

Navigating the Indo-Pacific - India's Strategic and Security Perspectives Amidst China's Belt and Road Initiative

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ABSTRACT

Since the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's geostrategic and economic environment has undergone significant changes globally, particularly in South Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. With this developing project of connectivity, at the centre of which stands India, the latter sees the BRI with increased strategic suspicion and tactical awareness, as well as the possible latent opportunities which it contains. In this research article, the international security and strategic thinking of India is examined regarding the BRI, especially regarding its maritime connections, trade passage, and Indo-Pacific security landscape. The purpose is to critically review the strategic imperative of the growth of BRI not only via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) but also by the growing Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the opportunities available to India to generate a geopolitical and economic benefit.

The research methodology to be used in this study uses a qualitative, interpretative research methodology whose origin lies in geopolitical analysis, regional security systems, and policy discourse. Through analysis of secondary sources such as government white papers, maritime strategy documents, local think tank publications and insight journalism, the study builds an understanding of the extent to which India envisions and reacts to the infrastructural and strategic presence of BRI. As the paper suggests, using thematic content analysis, the dynamics of Indo-Pacific policy of India, which includes its Act East Policy, SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), and strategic relations with the Quad countries, serve as counterbalance instruments to the growing Chinese maritime power.

The study continues to examine the effects of trade and connectivity under BRI on the regional factors of South Asia, questioning the Indian objections to openness, debt diplomacy, and sovereignty, particularly about the smaller South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives. It compares them with other Indian projects like India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the development of Chabahar Port and involvement in multilateral mechanisms to promote maritime order and sustainable connectivity. Particular attention is paid to the maritime sphere, where the approach of the Chinese so-called string of pearls is related to the expectations of port diplomacy and the modernisation of the Indian navy.

This paper will assess India's varying response, as it has adopted diplomatic disengagement with BRI, active regional cooperation, and Instead, India is busy building a discourse of what it terms as inclusive connectivity, built on democratic principles and Sino-South win-win development and providing an alternative to the Chinese model of infrastructure diplomacy which is state driven. The paper also covers internal policy issues of India, such as infrastructural shortage, strategic unity, and maritime security lapse capability, and other aspects that counterbalance a complete regional response to the BRI.

Finally, the study comes up with the conclusion that although BRI challenges India on strategic autonomy and influence in South Asia, nonetheless, it also offers opportunities that India can use to regain its regional dominance, such as multilateral cooperation, strategic connectivity, and maritime security programs. This ambivalence is what defines the heart of the Indian strategic reply to BRI, balancing between opposition and re-imaging within the dynamics of a fast-evolving Indo-Pacific system.

The analysis of this research shall be based on the research objectives of:

1) What shall be India's counter current strategic response to China's Belt and Road

Initiative in South Asia?

2) How shall India bridge the gap of Trade and Connectivity with the current outlook in

a BRI-dominated South Asia?

3) Challenge or Catalyst? What shall be India's challenges, especially with the strategic

maritime dilemma in a region transformed by BRI?

INTRODUCTION

India has always maintained a cautious diplomatic policy with China due to the complex border disputes. The Belt and Road Initiative, which was a direct response to President Obama's "pivot to Asia" policy, has now, over the years has transformed to become a colossal project which weaves together not only trade but also an autobahn-like connectivity, which strengthens China's military and economic power. Some scholars have compared the BRI infrastructure programme to the infamous Marshall Plan, a new form of economic support with conditions attached. China, with its belt and road Initiative, has come in direct competition with the West, which might provide competition to the western developed countries; on the other hand, it provides agency and opportunities to the developing world. However, India has its reservations about the true motive of this Chinese policy, which makes India sceptical about joining.

The Indo-Pacific has become the centre stage of twenty-first-century geopolitics. Stretching from eastern littorals of Africa, through the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia to the western Pacific, the region includes important maritime chokepoints (Malacca, Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb) and represents a significant portion of global trade and energy flows. The region's importance has been enhanced by the simultaneous rise of China and India, a US strategic re-orientation towards Asia, and the growing multilateral economic initiatives to re-order connectivity across Eurasia and beyond (Cooper).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was announced in 2013 but later rebranded from "One Belt One Road," is a combination of an overland Silk Road Economic Belt and a Maritime Silk Road aimed at connecting Chinese ports with those throughout South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Beijing frames the BRI as an aspiration for joint economic development through new infrastructure, markets and finance; however, according to scholars and policymakers, the initiative also has obvious geostrategic implications for regional influence and security (Menon; Robbins).

For India, the BRI is a complex strategic problem. While improved connectivity could in principle foster trade and growth across South Asia, several elements of the BRI, most visibly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which runs through disputed territory, cut to the core of New Delhi's concerns about sovereignty and regional primacy. New Delhi's rejection of aspects of the BRI therefore reflects both legal and strategic objections: CPEC's routing through contested Gilgit-Baltistan, a pattern of large loans and infrastructure deals, which can create long-term dependencies, and port and logistics projects in the Indian Ocean that hold potential dual use value for power projection (Sharma; Neagle).

This study conducts a qualitative, interpretive analysis of India's security and strategic perspectives on the Indo-Pacific in the era of the BRI. It asks: How does India perceive the strategic threats and opportunities posed by the BRI? What are the principal instruments? Are they diplomatic, economic, and naval means by which India seeks to respond? And which policy pathways could enable India to protect sovereignty, sustain regional influence, and offer credible connectivity alternatives? The paper draws on policy statements, academic analyses, and country case studies to map India's stance and to propose actionable recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The available literature about the Belt and Road Initiative generalizes into two camps. One of them focuses on domestic economic drivers: the BRI directs Chinese capital and industrial capacity abroad in order to counter overcapacity, promote growth and to ensure trade-and-energy pathways which are considered essential to Chinese industry (Gong; Menon).

The second camp emphasizes on geopolitical objectives: infrastructure investment and how port construction can create diplomatic bargaining, build dependencies between recipient countries, and a possible influence pattern that serves the long-term People's Liberation Army logistic and strategic access (Robbins; Gong).

Critics often highlight examples that seem to confirm how China is debt trapping various countries, the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, which, following loan problems, was leased by a Chinese state agency over 99 years, but proponents suggest the situation is more complicated and recipient countries have lost agency and responsibility (Robbins; Neagle).

Scholarly interventions that smooth out the discussion observe that much of the BRI projects are a combination of business, political and strategic interest; that some Chinese analysts even refer to the BRI as somewhat defensive, a counter action to U.S. rebalance policy, and to the perceived strategic weakness (Gong).

Some authors demonstrate that the Maritime aspect of the BRI appeals to the historical network, the Maritime Silk Route, to legitimize a revitalized Chinese maritime presence, and to make the idea of infrastructure diplomacy seem an act of restoring relationships in trade.

This framing is also quite powerful politically: it is a combination of cultural-historical legitimacy and contemporary economic policy, allowing Beijing to discuss the MSR as a harmless reversion to pre-modern connectiveness and the critics to interpret port and logistics investment that could potentially have a naval purpose (Robbins; Gong).

India has been receptive to the BRI in atomistic and pragmatic ways, showing its true nature of new multilateral-based policies. New Delhi has been selective in accepting China-led multilateral mechanisms (such as India has joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) but has been opposed to accepting the BRI in its forms that challenge Indian sovereignty (Sharma).

This selectivity is a product of the developmental needs of India, that is, connectivity and investment, and its strategic goals, that is, territorial integrity, regional primacy in the Indian Ocean, and avoidance of structures that would implicitly legitimise claims by rivals (Menon; Sharma).

In the literature, a helpful typology distinguishes Indian actors into (1) economic optimists, who view BRI connectivity as potentially advantageous to trade and regional development; (2) strategic sceptics, who underline encirclement and military implications; and (3) pragmatic reservations, who make selective cooperation without jeopardizing its sovereignty (Sharma).

These categories are projected onto actual policy decisions: India does support other financing and infrastructure initiatives (AIIB membership, bilateral projects) and does not support CPEC or BRI summits which sweep sovereignty disputes under the carpet.

The concept of the Indo-Pacific is propagated by Japan, the United States, Australia and India, focusing on the idea of the region as an integrated sea where the rules, freedom of navigation, and free markets should be the foremost priorities (Wada). The BRI, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision is, therefore, a competition between infrastructure and normative projects, one of which is China-led and state-centric, and the other focused on maintaining liberal standards of trade and partnerships of a diverse nature (Gong; Cooper).

Key case studies focus on the Indian Ocean as the site of contestation. Authors document Chinese port diplomacy from Gwadar to Hambantota and Sittwe and examine how these commercial ports can take strategic significance

as coupled with Chinese logistics, debt conversion, or security agreements (Neagle; Robbins). India's literature considers these tactics can be part of a "String of Pearls" logic that may undermine New Delhi's traditional maritime primacy and jeopardize sea lines of communication that are vital to India's trade and energy lifelines (Menon; Kaura).

Literature also exists on Indian efforts to develop alternatives, namely Chabahar port (with Iran) for access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, the India-Japan Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, and more recently, corridor proposals, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) and enhanced Quad coordination (Kaura; Neagle). These alternative approaches are often pitched as quality, transparent, and rules-based counterpoints to BRI's state-led, loan-driven model (Neagle; Sharma).

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative and interpretive approach based on thematic content analysis. Unlike quantitative approaches that use statistical modeling, qualitative research puts a greater emphasis on interpretation, meaning-making, and analyzing context. This is particularly useful for international relations issues such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) where geopolitical strategies, perceptions and narratives are as important as material infrastructure outcomes.

The sources for this analysis are divided into four broad categories:

Academic literature and Peer reviewed articles: These are studies on China's BRI Motives, Indian response and Indo-Pacific Geopolitics (Gong; Sharma; Robbins).

Policy documents and official statements: India's "Act East" policy, SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, and statements made at BRI forums and Quad meetings offer an insight into New Delhi's positions.

Think-tank reports and strategic commentary: These reflect changing debates in India and worldwide on responses to BRI and Indo-Pacific security challenges (Kaura; Cooper).

Case studies: Specific projects - for example Gwadar Port (Pakistan), Hambantota Port (Sri Lanka), Chabahar Port (Iran), and the IMEC project - are analysed to show how BRI and counter-initiatives play out on the ground (Neagle; Menon).

Thematic coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts throughout sources: sovereignty, strategic autonomy, maritime security, debt dependency, regional partnerships, and alternatives to BRI. These themes are then used to organize the analysis of India's security perspectives.

There are some limitations to the methodology. First, as a qualitative study, it heavily depends on interpretation and secondary sources, which may contain the biases of the authors of the sources, due to their national or institutional positions. Second, because the BRI projects are ongoing, the outcomes are fluid; the results of today's analysis may be outdated within a few years. Despite these limitations, however, qualitative analysis provides a rich and nuanced understanding of India's strategic calculations in the Indo-Pacific.

India's Strategic Responses

India has continuously declined to embrace the BRI model by boycotting the 2017 and 2019 Belt and Road Forums. Official statements stress that connectivity must have the following foundation: sovereignty, territorial integrity, transparency and financial sustainability. By doing so, New Delhi has attempted to delegitimize the strategic underpinnings of BRI and to present itself as a responsible alternative leader (Sharma).

India has undertaken counter-initiatives to the BRI. The most significant one is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) announced in 2023, linking India to Europe through the Arabian Peninsula. This corridor, supported by the U.S. and EU, is positioned as a transparent and sustainable alternative to BRI (Menon).

The Chabahar Port project in Iran is another pillar of India's connectivity strategy, which will provide access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, while bypassing Pakistan. New Delhi has also promoted the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) that connects India with Russia and Europe through Iran and the Caspian Sea. These projects together aim to show the world that India is capable of delivering viable alternatives.

India's maritime strategy, which has been expressed in the SAGAR doctrine (Security and Growth for All in the Region) emphasises cooperative maritime security and regional development. To operationalize SAGAR, India has undertaken naval modernisation - investment in aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines and maritime surveillance systems. It has further enhanced engagement with littoral states through capacity building and joint exercises to signal its intention to retain primacy in the Indian Ocean (Kaura).

India's Act East Policy has developed into a wider Indo-Pacific policy. The Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) with the United States, Japan and Australia has been an important platform to advance the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Though the Quad is not a formal alliance, its naval exercises (Malabar) and joint statements show common worries about China's increasing influence. By joining these like-minded partners, India gets to increase its bargaining power against Beijing (Cooper; Wada).

Despite the fact that India is BRI's opponent, India has not discontinued its engagement with China. India's "issue by issue diplomacy" paves the way for New Delhi to collaborate with Beijing on global issues such as climate change and trade, and to resolutely oppose sovereignty-violating projects such as CPEC. This approach maintains India's strategic autonomy and prevents it from being locked into a purely confrontational situation.

What shall be India's counter-current strategic response to China's Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia?

India's counter-current strategic response should be multilayered: (a) deny strategic legitimacy to projects that violate Indian sovereignty, while remaining open to selective, rules-based cooperation; (b) create and scale credible alternatives in finance and infrastructure; and (c) operationalize maritime and diplomatic measures to maintain India's primacy in the Indian Ocean.

Deny legitimacy where sovereignty is involved. India needs to have a strong and consistent position that projects which cross or implicitly legitimise contested territory (CPEC through Gilgit-Baltistan) are unacceptable. This is not just legal posturing but a strategic baseline: acquiescence would send a signal of erosion of red lines and encourage further projects that corrode New Delhi's influence (Sharma; Menon).

Provide credible and visible alternatives (competitive connectivity). The strategic response needs to include offering concrete alternatives (corridors, ports and finance) with more rapid delivery and improved safeguards (transparency, local content clauses, environmental review). IMEC, Chabahar and increased use of multilateral lenders (with Japan, EU, U.S. partners) should proceed from announcement to implementation with priority funding, not rhetoric. Alternatives should be reframed as 'quality infrastructure' and supported by packaged financing (loan + grant + technical assistance) in order to narrow the immediacy gap that presently favours China (Menon; Neagle).

Leverage partnerships to amplify the reach of India. India can't out-spend China so it must out-coalition China. Strengthen Quad cooperation (practical, projectized), expand co-financing with Japan/EU, and institutionalize India's role in AIIB / other fora to influence project norms. Strategic coalitions are able to crowd in capital for alternatives while raising diplomatic pressure on opaque BRI deals (Cooper; Gong).

Maritime Operational Posture & Neighbourhood Diplomacy. Operationally, increase naval presence, maritime-domain awareness (satellite, MDA sharing) and provide capacity building to littoral states (patrol boats, training, coastal radars). Pair hard security measures with soft power programmes (development, fisheries, health) to ensure that neighbour states remain receptive to Indian overtures rather than become automatic dependents of BRI (Kaura; Robbins).

Competition between narratives and the normative. India should globally articulate a model of connectivity that is based on sovereignty, covering debt sustainability, environmental safeguards and transparency on procurement. This narrative diminishes the political appeal of opaque BRI loans, as well as helps states to negotiate better terms (Sharma).

India's counter current response needs to be coherent (policy+ projects+ diplomacy + maritime presence). Denying the strategic legitimacy of BRI, where it violates sovereignty, while at the same time providing credible, financed alternatives in partnership with like-minded states is the most realistic path towards blunting China's influence in South Asia (Menon; Kaura).

How shall India bridge the gap of trade and connectivity with the current outlook in a BRI dominated South Asia?

Bridging the trade and connectivity gap requires India to address three shortfalls: (A) funding/finance (B) speed/quality of project implementation and (C) integration of regional supply chains and customs facilitation.

Close the financing gap with blended capital. China's advantage is cheap, state-backed, fast finance. India has to mobilize blended finance, concessional loans, and syndicated multilateral packages with Japan, EU and MDBs to alleviate the initial fiscal burden from small states. Establish a regional "Connectivity Fund" with transparent governance and quick-disbursement protocols to match the speed of delivery of BRI (Neagle; Sharma).

Speed up deliverables, single window, project pipelines. India requires a project pipeline (shovel-ready projects) and single window approvals for partner governments, for projects to be contracted and commenced in a short period of time. Chabahar slow rollout indicates the cost of procedure delays IMEC should take aggressive timelines with milestone-based disbursement and accountability (Menon).

Focus on "connectivity niches" which India has a comparative advantage. Focus on corridors which leverage geography and trade complementarities: S. Asia - West Asia corridors (through Chabahar/IMEC), digital connectivity and secure data links, energy grids and hinterland logistics to bind India's industrial clusters to regional markets. Targeted wins (fast customs modernisation, rail improvements to ports) can provide trade gains out of proportion to the size of the win.

Harmonize trade facilitation and regulatory systems. Infrastructure is a necessary, but insufficient. Harmonized customs procedures, e-single windows, mutual recognition of standards, corridor governance bodies (with dispute resolution) will multiply the effect of trade. India should take a leadership on capacity building for customs modernisation in South Asia to reduce non-tariff barriers that reduce value of ports or roads. (Wada; Cooper).

Use private sector and diaspora networks. Incentivise Indian and regional private companies to co-invest in manufacturing and logistics to anchor the trade flows. Use diaspora banking and private equity to match the concessional public finance and create nodes of commerce that are commercially sustainable such as presently dominated by BRI projects.

Challenge or Catalyst? What should be India's challenges, particularly with the strategic maritime challenge in a region transformed by BRI?

The BRI is both a challenge and a catalyst for India; it challenges traditional strategic dynamics while catalyzing policy entrepreneurship and regional cooperation. The port vulnerabilities and Dual-use access denial of the Chinese-funded ports (Gwadar, Hambantota, Kyaukpyu) have commercial rationales, but potential dual-use utility. If Beijing is able to obtain basing or logistic agreements, India is faced with limited manoeuvrability and surveillance, the classic access denial issues (Robbins; Neagle).

Deterioration of neighbourhood power through debt and client-based politics. The debt pressures can turn into strategic dependencies that constrain India's diplomatic clout and access to maritime basing or overflight permission in emergencies, increasing the maritime dilemma of India (Kaura).

Operational overstretch and resource asymmetry, To police or counter every BRI move would overstretch Indian naval and diplomatic resources. China's economic size permits many points of entry, India will have to select priorities wisely (Menon).

Modernization of policies and capacity building. BRI's aggressive implementation has spurred India to modernise its navy, and expedite maritime diplomacy (SAGAR, Quad). These investments, while defensive, are also improving India's capacity to project stability and public goods (Kaura; Cooper).

The formation of coalitions and normative leadership. The competition has encouraged partners to be like-minded, to develop infrastructure norms (quality, transparency) to allow India to spearhead a normative alternative, which can be appealing to middle powers and small littoral states (Sharma; Neagle).

Propose a triage solution to the IOR: (A) harden the strategic periphery (key choke-points and partner harbours) by capacity building and access agreements; (B) rapidly establish interoperable surveillance and logistic nodes (shared MDA, ISR data-links) with Quad and regional navies; (C) pursue the idea of an economic resilience, by contributing to economic projects generating incentive to use Indian aid rather than opaque debt (Kaura; Robbins).

To remain ahead of the game in the Indian Ocean, India needs to keep upgrading its naval capabilities, including air carriers, nuclear submarines, and instruments of maritime domain awareness (Kaura). Enhancing Maritime practice with littoral countries, which include Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Mauritius, will limit the ability of Beijing to establish a strategic presence. The provision of patrol vessels and training programs in India are good move which ought to be internalized (Neagle).

India and china: The balance of Power

The tussle between India and China over the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in South Asia is not just one of infrastructure or economics. At its most basic level, it is an expression of two recurring themes in international relations theory: the balance of power and the security dilemma. These frameworks, articulated over the years by classical and neorealist scholars, offer a lens to understand why India resists Chinese-led connectivity projects, cultivates counter-coalitions, and tensions in the Indo-Pacific continue despite the two states proclaiming peaceful intentions.

The balance of power is one of the oldest principles of international relations, going back to European diplomacy in the wake of the Peace of Westphalia. Central to classical realism was Hans Morgenthau who believed that states attempt to sustain equilibrium to avert the advent of a hegemon (Morgenthau 167). The underlying logic is survival: if one power is dominant, others are threatened with existentialism. Kenneth Waltz, the father of neorealism, later developed this idea further when he stated that the anarchic nature of the international system leads states to balance against concentrations of power, either internally (building their own capabilities) or externally (forming alliances) (Waltz 118).

India's refusal to endorse BRI can be understood in the light of this. By refusing to endorse the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and boycotting Belt and Road Forums, New Delhi indicated that it would not allow Beijing to have economic and geopolitical centrality in South Asia (Sharma).

Instead, India has tried to balance internally by investing in alternative corridors such as Chabahar and India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and externally through the Quad and by partnering with Japan, the U.S. and the EU (Kaura; Cooper).

This is consistent with the balance of threat theory of Stephen Walt who stresses that states balance not only relative to raw power but to perceived intentions and proximity. Because of China's ability to project its influence through South Asian infrastructural developments, this, coupled with the possibilities for obscure lending and military dual use, makes the perception of threat from India's perspective greater (Walt 22). Hence, balancing is rational and necessary in order to preserve autonomy.

The Security Dilemma in The Indo-Pacific

While balancing provides a means for India to resist domination, it also heightens the problem of the security dilemma, a state of affairs memorably formulated by John Herz and expanded on by Robert Jervis. The security dilemma occurs when actions that one state takes to increase its security are seen as threatening by others, creating spirals of mistrust and escalation. (Herz 157; Jervis 62).

China insists that the BRI is purely focused on development and economic progress, but India perceives ports such as Gwadar or Hambantota as potential naval bases and that in turn forces it to expand naval modernization and invest in maritime domain awareness and find external partners (Robbins; Kaura).

On the other hand, Beijing sees India's membership in the Quad and increasing naval cooperation with U.S. and Japan, as a containment policy against its rise. This mutual suspicion is an example of what Jervis has argued to be the case under an anarchic system, that such defensive measures are often offensive in nature (Jervis 74).

The Indo-Pacific is thus a textbook example of the security dilemma: India's balancing behaviour causes fears in Beijing that prompt China to accelerate BRI projects and naval deployments, thereby vindicating India's fears. The lack of binding regional security institutions exacerbates this spiral and makes mistrust the default mode of interaction.

India's balancing efforts in countering BRI is manifested in three areas:

Maritime Power Projection: By boosting the SAGAR doctrine and modernizing its navy, India is making a bid for maritime hegemony in the Indian Ocean. This is internal balancing that counter-balances Chinese influence in Gwadar, Hambantota and Kyaukpyu.

Coalitional Diplomacy: India has been strengthening its relationship with Quad, with the Association of South-East Asian Nations and the Indian Ocean Region (IORA). This external balancing reflects Waltz's prediction of middle powers banding together in order to thwart hegemony (Waltz 126).

Connectivity Alternatives: By investing in Chabahar and IMEC, India is not only creating trade corridors, but also denying China monopoly control over regional infrastructure. These projects represent Morgenthau's idea that balance of power is not static but needs better active measures to check the dominance (Morgenthau 171)

However, balance of power politics is not cheap. Excessive balancing runs the risk of locking India into zero-sum dynamics with China, perpetuating the security dilemma. Waltz reminds us of how balancing can not only stabilize order, but also may entrench rivalries if it is mismanaged (Waltz 132).

Moreover, India can't ignore the fact that the BRI - despite the risks - provides immense opportunities. Access to infrastructure financing, broader markets and trans-national supply chains have the potential to accelerate India's growth. Rejecting the initiative entirely runs the risk of self isolation, particularly if neighbours embrace BRI wholeheartedly. Here is the paradox: balancing protects sovereignty but can lose out on potential economic dividends.

CONCLUSION

Between Caution and Engagement

India's strategy regarding the BRI is consistent with the logic of the balance of power theory and the dangers of the security dilemma that have persisted since the 1950s. By resisting Chinese centrality through internal and external balancing, India is securing its sovereignty and its position in the region. Yet, these same measures drive up the level of mistrust and competition, leading to a spiral that nobody fully wants.

The challenge, therefore, is to locate some calibrated middle path. India must be careful- it should resist projects that go against sovereignty and it should be prepared for maritime contingencies it should not reject the scope of opportunities that the BRI represents. Selective engagement on transparent, rules-based projects, in

combination with pro-active coalition-building, may enable India to reap economic benefits while preventing China from monopolizing the regional order.

In essence, India's strategy should have a dual approach: Balance where it is needed, cooperate where it can. As Morgenthau noted, the balance of power is not an end in itself but rather a way of ensuring autonomy (Morgenthau 180). For India, the BRI is not just a challenge but a test of whether it can manoeuvre between rivalry and opportunity in shaping the Indo-Pacific Order.

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