

# Unveiling the Power Dynamic: A Critical Review of the Belt and Road Initiative's Impact on China-Bangladesh Relations

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## ABSTRACT

This systematic review synthesizes existing literature to analyze the power dynamics between China and Bangladesh within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework. Through rigorous article retrieval, evaluation, and analysis, 192 studies (16 books, 173 articles, and three conference proceedings) were included, supplemented by additional studies from reference lists. The review employs an integrated theoretical framework combining neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism to examine the intricate dynamics at play comprehensively. Key findings reveal diverse dimensions, including China's hegemonic ambition, economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and geopolitical implications. The review identifies two narratives: one emphasizing the benefits of closer ties with China and the other expressing concerns about sovereignty and dependency. It underscores the transformative impact of the BRI on the China-Bangladesh relationship and emphasizes the need for further analysis of power dynamics. This research informs policymakers and practitioners, contributes to scholarly discourse, and highlights the evolving nature of this bilateral relationship under the BRI.

**Keywords:** Belt and Road Initiative; China-Bangladesh Relations; Power Dynamics; Neorealism; Neoliberal Institutionalism.

## INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has attracted widespread attention from the academic and political worlds as an essential global development plan that aims to improve connection, infrastructure development, and economic unity throughout Asia, Europe, and Africa (Panibratov et al. 2022; Baruah 2018; Thüerer et al. 2020). The purpose of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is to merge two principal components (Clarke 2017): the "Silk Road Economic Belt," which encompasses transportation and communication infrastructure across Central Asia (announced in Kazakhstan), and the "Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road," which involves a series of ports connecting China to Southeast Asia, the South Asian subcontinent, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe (announced in Indonesia). The announcement of BRI represented the shift of China's foreign policy stance from passive and reactive to proactive (Wang 2016; Yu 2017). The grand strategy behind the BRI is to establish power favorable to its interests and to box-in India within the region, limiting India's ability to challenge China's primacy in Asia and beyond (INDIA and BHARTI 2023). It suggests that China's engagement with South Asian and Indian Ocean states through the BRI is a strategic move to strategically encircle and curtail India's rise (Mohan and Abraham 2020).

China's involvement with Bangladesh within the BRI has profoundly influenced the region's power dynamics and geopolitical landscape (Mitchell 2021; Chakma 2019). Extensive research has explored various aspects of China-Bangladesh relations in the context of the BRI, including China's strategic interests (Saimum 2020; Chakma 2019), economic implications (Md A Karim and Islam 2018), negotiation power, influence, and

bilateral relations influence (Li et al. 2022; Zhou & Esteban 2018; Plagemann 2022; Wahid et al. 2020; Sarker 2022; Hossain 2021). The BRI has allowed China to exert influence and leverage its economic power, resulting in a noticeable shift in power dynamics since its inception. While recent studies have predominantly focused on the economic aspects, earlier investigations delved into the political economy and geographical dimensions. Despite its regional concentration, the BRI has the potential to significantly enhance the existing literature on China-Bangladesh diplomatic relations across diverse research domains. However, limited attention has been given to understanding the power dynamics, specifically within the China-Bangladesh relationship in the context of the BRI (Titumir & Rahman 2019; Ehsan 2021; Sarker 2022; Choudhury 2023). Considering the global significance of the BRI, it is crucial to explore further and analyze the power dynamics within and beyond China and Bangladesh.

Therefore, through a systematic review, this study aimed to examine the literature on the BRI in the context of China-Bangladesh relations and understand its impact on their power dynamics. The BRI is in its early stages, similar to the initial phase of theory building in research (Handfield and Melnyk 1998), and exploratory studies have been conducted to identify key issues (H. Wang 2021; Beeson 2018). The authors employed an integrated theoretical framework encompassing neorealism, and neoliberal institutionalism to critically evaluate the multidimensional nature of power dynamics within China-Bangladesh relations under the BRI. This comprehensive analysis provides valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners interested in understanding the evolving power dynamics of China-Bangladesh relations within the BRI framework, contributing to scholarly discourse.

The present analysis is guided by an integrated theoretical framework incorporating elements of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. This blended perspective critically evaluates the multidimensional nature of power and the intricate dynamics within China-Bangladesh relations under the BRI. By adopting such an encompassing theoretical approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the power play in their bilateral relations within the context of the BRI. Consequently, this research not only stimulates further scholarly discourse but also offers valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners interested in understanding the evolving power dynamics of China-Bangladesh relations within the framework of the BRI.

The subsequent sections of this paper are structured as follows: The second section introduces the theoretical framework employed, drawing upon the principles of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. In the third section, the methodology employed in this study is detailed. The fourth section presents the findings of the research. Moving on to the fifth section, a comprehensive discussion is provided, integrating the various themes explored in the results section to elucidate the impact of the BRI on the power dynamics of China-Bangladesh relations. Finally, the last section concludes the analysis conducted in this study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2013, China initiated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a mega infrastructure and economic development project within the 21st century. The scope of this project stretches from Asia, Europe, and Africa in order to improve networks of connectivity, reinforce economic integration, and reinvent global trade patterns (Panibratov et al., 2022, Baruah, 2018, Thürer et al., 2020). The Silk Road Economic Belt consists of two main components, namely the "Silk Road Economic Belt" on land infrastructure along the Central Asia and "Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road" related to maritime connectivity at ports and shipping routes (Clarke, 2017). This is a radical change for China's foreign policy, from that of a historically inactive paradigm to a more active and strategic paradigm (Wang, 2016; Yu, 2017). They have interpreted the BRI widely as a display of China's hegemonic aspirations, namely, to offset India's regional clout and bring its own command over Asia (Mohan & Abraham, 2020; INDIA & BHARTI, 2023).

Scholarship on the China-Bangladesh relationship in the context of the BRI has been extensive. Strategically situated in South Asia and Indian Ocean region, Bangladesh has become a focal point for China's economic

and geopolitical outreach. The BRI has played a huge role in the power balance between the two nations as China has been wielding its economic clout to entrench its deals and gain influence, and relevance (Mitchell, 2021; Chakma, 2019). However, extant literature has looked into various aspects of this relationship, including China's strategic interests in Bangladesh (Saimum, 2020; Chakma, 2019), economic implications of BRI projects matters (Md A and Islam, 2018) and negotiation dynamics in bilateral relations (Li et al., 2022; Zhou and Esteban, 2018). Indeed, recent studies have predominantly focused on economic aspects of the BRI, yet older studies largely centred on the political economy and geographical importance of the BRI (Plagemann, 2022; Wahid et al., 2020).

The literature contains a dual narrative on China and Bangladesh relations under the BRI. In one hand, scholars argue that the enhanced economic cooperation, infrastructure development and regional connectivity will be beneficial both for its regions and countries (Hossain, 2021; Sarker, 2022). Conversely, there are concerns over increased dependence on China, and the prospect of that compromising Bangladesh's sovereignty, autonomy (Titumir & Rahman, 2019; Ehsan, 2021). The duality underlines the messy nature of power play (or, rather lack thereof, depending on how one likes to look at it), referred to so often as the top/down power dynamics in their relationship in which Bangladesh's own agency is readily subjugated under the might of China's economics and geostrategic concerns (Choudhury, 2023).

These dynamics have been analyzed with the use of theoretical frameworks such as neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. The power and security are considered the main issues in international relations and Chinese BRI is suggested as a component of strategic weapon against regional rivals such as India to maintain its own supremacy (Mohan and Abraham, 2020). On the other hand, neoliberal institutionalism gives great emphasis to the cooperative aspects of the BRI, which perhaps offers a platform for economic interdependence as well as institutional collaboration (Zhou and Esteban, 2018). This integration brings out a wholistic view of China-Bangladesh relations under the BRI.

The scholarly inquiry also has been about Bangladesh's BRI perspective. The country has been observed to practice a pragmatic engagement with China balancing its economic gain amongst its strategic autonomy (Zaman, 2022; Casaca, 2021). Being able to diversify partnerships and selectively engage with Chinese initiatives, as describes in Wolf (2019), is what Bangladesh has done that allows it to navigate the risks associated with too much reliance on a single power. In a similar vein, Titumir and Rahman (2019a) and Chowdhury (2023) point out that Bangladesh's foreign policy balance is between China and other regional powers like India and the United States.

Despite the proliferation of literature in the BRI, there are voids of knowledge about the long effect the BRI to have on China-Bangladesh relations. Though previous studies offer great insight about the financial and geopolitical implications of BRI projects, we also need to go further with the socio-political and cultural trajectories of these projects. Furthermore, it is important to explore how domestic politics has contributed to Bangladesh's involvement with the BRI. Future research can also look at the regional implications of the BRI for South Asia; more specifically, the impact it has on South Asian stability and cohesion.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The present study utilized an integrated theoretical framework encompassing neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism to comprehensively analyze the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the power dynamics between China and Bangladesh.

Neorealism views international institutions as tools powerful states use to shape hierarchical power structures (Nye 1988). For instance, Zhou & Esteban (2018a) highlighted that the Bretton Woods institutions consolidated US hegemony. Regional multilateral institutions have distinct implications for rising powers and established hegemony, allowing the former to enhance their bargaining power and the latter to socialize rising

powers into their preferred regimes (Kent & Center 2007; He 2008). In the context of the BRI, China benefits from its asymmetric power, while Bangladesh gains increased bargaining power and the potential for a balancing coalition against perceived threats.

Conversely, neoliberalism emphasizes states prioritizing their gains and sees international institutions as facilitators of cooperation and compromise (Flew 2014). It argues that engagement with these institutions leads to absolute gains for all involved parties (Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi 2010). Neoliberal institutionalism highlights the role of international institutions in reducing costs, shaping preferences, and achieving common goals (Barnett & Finnemore 1999; Hopmann 1995). Consequently, regional multilateral initiatives operating within specific frameworks can be strategically employed as a soft balancing mechanism for cultivating friendly bilateral relations (Zhou and Esteban 2018b). This strategic interplay fosters strategic interdependence and reshapes power dynamics concerning bilateral relations.

The integration of neorealism and neoliberalism offers a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics in China-Bangladesh relations under the BRI for two primary reasons. Firstly, it allows for multidimensional analysis, simultaneously considering power dynamics, national interests, cooperation, and institutional factors. Neorealism provides insights into the distribution of power and states' pursuit of national interests (Waltz 1979), while neoliberalism highlights the cooperative potential of international institutions and the pursuit of absolute gains (R. O. Keohane and Nye 1989). Secondly, integrating these theoretical perspectives provides complementary viewpoints on international relations. Neorealism focuses on power struggles, state behavior, and security considerations (Mearsheimer and Alterman 2001), whereas neoliberalism emphasizes cooperation, institutions, and economic interdependence (R. Keohane 2011). Therefore, the integrated theoretical framework of neorealism and neoliberalism offers a holistic approach to comprehending the complex dynamics in China-Bangladesh relations under the BRI. By considering power dynamics, national interests, cooperation, and institutional factors, this framework provides a comprehensive analysis that captures the intricacies of the relationship.

Thus, integrating neorealism and neoliberalism offers a more holistic and nuanced analysis of the complex dynamics in China-Bangladesh relations. It allows us to simultaneously consider power dynamics, national interests, cooperation, and institutional factors, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding and evaluating the relationship.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The author utilizing the systematic literature review approach, initially centers on examining the depiction of the BRI within the context of China-Bangladesh relations as portrayed in the available studies. The current study, drawing on the findings and insights from this literature review, examines how the BRI influences the power dynamics in China-Bangladesh relations. Therefore, the response to the first research question ultimately shapes and guides the formulation of the second research question in this investigation. A systematic procedure was employed to retrieve and select articles to eliminate personal biases and maintain a fair evaluation process (Vergnes et al. 2010). This approach ensures that judgments regarding the value of a study are based on predetermined criteria rather than subjective opinions. The following subsections present the techniques employed to gather, evaluate, and analyze the articles. The summarized presentation of the sample characteristics follows this.

### Retrieval Process: Sourcing Relevant Literature for the Study

In order to promote inclusivity and mitigate any potential bias towards specific publishers, this study deliberately excluded the use of full-text databases from publishers such as Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Taylor & Francis, or Wilson. Instead, an abstract and citation database was employed, which offers comprehensive

coverage across various full-text databases. Among the notable abstract and citation databases, Google Scholar was prioritized. The search focused on peer-reviewed international journals, books, conference proceedings, and online news portals to maintain source quality. However, due to the limited availability of internationally recognized peer-reviewed articles, the search was extended to include local and predatory journal articles to gather sufficient data for a comprehensive analysis. Only English sources were considered, considering the language limitations of the author.

The search was conducted on Google Scholar between October 2022 and January 2023, utilizing specific terms related to the BRI and China-Bangladesh relations. The search terms encompassed various aspects, such as BRI, geopolitics, security cooperation, foreign policy, power dynamics, and the changing dimensions of the relationship. The search was restricted to the articles' titles, abstracts, and keywords without imposing any limitations on the subject area or publication year. It helps to achieve precise outcomes without biases. A total of 210 articles were retrieved at this initial stage of sourcing.

### **Article Screening: Evaluating and Selecting Relevant Literature**

During the screening stage, the abstracts of the initial sample of 260 studies combining books and articles were thoroughly examined to determine their suitability for inclusion in the study. The primary criterion for inclusion was whether the article focused on the BRI within the context of China-Bangladesh relations. As a result, 50 articles and ten books were excluded based on their relevance to the current study, leaving 200 articles, including books, for further analysis. It is important to note that no specific inclusion or exclusion criteria beyond the BRI focus were applied during this initial screening due to the diverse subject areas covered in the original sample. Additionally, some articles discussed the competing Indian initiative and its implications for China-Bangladesh relations after 2013. Out of the remaining 200 studies, only 192 were accessible for detailed review, despite the researcher's best efforts to retrieve them through various channels.

To ensure the thoroughness of the search, the reference lists of these 192 studies were cross-checked. This organic approach of supplementing the retrieved studies with references from within the articles themselves ensured a comprehensive selection process. The final sample of studies included in the analysis was 192. It is worth mentioning that only the articles directly referenced in the review are listed in the reference list at the end of the paper.

### **Data Extraction and Synthesis: Analyzing Articles**

Due to the large sample size and the broad nature of the topic of BRI and China-Bangladesh relations, more than detailed coding of texts was needed. Instead, a hermeneutic approach (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2014) was employed, using a two-dimensional matrix as a template for data collection. Each study was analyzed based on the discussed aspects, such as strategic, geopolitical, socio-economic, and cultural relations, dependency, negotiation of interests, power dynamics, focus (Bangladesh or Chinese interest-oriented), and the research method used. Results were cross-checked to minimize subjectivity. The presentation of results is a narrative synthesis, as literature reviews typically do. A summary of the primary sample characteristics is provided before presenting the results.

### **Sample characteristics**

Table 1 provides an overview of the critical characteristics of the 192 studies, including the distribution of the publishers' names for the books and journals in which the articles have been published. It sheds light on the various dimensions of China-Bangladesh relations within the context of the BRI. However, the number of studies published in reputable journals on the topic of China-Bangladesh relations under the umbrella of BRI is quite limited.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics: Overview of Books and Journals Publication, Conference proceedings, online documents

<b>Books publishers</b>	<b>No of studies</b>
Springer	3
Rutledge	7
Stanford University Press	2
Cambridge University Press	1
Cambridge Scholar Publishing	1
World Scientific Publishing	1
Library of Congress	1
Journal Publisher/Journal Name	No of studies
Taylor and Francis	40
Springer	22
SAGE	38
Elsevier	30
JSTOR	20
Cambridge	1
Wiley Online library	2
Chatham House	1
Journal of South Asian Studies	1
Journal of Kolkata Society for Asian Studies	1
American Journal of Social Science and Humanities	1
Journal of APR Command and Staff College	1
Korean Journal of Defense Studies	1
Journal of International Relations and Diplomacy	1
Transportation Journal	1
Rising Power Quarterly	1
Asian Journal of German and European Studies	1
Journal of Management Science and Engineering	1
Journal of Internal Business Studies	1
Journal of Indian and Asian Studies	1
Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and International Relations	2
Open Journal of Social Science	1
China and the World	2
Conference proceedings	2
Online Portal	2
Total	192

## RESULTS

The systematic literature review provided valuable insights into the power dynamics between China and Bangladesh under the BRI. The following sub-sections present a narrative synthesis of the key findings, highlighting the impact of the BRI on various aspects of China-Bangladesh relations.

### The portrayal of China-Bangladesh relations in the broad literature

To explore how the BRI is portrayed in the context of China-Bangladesh relations as depicted in existing research, Table 2 provides an overview of the various dimensions of BRI-related issues discussed in each article within the context of China-Bangladesh relations.

Table 2: Dimensions of BRI-related issues discussed in the articles

Dimensions of BRI-related issues discussed	Number of studies
China's dominance through the BRI	89
BRI and China's involvement in Bangladesh	68
The pronounced geo-strategic significance of Bangladesh to China	29
Bangladesh's approach towards BRI	6

Table 2 illustrates that a diverse range of aspects related to the BRI is examined, with particular emphasis on (1) China's dominance through the BRI, (2) China's involvement in Bangladesh, (3) the pronounced geo-strategic significance of Bangladesh to China. The subsequent sub-section delves into these three predominant themes to understand how previous studies portrayed Bangladesh's approach toward the BRI.

### China's dominance through BRI

A significant body of scholarly research examining the regional context highlights China's assertive pursuit of dominance in the South Asian region through its BRI program. Of the 89 studies analyzed, 65 delve into China's hegemonic ambition (i.e., Beeson 2018; Clarke 2017; Yu 2017; Bhattarai 2019; Y. Wang 2016; Chan 2020; Sági & Engelberth 2018; Tunningley 2017). These studies consistently underscore the instrumental dimension of the BRI as a strategic tool employed by China to reshape the regional order in South Asia through the deepening of friendly relations (Jain 2018; Samaranayake 2019; Awasthi 2018; Choudhury 2023b). Furthermore, within this scholarly discourse, 32 studies explicitly contextualize China's dominance under the BRI by elucidating the significance of the India factor, with a particular focus on bilateral relations with Bangladesh as an influential element (i.e., Mohan & Abraham 2020; Lintner 2019; Norton 2018). However, the overwhelming majority of studies, 93 out of 97, do not directly address China's utilization of the BRI to exert dominance over its foreign relations with Bangladesh. Instead, they predominantly examine infrastructural, economic, and security cooperation between China and Bangladesh (Freeman, 2018; Amin & Nion, 2023). Although in 4 studies, China's politics behind the BRI was the main focus (Murton & Lord 2020; Tekdal 2018; Zou et al. 2022; Petry 2022) they merely highlight the politics behind China's efforts of cultivating friendly relations with Bangladesh while explaining China's strategy of dominating South Asian region by curtailing India.

The findings from this corpus of research contribute to the emergence of two divergent narratives concerning China's diplomatic ambition to dominate the South Asian region and its associated foreign policy priority of fostering amicable relations. One line of scholarship accentuates the benefits of enhanced diplomatic ties with China resulting from its dominance under the BRI, as explored by authors such as Wahid et al. (2020), Ehsan (2021), Razzaque & Rahman (2020), Choudhury (2023a), and McDonald & Burgoyne (2019). Conversely, an alternative strand of research highlights the potential risks of compromising sovereignty and intensifying dependency on China when pursuing closer relations for BRI implementation, as evidenced by studies from Ranjan (2019), Ejaz & Jamil (2022), Mitchell (2021b), Butt et al. (2021), and Liu (2018). Notably, the latter set of studies raises concerns about the involvement of South Asian states, including Bangladesh, potentially undermining regional cohesion (Jain, 2018; Ahmed & Haque Sheikh, 2021; Samaranayake, 2019). In contrast, the former group of studies offers insights into China's employment of soft power diplomacy, mainly through increased engagement with smaller South Asian nations like Bangladesh (Samaranayake 2019; Sharma & Khatri 2019; Mirza et al. 2020; Chakrovorty 2020; Sparks 2018).

### BRI and Chinese involvement in Bangladesh

The study identified a total of 68 research articles that primarily focused on the multifaceted involvement of China in Bangladesh, aiming to gain strong support from Bangladesh for the success of the BRI. All of these studies engage in discussions related to this topic. The majority of the research emphasizes the economic aspects, while some studies specifically address the collaborative efforts towards ensuring the success of the

BRI (i.e., Hossin et al. 2018; M. N. I. Sarker et al. 2018; Ahamed & Rahman 2020; Battamo et al. 2021), and explore the geo-economic foundation of the BRI initiative (Saimum 2020; Chakma 2019; Shi et al. 2019).

Among the 50 studies that primarily focus on regional contexts and China's grand strategy, the BRI is presented as a contextual framework for discussing China-Bangladesh relations or as part of broader discussions (i.e., Flint & Zhu 2019; Lin et al. 2020; Huang 2016). However, the remaining 23 studies specifically concentrate on China-Bangladesh relations within the framework of the BRI and the resulting Chinese involvement. Among these 23 studies, 9 are focused on China's military engagement (Datta 2021; Choudhury 2023a; N. M. Sarker 2022; M. R. Karim & Pavicevic 2021; Wahid et al. 2020; Roy-Chaudhury 2022; Jacob 2020; Karki 2022; Kewalramani & Mehta 2021), 5 are on economic engagement (Chakma 2022; Uddin 2023; Amin & Nion 2023b; Paul 2019; Calinoff & Gordon 2020), 5 are on geopolitical diplomacy (Ahamed & Rahman 2020; Anwar 2019; Akkas Ahamed 2020; Kumar 2022; Barua 2021), and 4 are on infrastructural investments (Plagemann 2022; Jain 2018; Chakma 2019; Teo et al. 2019).

The body of research can be broadly classified into two distinct lines of argumentation. The first line of argument underscores the significance of China's state capitalism and highlights the reciprocal advantages derived from the BRI for both Bangladesh as the recipient nation and China as the providing party (Gallagher et al. 2021; Lee & Shen 2020; X. Wang et al. 2022; Battamo et al. 2021). These scholarly investigations emphasize the significance of collaborative efforts, shared innovation, and collective progress as fundamental aspects of the reconfigured China-Bangladesh relationship within the overarching framework of the BRI (Chen et al. 2021). Conversely, the second line of argument focuses on national self-interest, highlighting China's high ambitions and one-sided goals for growth and prosperity (Chen et al. 2021; Schulhof et al. 2022).

Upon examination of the body of international scholarly research, it becomes evident that the dominance of the latter viewpoint is pronounced. In contrast, the prevalence of the former viewpoint is more conspicuous in studies conducted by pro-China researchers. This indicates a tendency to demonstrate the positive outcomes of the BRI in China-Bangladesh relations while overlooking issues such as China's one-sided national ambition and interests. For example, Yasmin (2019) argues that the competition between China and India marked a blessing for Bangladesh to cultivate more deeper bilateral relations with China under the flagship of BRI program. Similarly, Wahid et al. (2020) contend that BRI is a new historical starting point for China-Bangladesh relations, leading to the opening of more opportunities for Bangladesh. However, the synthesis of studies conducted by other researchers intending to unfold issues such as China's ambition for strengthening national interests and power typically reveals one interesting point. China-Bangladesh relation under the outlier of BRI primarily serves China's strategy of offensive mercantilism by creating a dependency on China in countries like Bangladesh using the "debt trap diplomacy" that makes BRI comparable with the Marshall Plan (Demiryol 2019; NGA & THUONG 2021; Casaca 2022; Song & Fabinyi 2022).

The BRI poses significant challenges for China in securing international cooperation, which is crucial for successfully implementing the ambitious project (Ferdinand 2016). In response, China has taken proactive measures to strengthen its foreign relations, particularly with Bangladesh, as a strategic move to overcome this challenge. However, longstanding political tensions, such as India's decision to refrain from participating in the BRI due to concerns over China's support for Pakistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, present additional obstacles (Das 2017; Garlick 2017; Jacob 2017). To address this, China has intensified its engagement with Bangladesh, prioritizing it as a key component of its foreign policy strategy in the South Asian region (Chakma 2019; Samaranayake 2019; Singh 2010). Scholarly discussions by Shen & Chan (2018) and Bersenev et al. (2020) have drawn parallels between the BRI and historical instances of the Marshall Plan, emphasizing the need to scrutinize the initiative's implications.

The analysis above illuminates the transformative implications of the BRI for the China-Bangladesh relationship, encompassing multifaceted dynamics within the realm of international relations. While the BRI engenders prospects for novel avenues of cooperation and expanding existing partnerships, it concurrently unveils intricate power dynamics that warrant examination through the lens of advanced international relations



theory. Specifically, the BRI introduces a nuanced interplay of power relations, wherein it establishes a potential platform for China to exert its influence over smaller states, including Bangladesh, by ostensibly promoting developmental objectives and economic collaboration. This phenomenon invites scholarly inquiry into the underlying neocolonial dimensions inherent in the BRI framework and the ensuing ramifications for regional dynamics. Moreover, it underscores China's strategic calculations in navigating the intricate web of influences, particularly in balancing India's influence within the broader South Asian context. These observations underline the imperative of engaging in rigorous analysis and developing a sophisticated understanding of the intricate power dynamics that shape China-Bangladesh relations under the purview of the BRI.

### **Pronounced geo-strategic significance of Bangladesh to China**

The comprehensive review of literature draws upon a diverse selection of thirty studies, where the majority of twenty studies engage in a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter. Noteworthy contributions include works by Uddin (2023b), Flint & Zhu (2019), Khursheed et al. (2019), Saimum (2020), and F. Ahmed (2022), which engenders a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter. Conversely, the remaining ten studies adopt a theoretical modeling approach to examine China-Bangladesh relations, particularly within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, from a strategic standpoint. These studies, conducted by notable authors such as N. M. Sarker (2022), Baghernia & Meraji (2020), Mahmud Titumir & Zahidur Rahman (2019), Mohd Aminul Karim (2022), Afzaal & Naqvi (2022), M. R. Karim, (2020), Fulton (2018), Yasmin (2019a), Gong (2022), and Pradhan & Mohanty (2021), offer valuable insights into China's increasing recognition of the significance of fostering cordial bilateral relations with Bangladesh.

The research in both streams demonstrates a shared focus on China's growing recognition of the importance of cultivating amicable bilateral ties with Bangladesh. Notably, F. Ahmed (2022) and Khursheed et al. (2019) delve into the relationship between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's commitment to strengthening friendly relations with Bangladesh. In particular, F. Ahmed (2022) asserts that China's prioritization of establishing harmonious connections with South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, can serve as leverage to enhance the region's geopolitical significance, resulting in a mutually beneficial outcome. Conversely, other studies shed light on a win-loss scenario, highlighting the one-sided advantages of China-Bangladesh relations within the framework of the BRI (Samaranayake 2019; Islam 2019).

### **Bangladesh's approach towards the BRI**

A comprehensive analysis of China-Bangladesh relations reveals a considerable body of scholarship, encompassing six studies primarily concentrating on Bangladesh's approach towards the BRI. Notably, Zaman (2022) critically examines Bangladesh's strategic orientation vis-à-vis the BRI, positing that the country's multifaceted China policy, characterized by a judicious blend of economic pragmatism, diplomatic engagement, and political accommodation, has fostered a symbiotic interdependence and cooperative rapport. Similarly, Casaca (2021) underscores Bangladesh's seemingly nonchalant attitude towards potential geopolitical dependencies arising from BRI participation. Meanwhile, Wolf (2019) lauds Bangladesh's discerning stance in diversifying partnerships and selectively embracing Chinese initiatives, investments, and defense acquisitions, hailing it as an exemplar of effective engagement with China. Furthermore, studies by Titumir & Rahman (2019a), Plagemann (2022b), Chowdhury (2023) highlights the balancing mechanism of Bangladesh foreign policy concerning its relations with China.

## **DISCUSSION: BRI'S IMPACT ON POWER DYNAMICS IN CHINA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS**

Through a systematic review of the existing studies focusing on the BRI and China's foreign policies towards South Asia, particularly Bangladesh, several noteworthy observations come to light, providing insights into the reshaping of power dynamics within China-Bangladesh diplomatic relations: (1) The prevailing studies

predominantly adopt a descriptive approach, aiming to unravel the essence of the BRI and comprehend China's underlying objectives; (2) The focal point lies in China's foreign policy towards Bangladesh, with specific attention given to evaluating the BRI's success; (3) The research delves into why China assigns greater importance to Bangladesh in its foreign policy priorities regarding the BRI; (4) A limited number of studies explore Bangladesh's approach to China in the context of the BRI.

Considering the BRI's relative novelty, comprehensive nature, and broad-based initiative, these findings are expected. As noted by Handfield & Melnyk (1998), during the early stages of theory construction, the primary focus is identifying and understanding the phenomenon, deciphering its purposes, and anticipating potential responses from external actors. However, upon undertaking a meticulous analysis of these thematic threads derived from a systematic review of the chosen studies, a comprehensive comprehension unfolds regarding how the BRI impacts the power dynamics between China and Bangladesh. This underscores the significance of critically scrutinizing various dimensions, such as China's ambitions within the BRI framework, its engagement with Bangladesh, the pronounced geostrategic significance of Bangladesh to China, and Bangladesh's approach towards China. By delving into these dimensions, a more precise understanding emerges of how they collectively shape and influence the evolving power dynamics within the diplomatic relations between China and Bangladesh.

China's foreign policy underwent a significant shift, transitioning from bilateral and multilateral approaches to regional multilateralism, with the BRI playing a pivotal role in driving this transformation (Zhou and Esteban 2018a). The BRI is China's far-reaching foreign policy initiative that reshapes global geopolitics through regional economic cooperation along the Silk Road while advancing its geopolitical and geostrategic interests (Yu 2017). This strategic shift signifies a significant change in Chinese foreign policy, moving away from a passive "Keeping a Low Profile" approach to actively striving for achievements and influence (Yan 2014). China's strategic utilization of regional multilateral cooperation, which enhances economic, political, and security connections, is vital in addressing security challenges and facilitating its peaceful emergence (Goldstein and Mansfield 2012). Within this context, China's approach to the BRI and the subsequent priority of deepening bilateral relations with Bangladesh is driven by a multifaceted grand strategy (Pantucci and Lain 2016). This strategy encompasses adopting a soft balancing approach to counter India's domination and containment efforts, advancing China's soft power and normative influence by promoting alternative ideas and norms, and reshaping global governance to align with China's values, interests, and status (Zhou & Esteban 2018a; Paradise 2018).

Applying a neo-realist perspective (Kent & Center 2007; He 2008) in analyzing China's behavior towards Bangladesh within the framework of the BRI and its grand strategy offers insights into the rebalancing of power dynamics. The BRI's announcement is primarily motivated by Chinese geo-economics, geopolitical, and geostrategic factors (Clarke 2017; Pantucci & Lain 2016). Firstly, driven by domestic economic challenges, China seeks to establish closer economic ties with South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, through infrastructure development, trade promotion, and improved interconnectivity, mainly through the "Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor" (BCIM) (Tekdal 2018; Y. Wang 2016). This presents investment opportunities for Chinese firms, addresses China's industrial overcapacity, revitalizes its sluggish economy, and fosters domestic development (Johnston 2019; Beeson 2018b). Secondly, the BRI is a vital diplomatic tool for China within its periphery, allowing access to resources, markets and advancing key geopolitical objectives (Clarke 2017). Given India's reservations about the BRI, other countries of South Asia, such as Bangladesh, become an essential player in ensuring regional connectivity (Freeman 2018b; Blah 2018).

Additionally, the BRI holds significance for China regarding energy security, geopolitical influence, and maritime interests (Umbach 2019). The proposed BCIM facilitates China's energy imports from the Persian Gulf and Africa, reducing its dependence on the Malacca Straits where the US wields influence (Zhou and Esteban 2018a). With India displaying reluctance towards the BCIM, Bangladesh becomes an attractive country for China's peripheral diplomacy, serving two purposes: enhancing regional connectivity and

cooperation, enabling China to leverage its power and influence in South Asia, and expanding its geopolitical space (Paul 2019; Roy-Chaudhury 2022). Furthermore, China's emphasis on expanding maritime influence and securing its interests makes Bangladesh a priority for establishing seaports (Chakma 2019; Clarke 2018). Thirdly, the BRI is shaped by rising geostrategic competition in the South Asian region, particularly with India (Brewster 2017). Thus, from a neo-realist perspective, the BRI allows China to engage in soft balancing, undermining Indian power through asymmetric interdependence, strategic reassurance, and deterring the formation of anti-China coalitions. It also aims to promote soft power and increase China's role as a normative power, enhancing the legitimacy of its rising status. Moreover, China seeks to reshape global governance to align with its values, interests, and status.

Similarly, within the context of Bangladesh, the BRI-driven peripheral diplomacy prioritizes Bangladesh as an essential partner, enhancing its bargaining power (Kent and Center 2007) and providing an opportunity to balance its relations with China without provoking India (He 2008). This aligns with neo-realist assumptions of bargaining power (He 2008). Just like the BRI enhances China's bargaining power and capacity for institutional balancing, Bangladesh's increasing significance to China in South Asian regional multilateral settings allows the country to exploit China's uneven power dynamics with India, ultimately promoting its interests. For instance, China's BRI program has spurred other states to accelerate connectivity initiatives across Asia, leading to the geopolitical significance of Bangladesh due to its strategic location. This increased bargaining power has prompted Bangladesh to pursue a balanced diplomatic approach, participating in the BRI platform to mitigate potential influence from any single state power.

However, the integration of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism sheds light on China's soft power diplomacy and the underlying power dynamics at play. Neoliberal institutionalism emphasizes the role of international institutions and cooperation in achieving mutual gains, as China actively engages in the BRI and participates in regional multilateral frameworks with Bangladesh (R. Keohane 2011). This demonstrates China's intention to promote economic connectivity, trade, and infrastructure development, as highlighted by the earlier studies, which can potentially create dependencies and asymmetric power relations between the two countries. China's economic investments and infrastructure projects in Bangladesh under the BRI (Chakma 2022; Uddin 2023; Amin & Nion 2023b; Paul 2019; Calinoff & Gordon 2020; Plagemann 2022; Jain 2018; Chakma 2019; Teo et al. 2019), can lead to a power asymmetry where China, as the dominant actor, wields significant influence over Bangladesh's economic and political decisions. At the same time, neorealism highlights power distribution and states' pursuit of national interests (Waltz 1990). As a rising power, China utilizes its economic capabilities and the BRI to enhance its regional influence and shape the power dynamics in the region, including its relationship with Bangladesh (Mearsheimer and Alterman 2001). Through its economic engagements, China aims to establish dependencies and strengthen its overall power (Gilpin 1981) potentially leading to a power imbalance in China-Bangladesh relations, despite the potential increase in bargaining power and the capability of balancing in foreign policy formulation concerning inter-state relations. This dynamic can shape the decision-making process and limit Bangladesh's ability to assert its interests independently.

Therefore, the combination of neoliberal institutionalism and neorealism provides insights into China's soft power diplomacy in the context of the BRI and China-Bangladesh relations. While the BRI offers potential benefits for Bangladesh's economic development, bargaining power, and capacity for balancing, it also introduces power dynamics where China is dominant, exerting influence over Bangladesh's decision-making process. Understanding these power dynamics is crucial for Bangladesh to navigate its relationship with China under the BRI and safeguard its interests.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic review presents a comprehensive synthesis of the literature about the BRI and its implications for China-Bangladesh relations. This review offers valuable insights into power dynamics within this bilateral relationship by critically analyzing a diverse array of studies. The findings of this review highlight a

predominant scholarly focus on China's pursuit of regional dominance through the BRI, particularly concerning reconfiguring the regional order and countering India's influence. While existing research recognizes the potential benefits and collaborative prospects of China's engagement with Bangladesh under the BRI, a contrasting perspective raises concerns regarding compromised sovereignty and heightened dependency. The multifaceted nature of China's involvement in Bangladesh within the BRI framework is explored in depth, with a particular emphasis on economic dimensions, collaborative endeavors, and the geo-economic underpinnings of the initiative. The reviewed studies present a range of viewpoints, including arguments highlighting reciprocal advantages for Bangladesh and China and apprehensions surrounding China's pursuit of self-interest and offensive mercantilism. The geo-strategic significance of Bangladesh to China is underscored throughout the literature, with an increasing recognition of the importance of fostering cordial bilateral ties. While some studies acknowledge Bangladesh's discerning approach to diversifying its partnerships, others caution against potential geopolitical dependencies resulting from BRI participation. Thus, this systematic review reveals the intricate interplay of power dynamics within China-Bangladesh relations under the BRI framework. It underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of China's strategic calculations, the regional implications of the BRI, and the potential neocolonial dimensions inherent in the initiative.

Future research should investigate the long-term consequences of China's dominance aspirations, particularly its economic, political, and military ambitions. It is crucial to understand the implications for global power dynamics; the challenges posed to existing international norms and institutions, and the impact on the sovereignty and autonomy of other nations. Additionally, there is a need further to explore China's influence over smaller states like Bangladesh, examining the mechanisms through which China exerts its influence and understanding the implications on domestic politics, economic development, and foreign policy choices of these states. Moreover, examining the impact of BRI participation on regional cohesion is vital in analyzing the economic, political, and social implications of BRI projects on regional integration, cooperation, and conflicts. This research would provide valuable insights into the dynamics of China's dominance, its influence over smaller states, and the consequences of BRI participation on regional stability and cooperation.

This systematic review contributes to an advanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted relationship between China and Bangladesh under the BRI. It highlights the necessity for ongoing scholarly inquiry to critically examine this evolving partnership's implications, challenges, and opportunities, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of power dynamics and their ramifications for regional and global geopolitics.

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