). In opposition to China's investment model, Sri Lanka would fully own the port. Singh (2018) also notes that Japanese infrastructure projects are largely concerned about environmental and financial issues. Hence, the analysis demonstrates that Japan's insistence on quality and transparency could prove an important factor gaining India's trust.

The findings further align with prior research that suggests that US and Japanese aid could boost India's strategic position in the Indo-Pacific (Jha, 2017; Minwang, 2017; Ying, 2018). In essence, the findings clarify both Paul's (2018) and Gong's (2019) work regarding naval cooperation between the US and India and the AAGC—which is both counter and analogous to the BRI. Interestingly, alliances among India, Japan and Sri Lanka are yet to be described in BRI literature, which means the findings in this study are novel. After all, it is essential that India develops strategic relations with the US and Japan to ensure its influence in areas in which China has already made profound inroads.

The third sub-theme addresses the significance of India's connectivity initiatives. Media discussions demonstrated India's desire to accelerate cooperation under the Act East, Neighbourhood First and Go West policies (Chaudhury, 2018; The Times of India, 2019; Varma, 2017). In practice, each of these aligns with its smaller economic partners' needs and capabilities (Bagchi, 2017). To counter the BRI, India has provided assistance by extending its government lines of credit for development as well as capacity-building projects in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Roche, 2019; Unjhawala, 2018). The findings suggest that Indian media coverage sees the country as a credible development partner since its concessional loans could help bolster its international image.

Also, as mentioned in prior research, the 1991 Look East policy played a crucial role in strengthening India's role in Asia through the development of economic and strategic relations with other countries (Grare, 2017). Now known as 'Act East', Prime Minister Modi has changed the policy to focus more on practical development. Consistent with the literature, the key insight gained from the media analysis extends the existing discussions by highlighting India's connectivity projects and the country's need to strengthen its ties with neighbours to preserve both political and economic influence.

## **5.7 New phase in the Belt and Road Initiative**

India's media has focused intently on the scale and scope of the BRI, as well as China's approach to its implementation. Unpacking the new phase in BRI operations means tracking its evolution and scrutinising how China attempts to address international concerns with respect to existing project practices. This theme discusses five key sub-themes, including expansion of the

BRI, the shift in focus from a physical to a digital Silk Road, international criticisms, the purpose of the Second Belt and Road Forum (BRF), and growing emphasis on India's stance.

The first sub-theme regards China's failure to provide a blueprint for active BRI projects. Media discussions revealed that the initiative has expanded to cover 35 economic corridors stretching from Eurasia to the Pacific Islands, Latin America and the Arctic (Khasru, 2019; Sachdeva, 2019). The number of BRI participants has also increased and now stands at 126 countries and 29 international organisations (Ashok, 2019; Raghavan, 2019). Particularly, the formal engagement of Italy (the first G7 country) indicates the expansion of goodwill and China's venture towards pan-European connectivity (De, 2019; Nair, 2019). Due to its broad, inclusive and flexible framework, the BRI could also provide sufficient space to include a host of projects beyond its confines (Ahmad, 2019), and even eclipse the 2,000-project mark (Bhoothalingam, 2019). However, prior establishment of other similar ventures (such as the BCIM and Central Asian energy projects) predated the announcement of the BRI (Hajari, 2018; Kumar, 2017). These findings imply that China may have exaggerated the number of BRI projects. Consequently, the ostensibly vague nature may cause difficulty in estimating the exact size and scope of the BRI.

The data further extends the literature by providing updated information on the BRI's scale and scope. Several scholars show that the project began with six corridors passing through Eurasia (Herrero & Xu, 2017; Cai, 2018; Enderwick, 2018) and contained, according to Ferdinand (2016), Li and Taube (2018), Zhou and Esteban (2018) and Wang (2019), only 65 member countries. Moreover, China seems to emphasise the openness of the BRI by welcoming the participation of all interested parties without political attachment (Liu & Dunford, 2016; Vangeli, 2017). It can be assumed that such openness has led to a dramatic increase in both corridors and participants, as found in the present results. Yet, the exact scope of the BRI is yet to be determined and might suffer from overstretching.

The second sub-theme is the concentration of the media on the shift to a digital Silk Road. According to Samanta (2019), China has invested massively in 5G technology due to its status as the next technological revolution facilitating the creation of intelligent hardware, such as transport, defence products and other basic infrastructure. Yet, the Indian media has shared with the US a range of security concerns about 5G networks through the BRI (Narayanan, 2019; Raghavan, 2019; The Times of India, 2019). Besides this, disruptive Chinese technologies could aid Pakistan in terms of defence capability (The Times of India, 2019). At a more basic level, 5G networks would also afford the potential of China in dominating global technological standards (Narayanan, 2019). Overall, these findings suggest that the media in India acknowledges the possibility of the BRI in informing modern connectivity and smart cities



through Chinese 5G. Nevertheless, its digital domain could pose even greater challenges to India than the current physical projects of the BRI.

In the same vein, the literature raises the importance of digital technology related to development. Several studies have demonstrated China's attempt at developing digital infrastructures involving the internet, data transmission and ecommerce networks. As such, a digital system would effectively reshape development patterns across BRI areas (Bin, 2017; Yu, 2017, 2019). Importantly, Li and Schmerer (2017), Enderwick (2018) and Li and Taube (2018) all argue that higher productivity resulting from modern technology could lead to increased sustainable growth—aligning the findings with the literature in terms of China's 5G potential. However, the findings obtained from the Indian media revealed a concern over China's dominance through such disruptive technologies. Hence, it could be said that the Chinese 5G plans could have both economic and security consequences at a global level.

The third sub-theme regards ambiguity around China's intentions and practices, and the international push back in response. The media reported that India was first to oppose the BRI (Chellaney, 2018). Referring to Sirohi (2018) and Jaishankar (2018), its objection was getting vindicated after the UN rescinded a resolution officially endorsing the initiative. Thereafter, the economic viability of many BRI projects soon found scrutiny, particularly as the worsening debt crisis led to project cancellation in Malaysia, Bangladesh, Tanzania and Hungary, and even Pakistan (Bhoothalingam, 2018; Chellaney, 2018). These findings suggest that the Indian press perceives cancellation of projects as an increasing backlash against the BRI.

As mentioned in prior research, the UN's initially endorsed the BRI in terms of international cooperation as well as economic integration (despite its non-participation) (Blah, 2018; Cai, 2018; Wang, 2019). In this sense, the key insight from the media discussion is aligned with the literature. Nevertheless, the findings revealed an abolition of the UN resolution. It can be assumed that the cancellation of some BRI projects might have urged the UN to reconsider China's actions more closely. Hence, based on the analysis of media discussions in India, it could be said that India's voice has helped shift wider sentiments on the BRI, prompting other parties to realise the adverse effects of the BRI at a global level.

The fourth sub-theme centres on China's efforts to address BRI criticisms. The press in India reported that China used its Second BRF to exert political power over the US by boasting an increase in BRI participants (The Times of India, 2019). For comparison, 28 heads of state or government attended the First BRF in 2017, which increased to 36 the year after (Khasru, 2019). Evidently, this indicates that the BRI *is* still attractive and able to gain international traction despite growing concerns. According to Joshi (2019), China has now understood the requirements for long-term BRI success and the importance of returning profit to both hosts and

operating companies. In response, China has released a sustainability framework, which defined, according to International Monetary Fund and World Bank standards, criteria guiding BRI financing cooperation that also prevents the risk of debt distress (Aneja, 2019; Joshi, 2019). In addition, Xi Jinping has pledged to adopt transparent practices in every project (with zero tolerance against corruption) and the international standard for sustainable development (Chaudhury, 2019). Together, these findings suggest that the press in India interprets the improvement of a collaborative approach in BRI projects as China's endeavour to address international criticisms.

As highlighted in the literature, the BRI is China's most ambitious foreign policy initiative for promoting economic development (Cai, 2018; Shahriar et al., 2018; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Many scholars have pointed out that BRI challenges relate mostly to a deficit in trust (Gong, 2019; Kaczmarek, 2017; Li & Schmerer, 2017; Nordin & Weissman, 2018). However, no studies so far have mentioned China's efforts to address such concerns. In essence, the findings obtained from the media analysis here provide new insights into China's recent attempts, particularly through its second BRF. This reveals that the second BRF was a branding exercise for China to project its political power and build confidence in BRI participants.

The fifth sub-theme that emerged from media discussions concerns India's position on the BRI. According to the *Hindustan Times* (2019) and Roy (2019), the country's two-time absence at the BRF clearly indicates staunch opposition to the initiative. Although China has expressed willingness to improve the BRI's practices, its pledges did little to compensate for the country's past misdeeds (Chaudhury, 2019). Moreover, China has not addressed concerns around project viability and has promised only immediate benefits, which overshadow future consequences (Raghavan, 2019). These findings suggest that the Indian media continues to criticise China's lack of attention to the long-term success of the BRI.

Further, Indian media reports have acknowledged China's efforts, but remain critical of their execution in practice (Hindustan Times, 2019). According to Roy (2019), China's reversal in proclaiming Masood Azhar (of JeM) a global terrorist (see Section 5.3) caused India's silence at the Second BRF (no further opposition was articulated). Moreover, the CPEC has been a persistent stumbling block further preventing India's active participation in the BRI (Varma, 2019)—all the while rooting national concerns ever deeper into issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity (Kamdar, 2019). Since the project's launch, India's rejection has remained firm, and no efforts on the Chinese front have yet proven capable of changing this stance. Evidently, the only possible reconciliation efforts are through connectivity projects, which 'must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018, para. 4).

Overall, the findings are consistent with the literature, which suggests that the economic size of some recipient countries, combined with a lack of prudent project calculation could lead to debt traps (Blah, 2018; Heiduk & Sakaki, 2019; Ohashi, 2018). In particular, note the railway project fiasco in Laos in which the projected volume of passengers greatly outmatched the Chinese investments pledged towards its development (Gong, 2019). At the most basic level, China's complete disregard for the economic viability of BRI projects could, therefore, indicate that mass investments into development are purely political. Also consistent with Jacob (2017), Minwang (2017) and Blah (2018), the CPEC has proven a persistent source of Indian dissatisfaction and suspicion regarding BRI development. As such, it could be said that the country will not soon alter its stance on the initiative unless its core concerns about sovereignty and territorial integrity are addressed.

## **5.8 Summary**

Six key themes emerged from the analysis, including the commercial advantages of BRI participation, China's political intentions regarding the CPEC, China's geostrategic ambitions, India's balancing act to counter the rise of China, viable alternatives to joining the BRI, and the new phase in BRI evolution. As shown, the media posits a range of conflicting views about the benefits of India's involvement in the project. Some outlets believed that the country could leverage the BRI if it focused less on the CPEC, while others argued that the initiative offers no specific benefits to member nations. Launch of the Corridor also introduced several concerns around sovereignty and China–Pakistan cooperation. In the media coverage in India, the CPEC is represented as more than just a commercial project but also a possible threat to national security.

India's media has also criticised the BRI as a geopolitical tool for projecting China's political influence. Overwhelmingly, this is because the initiative is inherently political and because China has unilaterally initiated its rule without external consultation—despite emphasising the project's win-win cooperation. The BRI's predatory financial model, which sees Chinese loans come with recipients' sovereign guarantee, ultimately saw China's development strategy labelled debt-trap diplomacy. Apart from this, the media reports that India has sought new ways to cooperate with China, despite the latter's rise challenging its interests in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. India has participated in Chinese-led initiatives, such as the AIIB and SCO, but remains against the BRI.

In addition, discussions in the Indian media see India's pursuit of strategic partnerships with other major powers as a way to offset its comparatively inferior resources, while China made attempts at its Second BRF to address international criticism. Nevertheless, media perceptions

suggest that India remains unconvinced by China's supposed efforts to improve its predatory practices, perhaps because China continues to ignore all sovereignty concerns.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore perceptions in the Indian press surrounding the BRI. To do so, it reviewed relevant literature on the initiative and extracted for analysis empirical data from media discussions in India. The results showed that India continues to express its unwavering opposition to the BRI, primarily due to concerns over sovereignty and territorial integrity. At a national level, the BRI is still considered a flagrant attempt by China to secure its own benefits in response to growing protectionism concerns. This despite the fact that China has promoted the BRI as a win-win initiative that will strengthen transnational connectivity through infrastructural development.

As became clear from the literature and analysis of media discussions, China can no longer hide its geostrategic ambitions on the international order. Since the BRI is likely to increase its centrality globally, the country would be able to play a more active role in the global economy. In addition, its financial provisions (through loans with few conditions) to developing nations come with strategic implications driven by a predatory financing model, which is likely to relieve mainly domestic economic concerns (i.e., excess capacity and national imbalance). This means that China is seen as the major beneficiary of the BRI, and that, through the initiative, the country could gain political leverage to expand its influence at a global scale.

As far as the Indian media is concerned, the CPEC is likely to provide economic as well as military advantages to Pakistan. Tensions between the regions were further intensified following China's cooperation and growing alliance with Pakistan, upsetting India's interests in the Kashmir region. With China's financial and political support, Pakistan's position in the disputed territory could be legitimised. On top of this, China's growing presence in India's backyard, including South Asia and the Indian Ocean, has introduced both strategic and safety concerns. Despite this competition, India and China *have* cooperated strategically in contributing to the global economy. This is most evidenced by India's engagements with the AIIB and SCO, two multilateral, Chinese-led initiatives. That said, such participation does not seem to affect India's position on the BRI, meaning that the regional effects of its implementation likely override international efforts between China and India.

Further, instead of joining the BRI, India has tried to strengthen its position in the region by seeking strategic partnerships with other major powers. More specifically, the Quad initiative—a quadrilateral dialogue between India, Japan, the US and Australia—has sought to provide an alternative to the BRI. Through this, India has tightened its bilateral relations with the US and Japan in terms of economic and naval cooperation. This alliance also reflects convergent concerns between India and other major powers about the rise of China's political and military

power. In turn, India has promoted its own connectivity initiatives by extending concessional loans to smaller nations in different regions. This means that China's rise through the BRI has urged India to not only reconsider its position globally, but also continuously develop its relations with other countries to maintain regional influence.

Although massive investments under the BRI have attracted many international countries to join the project, the Indian media notes that increasing criticisms (such as lacking transparency) continue to plague implementation. This is most evident in the cancellation of many projects as well as the UN's reversal to support international cooperation through the BRI. In response, China used the Second BRF to address criticisms and improve collaborative efforts. Despite these attempts at reconciliation, China has not yet earned India's trust, likely due to its persistent failure to address the economic (non)viability of BRI projects. More specifically, India's core concerns with the CPEC, its sovereignty and territorial integrity remain firm in the wake of China's ongoing refusal to define the long-term consequences of BRI participation. As such, the analysis of media discussions in India indicate that India is not likely to compromise and will continue to hold its position against the BRI.

## **6.1 Research contributions**

This research contributes to discussions in the emerging BRI literature. As highlighted by Jacob (2017), findings in this field of work move fast, so close observation on BRI evolution is essential. That said, this study extends ongoing discussions by analysing more up-to-date information primarily in the form of news media reporting. Based on the data, it is clear that India has not changed its position on the BRI despite China's attempts to woo the country into submission. Now, it seems unlikely that India will buckle in the near future due to unanswered concerns with national sovereignty and integrity.

The research also provides important insight into the contemporary business environment. Given that both China and India are leading emerging economies, interaction between the nation-states (in relation to the BRI, China's most ambitious foreign policy project to date) has significantly affected global affairs. In fact, many scholars have highlighted a wide range of issues associated with the BRI, from the fundamental purpose of the project and the motives behind it, to the challenges it currently faces.

This study also offers other minor contributions to the existing literature. First, the research provides new insight into China's attempts (through its Second BRF) at addressing both India's concerns and wider global criticisms. Despite the literature on BRI challenges, no study has accounted for China's response to the international backlash. Second, the research extends the existing literature by highlighting the importance of the RCEP, an important trade agreement that China intends to deploy for addressing economic integration in the Asia-Pacific relative to

India's position on the BRI. To understand the country's stance, it is important to recognise the RCEP because it is part of India's broader concerns over trade—which could subsequently influence a host of future decisions. Overall, the findings indicate that China *is* focusing on increased integration instead of addressing India's gripes with trade. In turn, India has withdrawn from the RCEP, as it remains concerned that economic integration through the BRI could escalate its trade deficit with China.

The third contribution regards the importance of analysing India's perceptions of the BRI in conjunction with its official stance and collaboration through other China-led initiatives. Above all, this suggests that India *has* adopted a balanced perspective, responding to both the AIIB and the SCO positively, while refusing to participate in BRI projects. In terms of China–India relations, India is willing to cooperate with China when it comes to global interests, such as the promotion of international trade, but clear regional conflicts between the two continue to problematise total reconciliation.

The fourth contribution sees the research advance existing discussions by demonstrating cooperation not only between the US and India (like previous studies), but also among Japan, India and Sri Lanka. For example, note Japan's and India's approach to adopting better investment opportunities in developing the Colombo Port compared to the predatory financial model of the BRI. This directly relates to the fifth contribution, which regards India's promotion of its own connectivity initiatives, which received no attention in previous research. This approach suggests that the BRI has encouraged India to reinforce cooperation with its neighbours to sustain regional influence, and further demonstrates how India's interactions with the BRI have evolved parallel to China's recent changes in approach.

Altogether, the present study could provide practical contributions to BRI academia. Given how the initiative empowers and enables China to gain influence in the global economy, this study could offer valuable knowledge to countries or even businesses interested in BRI participation. The findings also posit that China's ambitions with the BRI will have implications for national and international spheres of economics and politics. As such, the study might help firms interested in conducting business in BRI regions to better understand the institutional environment they could face once involved, and how best to operate therein.

## **6.2 Limitations and future research**

Like all studies, this research has some limitations. First, a comprehensive overview of all relevant positions could not be presented. Despite the aim to analyse Indian perceptions by studying region-specific media discussions, most of the extracted articles voiced the opinions of (former) diplomats, independent analysts and government figures. This means that the findings cannot fully represent India overall, and that different data, which perhaps favour another point

of view (e.g., business leaders and/or specific regions), will posit different findings. Differences in institutional setting and interest can also influence opinions and how people express them. For example, the government will view the BRI through a political lens, while the business sector might take a more (geo)economic approach. Therefore, this study should be considered exploratory in nature.

Another limitation is that the study relied on existing documents, thus, constraining the researcher's ability to ask for clarification. Further, the use of strictly English-language news items produced a singular narrative, which was, at times, redundant. In essence, other positions could be presented by including other, non-English-language news media, such as Hindi, for analysis.

Nonetheless, these limitations offer clear directions for future study. To provide more comprehensive research, perceptions within specific sectors could be identified. In addition, future studies could consider using other methods of data collection, such as interviews, to gather richer and more in-depth data. Notably, the analysis highlighted the media's broad concerns over the lack of economic opportunities available to India's private sector, resulting from its government's geopolitical stance against BRI participation. Yet, it failed to identify *how* participation in the BRI might also help the private sector overcome these economic challenges. Therefore, further investigation could be carried out to provide more in-depth insights on the effect that India's geo-economic position has on addressing the nation's economic concerns.



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Example of familiarisation with the data

Year	Author	Sources of news items	Title	Key words/phrases
2017	Menon	Menon	The Unprecedented Promises – and Threats – of the Belt and Road Initiative	Economic logic; rising protectionism; infrastructure gap; continental and maritime connectivity gaps; advantages for the Chinese economy; set standards across countries and markets; security issues; geopolitical implications; sovereignty aspects of the CPEC; opportunity for India
2017	Kumar	ICWA.in	China's Strategic Quest for Market, Energy and Geopolitical Influence: A Status Note on the Eve of the Belt and Road Forum, Beijing, 14-15 May 2017.	Strategic project of China; China-Look Westwards; geo-strategies; India-Look eastwards; economic and trade cooperation; opportunities for China; OBOR' challenges; political risks; economic risks; China's presence in South Asia; India will not have a free run in the region; CPEC impacts on India's core concerns of sovereignty
2017	Varma	Livemint	India boycotts China's 'Belt and Road Forum' on sovereignty concerns	India is boycotting BRF; core concern on sovereignty and territorial integrity; CPEC-flagship project; debt burden; economic benefits of connectivity; China has tried to assuage India's feelings; naval base
2017	The Wire	The Wire	It's Official Now, India to Stay Away From China's 'Belt and Road Forum'	disregarded “core concerns”; Belt and Road Forum; ‘unilateral’ nature; Indian sovereignty; debt burden; CPEC is the flagship project of BRI
2017	Venkataramakrishnan	Scroll.in	Is India trying to convince the world China's One Belt One Road plan is secretly colonial?	debt-ridden; ignores its core concerns territorial sovereignty; financial responsibility; We are awaiting a positive response from the Chinese side; CPEC; a “unilateral” or “national” project of China; Debt diplomacy;
2017	Sajjanhar	ORFonline	India's prospects in China-dominated SCO	SCO wide-ranging agreements; cooperation and partnership between India and Central Asia; China dominated organisation; pitfalls for India; a risk of India being isolated;

				SCO will provide unqualified support and endorsement to China's Belt and Road Initiative; India has serious reservations; India-adopt a sophisticated and nuanced approach; hazard of India's membership of the SCO
2017	Nayyar	Livemint	One Belt, One Road has no basis in China's history	core concerns; India should focus more (on) cooperation; BRI violates India's sovereignty;
2017	Pant	ORFonline	India challenges China's intentions on One Belt, One Road initiative.	China's centrality in the global economic; unilateral approach; BRI is a bilateral rather than multilateral venture; core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity; initiated without consulting India; advantages of India joining BRI; China's maritime Silk Road reinforces India's concerns about encirclement and possible dual-use facilities; security concerns;
2017	Sajjanhar	Business Today	China's Belt and Road Initiative: Prospects and pitfalls	win-win cooperation; President Xi's most ambitious foreign and economic policy projects; strategic imperative; BRI will extend China's economic, diplomatic and military power; India's core concerns on its sovereignty and territorial integrity; transparency
2018	Bhaumik	The Telegraph India	A scheme for global domination	India appeared isolated; India has been severely critical of the BRI; BRI ignores its core concern on sovereignty; the BRI favoured Chinese interests at the project; Debt risks bear strategic consequences; global domination
2018	Krishnan	India Today	India's BRI bet pays off	the only major absentee in BRF; impending isolation; lack of transparency and financial sustainability in the mega project; concerns on repaying Chinese loans; India's main concern then was a lack of clarity;
2018	Baruah	Carnegie India	India's Answer to the Belt and Road: A Road Map for South Asia	Strategic ambitions; China's influence; Sino-Indian competition; India has started to craft a policy response; protest by not attending the BRF; the initiative's transparency and processes; CPEC-concerns about territorial sovereignty; India's strategic interests; debt burden; bilateral agreements; India's primary concern is the CPEC; Concerns on China's rise; Lack of operational details; China's intentions; India

				could benefit from the BRI; against international norms; undermine Indian sovereignty; geopolitical influence; unsustainable debt burdens-transparency concerns; China-Pakistan relations; Chinese attempts to strategically encircle India; overseas military base; New Delhi is expanding naval engagement
2019	Chaudhuri	GIS	Opinion: India nudges China toward Belt and Road changes	Transparency; strategic ambitions; huge debt; the elements of the BRI it is most concerned about – CPEC; Indian Ocean projects; mixing military and diplomatic goals
2019	Godbole	Asia Times	Depth of China's ties with Pakistan costs India	listing Masood Azhar under the UN sanctions regime; China's "deeper than ocean" relationship with Pakistan is more significant to its national interests; CPEC is the flagship of BRI; India is deeply aware of its position as a flag-bearer of the opposition to the BRI;
2019	Jaaved	Modern Diplomacy	India's purblind opposition to Belt and Road Initiative	Platform for international cooperation; India boycotted 1st BRF; sovereignty; debt trap; exacerbate Sino-Indian tension; detrimental to India's strategic interests; Indian Ocean - strategic location; fears of China's naval base
2019	Panda	East-West Center	India's Response to China's Proposed "Asia for Asians"	Chinese influence; China's vision; heavy reliance on military intimidation; China's strategic desire to dominate Asian affairs; India boycotting Belt and Road Forums that were held in 2017 and 2019; ignoring New Delhi's sensitivity concerning the disputed territory; unilateral Chinese-government scheme to gain international influence
2019	Dwivedi	IDSA.in	Xi's Belt-Road Initiative: Recalibration, Strategic Imperatives	Xi Jinping's multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure development; lack of transparency; debt trap; BRI provides China a unique platform; expanding global influence; digital silk road; China an overarching framework; Chinese companies' benefits; India's concerns about CPEC; India to pursue alternate connectivity initiatives like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor; geostrategic balance
2019	Khasru	The Print	China is trying to win over critics of the new Silk Road	government defaulted on debt payments; unsustainability of these debts; BRI helps address China's problem of excess

				capacity
2019	Borah	Asia Nikkei	India responds to Belt and Road Initiative with infrastructure push	China increases its influence in the region; Security concerns; India invested in infrastructure in South Asia and Africa; India has teamed up with Japan; challenges for India;
2019	Singh	Asia Nikkei	India should hurry RCEP trade pact to attract Chinese investment	RCEP; Trade deficit; saving-investment gap; the US is turning protectionist; influx of Chinese import;
2019	Majari	The Diplomat	India Had Good Reason to Pull out of RCEP	RCEP; Free trade agreement; India's withdrawal; Chinese product flooding; tariff elimination; deficit; economic imbalance; the Quad cooperation; India's strategic outreach

## Appendix 2: Example of codes and themes

Themes	Codes
Commercial advantages	Geo-economic cooperation
	Connectivity project
	Regional cooperation network
	Collective collaboration
	New globalisation
	Enhancing China's centrality
	China's economic tool
	Addressing Chinese surplus reserve
	Addressing Chinese overcapacity
	Addressing Chinese Western region
	Economic opportunity
	India's strategic location
	Addressing India's investment gap
	India's focus with political aspect
Political tensions related to CPEC	India's withdrawal from RCEP
	Uneven playing field
	CPEC-flagship project
	Sovereignty violation
	Threat to sovereignty
	India's sensitivity
	CPEC Kashmir
	Ignoring India's concern
	CPEC-no consultation
	No Chinese response
	Pakistan game's changer
	Strengthening Pakistan's position
	Non-commercial project
	China-India distrust
	Threat to India's security
	China's military presence
	China-Pakistan balancing India
	Kashmir internationalisation
	China's strategic intention
	Debt trap
	No transparency

China's geostrategic ambitions	China's hegemonic construction
	Geopolitical intention
	Sovereignty debt
	Geostrategic project
	China's influence expansion
	China's strategic ambition
	China's unilateral vision
	China's bilateral approach
	Developing countries' dependence
	Debt-driven strategy
	Neo-colonialism
	Predatory condition
	Economic nonviability
	Aggressive acquisition
Balancing acts of India in relation to China's rise	China's growing presence-South Asia
	BRI-India's neighbours' participation
	India's unmatched capacity
	India's political challenges
	Challenges India's strategic advantages
	Challenges India's primacy
	India's economic influence
	India's strategic interests
	Indian Ocean-strategic location
	China-India seeking cooperation
	China-India shared global interests
	Cooperation incentives
	SCO-India' connectivity vision
	SCO-cooperation venue
	BRI-SCO members' response
	AIIB multilateralism
	India-strategic alignment
	Asymmetric relationship
	India's maritime cooperation
	India's increasing cooperation
	Quad cooperation
	Alternative project
	Emphasising better quality

Alternative to joining the BRI	India-US cooperation
	US support to India
	India-US strategic partnership
	India-US addressing China's encirclement
	India-Japan alternatives to BRI
	India-Japan shared concerns
	Promoting India's connectivity project
	India's infrastructure push
	India-sustaining influence
	India-expanding lines of credit
The new phase of the BRI	Xi's signature project
	Italy joining the BRI
	Vindicating India's stance
	UN-withdrawing resolution
	BRI backlash
	BRF1 responsiveness
	BRF2 responsiveness
	China's assuring win-win outcome
	BRF2 political showcase
	China realising BRI requirements
	BRI-adopting international standard
	China addressing financial system
	Remaining popular project
	BRF2-India's silence
	Unclear map of scheme
	India's 5G concern
	CPEC-stumbling block

### Appendix 3: Example of analytical memos (as originally recorded)

Date	Analytical memos
2019/10/25	<p>As far as I am concerned, most of the articles reported about the establishment of the CPEC, which mentioned that China ignores the core concerns of India. This concern includes the location of the CPEC in Kashmir, where India claims as its own territory. Moreover, many articles cited a government official statement – the Indian government tries to provoke China to have meaningful dialogue in order to discuss the CPEC project, but the Chinese government shows no responses.</p> <p>Also, relations between China and Pakistan seem to be more intense, and it worries India. However, there are some sources reported that India did not view China through China-Pakistan prism. This encourages to interpret that the CPEC could be the main reason that made India stay away from the BRI.</p>
2019/10/28	<p>Some articles mentioned about close ties between Chinese SOEs and the host governments – local economies have struggled with the non-transparent operation. From my observation, the change of government in the BRI participant countries often result in reconsideration of the projects, which approved by the previous government (e.g. Malaysia, Maldives or even Pakistan).</p> <p>With the code of “India’s ideal connectivity project”, I have now come to realise that it can be considered as India’s indirect criticisms to the BRI, and it was expressed to convince the world to reconsider China’s intentions towards the BRI. Due to India’s diligence, it has been proved that the world has listened, at least there was no more resolution from the UN to the BRI. This means no more wordplay diplomacy from China.</p> <p>Some articles mentioned that there is decreasing levels of trust in India, because of China’s position in India’s bid to join the NSG, listing JeM under UN resolution and the CPEC. As such, India considers flexible approach instead of conventional deferential foreign policy in terms of relationship with China.</p>
2019/11/03	<p>There are growing concerns in the Indian media that China has grown digital connectivity in both commercial and geographical stakes. Chinese 5G is the main aspect that widely discussed in the media. The code of India’s 5G concerns contains the capacity of the 5G network in relation to the construction of basic infrastructure to defence weapons. Moreover, 5G could allow China to become a dominant power in the globalised world.</p> <p>This point is contrasted with the discussion in previous studies that I reviewed, which I found only the positive aspect of Chinese 5G, i.e. 5G could facilitate the development of economic patterns, including e-commerce. 5G could also result in better productivity and high growth rate.</p>
2019/11/05	<p>I would say that the code of “debt-driven strategy” was widely seen in the discussion in the Indian press. This comprises exploitative Chinese</p>



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loans, which is high interest combined with unconditional terms. In comparison to international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, China has offered recipients countries with low conditional loans. By this, I observed that there is no justification for the possibility of the related project.

So, many countries have seen the BRI as economic opportunities. With the enormous capital of China, many countries could not afford to lose the opportunity to develop connectivity and to integrate themselves into the world's economy better. In this sense, I can interpret that China acts as a development assistant by lending money to developing countries without worrying about getting money. This is because the host countries have guaranteed their debt payment by sovereignty.

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2019/11/06

With the code of “Chinese aggressive acquisition”, which many articles cited Hambantota port in Sri Lanka as the country that has negatively affected by debt burden. This is because Sri Lanka could not repay the debt that owned to China. This has led to the loss of control over its national asset for 99-year leases to China.

Apart from this, many articles point out that many projects under the BRI seem to be non-economically viable. Even though China has emphasises that the BRI is an economic project that tends to improve global cooperation and development, what really happened seem to suggest that the BRI is a geopolitical project. The reason for this is that investment through the BRI could help China enhance its global influence.

By considering exploitative loans (China's conditions to swap the debt, the non-viability of the BRI-related project), I have been encouraged to interpret China's approach to the BRI as “debt-trap diplomacy”

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