

China's BRI: From Regional balance to Global Challenge

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Abstract

Belt and Road Initiative is seen with greater skepticism in many countries. United States and India since the inception of the project have criticized and opposed the initiative. . This research is undertaken to explore print media coverage given to BRI in India, China & US. It strives to comprehend the factors which are being debated in Indian and American media blaming this initiative for promoting hostility in international affairs and how Chinese venture is damaging Indo-US interests regionally and globally by looking in to the rhetoric adopted by American and Indian newspapers. The researcher used Indian and American newspapers editorial discourse about BRI and CPEC to understand their perception. After qualitatively analyzing the themes found in their newspapers discourse, it is comprehended that the primary reason for that opposition was their regional and global interests which are at stake due to this project. China with this initiative is not only asserting its self as a regional hegemon in Asia and changing balance of power equation in its favor to challenging U.S. global supremacy by consolidating its sphere of influence abroad, establishing a new world order to serve its interest and erode the one established and led by U.S. and its western allies.

Keywords: BRI; CPEC, Global competition; security challenges

1.1 Introduction

In the last few decades China has attained a prominent position in global politics due to its economic might. Emerging as the second largest economy in the year 2010 to becoming the largest trading partner throughout the world, China has remained the largest contributor to the world GDP for many years. After becoming the world economic giant, in the recent years the country is seen to be actively engaging in world politics and many believe that China seems to be coming out of Deng Xiaoping former doctrine of “To hide our capabilities and bide our time” to play a more efficient and proactive part in international affairs.

Chinese vision of Belt and Road initiative is considered one among those moves by the country to enhance its activities abroad. In 2013, China declared the one-belt Road (OBOR)

project, or Belt and Road initiative, an ambitious project which apparently aims at promoting regional integration, as well as economic cooperation, especially among Eurasian countries. China is committing \$ 1.4 trillion for these infrastructure projects, where it is expected to invest \$ 500 billion in 62 BRI projects from 2017 to 2022. Once the Belt and Road is completed, it can cover 4.4 billion people and generate over \$ 21 trillion in Gross Domestic Product.

Most of the underdeveloped countries that lack basic or advanced infrastructure networks to grow their economies are considering this initiative as an unprecedented opportunity for them, but on the other side, despite the huge chunk of money as invested by China in the infrastructure projects abroad many countries perceive Chinese moves in a more hostile manner. The perception about Chinese activities in these countries is woven around the notion that China intends to achieve its geopolitical ambitions by using economic diplomacy abroad. Since the beginning of the project United States and India have looked upon BRI and its key projects in a more skeptical manner. This skepticism stems from the belief that this colossal investment by China is meant to assert itself as an upcoming super power country, damaging their interests at a regional and global level. This research is undertaken to explore print media coverage given to BRI in India, China & US. It strives to comprehend the factors which are being debated in Indian and American media blaming this initiative for promoting hostility in international affairs and how Chinese venture is damaging Indo-US interests regionally and globally by looking in to the rhetoric adopted by American and Indian newspapers.

1.2 Indo-US opposition to BRI/CPEC

The much acclaimed Chinese Belt and road initiative which primarily aims at enhancing global connectivity and development is also widely considered as a venture which can transform the regional and global dynamics of power struggle. Despite the projects being economic in nature still they have raised suspicions and invited criticism from Washington and New Delhi and has resulted in increased regional tensions (Khan et al., 2018).

Chinese Belt and Road initiative since its inception has sought greater attention in American media and its scholarly circles. Various studies have been conducted in America so far

to evaluate the impact of BRI on participating countries as well as its geopolitical implications for America in this region and beyond. BRI is considered a sign of a shift in Chinese foreign policy under the dynamic leadership of president Xi, and his dream of making China a prosperous and inter-nationally more engaged nation. China's move shows a gradual move from the Deng Xiaoping's policy of "To hide our capabilities and bide our time" to engage more in international politics with the ambition of becoming dominant power in Asia (Meltzer, 2017).

The development of numerous economic zones and establishing connections of Eurasia and Africa with China would definitely make China a dominant economic power in the eastern world . China proposed a cohesive future growth plan, and the U.S. could not offer any economic solution in response (Woodside, 2017). For China, the BRI is helpful in stabilizing its western borders, reshape its economy, propel nonwestern international economic institutions, expand its influence to other countries, diversifying trade routes and above all helping it to circumvent the US pivot to Asia, therefore the post-world war II US supremacy in the Eurasia is expected to be challenged and its core foundations made weakened by the Chinese geo-economic offensive (Cavanna, 2018).

1.3 US stance on China growing threat

U.S. past policies towards China were mostly framed around the notion that a constructive relation with the Chinese state would serve the interests of both states.. Although the policies shifted keeping in view the situations but enhancing the opportunities for cooperation for example North Korea, Climate Change etc., and minimizing the risk of conflicts was the idea behind a long standing Bi-partisan approach towards China (Dollar et al., 2019).

But now U.S. policy towards China seems to be shaped by the belief that the previous track of bilateral relationship favored China and denied the United States in a long-term competition for global leadership. In an effort to break this path, the Trump administration adopted a zero sum unilateral, protectionist, and "America first approach to the" relations with China (Dollar et al., 2019).

China's recent ventures of for example BRI, AIIB and Made in China 2025 is presented in west as threatening the hegemony of the United States in the world , which now exceeds seven decades. The U.S. sudden shift to "America First" in the administration of Trump, clarifies the "US apprehension" that its world dominance is declining against a rising China. It also shows that the United States is now seeking to prevent the former from overriding its dominance in order to preserve American influence for as long as possible. U.S. policy toward China is shifting from engagement to confrontation (Kim, 2019).

The officials from pentagon have too opted to return to "big power" competition with major opponents including China as a component of the White House strategy as it seeks disengagement from counter-terrorism wars. These officials clearly hope to boost U.S. military power in Asia and elsewhere to deter or, if required combat - China. As a result, they pushed Congress to finance more ships, aircraft, missiles and submarines to counter Chinese military reinforcements. They describe the clashes between Washington and Beijing as inevitable due to their incompatible political systems (Lee, 2018).

On the other hand the Chinese government has been presenting BRI, as a signature project of Chinese President Xi Jinping which is meant to link Eurasia as well as Africa to enhance economic collaboration at regional level, improving infrastructure and global harmony and stability. Propelled by the idea of old "Silk Road" Beijing has so far been contending that Belt and Road venture will serve the masses all over the globe" (State Council of the Republic of China, 2015).

1.4 American print media perspective on BRI

As far as the coverage of CPEC in American print media editorial discourse as a sole project is concerned, the project was given a slightest degrees of coverage in their editorials. Belt and Road initiative as a grand initiative has sought the attention of the media because of broader geo political implications of this venture for U.S. American print media seemed to have employed a balanced approach towards the initiative, where on one hand undermining the importance of the project as visible from the lack of coverage given to CPEC, but on the very other hand highlighting

the important implications of the initiative by giving frequent and negative coverage to Belt and Road initiative for posing threats to their core interests. The project framing was found negative with the following dominant theme prevalent in their news discourse.

1.4.1 A Global Challenge

Each country has a presentation of BRI and CPEC in the light of the nature and extent to which it effects their core interest. Therefore one of the prominent and prevalent frame about B&R Initiative in American print media was that of “Global challenge” , where B & Road Initiative is portrayed in a broader picture of China pursuit of "Global power position". Chinese venture is termed as an “ambitious initiative” through which China is trying to mold or change International order in its favour, thus, posing a challenge to current world order. In this broader frame, furthermore its activities in South China Sea along with construction of artificial islets are highlighted and presented as a part of China’s aggressive foreign policy and a move to consolidate its power and establish hegemony in the region. The moves like establishment of Asian infrastructure investment bank, is again perceived as an attempt to challenge Global leadership of USA.

1.4.2 Establishment of China centric world order

The strategic effects of BRI, especially those given by Wang Yiwei of Renmin University and Ji Mingkui of the PLA Academy, who presents Belt and Road Initiative in more geopolitical terms have sought greater attention in America (Chance , 2017).

Along with the print media, many scholars are also looking at the project from a geopolitical perspective. As many wonders at how China has increased the capacity to project power. The mesmerizing go-slow style policy of the pre-Xi year as summarized in the Chinese slogan "Hide and bide", has now been supplanted by an open power play (Ignatius, 2017).

It can be seen that the media and most US scholars see this move as an attempt by China to lay the foundation for a global system that erodes the current global system. As Chinese ports, pipelines, roads and railways will expand trade, investment and infra-structure connections from

Asia to Europe. They will create new markets, integrate the regions which are poorly connected and strengthen the Chinese sphere. Ultimately, they will form the basis of a China-centered global order (Small, 2015).

It has been dubbed as the Chinese version of Marshall Plan, which includes a trillion-dollar complex infrastructure investment and an aid assistance from Kyrgyzstan to Central Europe, extending to Southeast Asia, Africa and even Latin America. President Xi Jinping, who took the "Belt and Road" initiative in a two-day summit, clearly hoped that the geopolitical effects will also be the same. China will consolidate a sphere of influence in Eurasia and make itself a superpower with global influence rivaling, if not exceeding, that of the United States (Washington post, 2017, May 15).

1.4.3 Challenges to international institutions

Xi's trillion-dollar development program, which extends from the Eurasian main-land to the South Pacific, West Africa, and Latin America, is feared by many Americans as an effort by Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) to challenge the security and economic architecture of the current Global order. They fear that China's rise will come at the expense of international institutions and American influence (Greer, 2018). China is setting up its own institutions or molding the current one to meet its needs (New York Times, 2018, February 5).

1.4.4 Establishment of new economic architecture

One of the concern found about Chinese much acclaimed venture is that it will help China to achieve its strategic goal of becoming a strong trading force. This can result in China reshaping and asserting its influence in global economy while employing its economic and diplomatic tools to support one another (Heath, 2016).

China in their view seeks to establish new international economic architecture to work parallel to the economic institutions dominated by US such as the Bretton Woods system, WTOs and the IMF. Or the dollar based global financial system (Wethington & Manning, 2015). For some, the BRI and the AIIB represent a tipping point" that can pose challenge to the economic

system established by America, whilst introducing the beginning of the "Sino-centric" one (Wethington & Manning, 2015).

China's frustration is well known for its small representation in the Bretton Woods institutions, therefore the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank's funding support for BRI projects strengthen the notion that China wants to reshape its institutional environment (Heath, 2016). In spite of its promises to promote a comprehensive framework, BRI looks "tacitly exclusive" of the United States and its interests (Fallon, 2015). Thus re-establishing Eurasia as the biggest global economic market and causing a shift from the global financial system based on the dollar usage (Djankov et al., 2016).

1.4.5 Posing security threat

The perception about BRI in America is not only confined to China using its stronger economic power to achieve its long-term strategic goals but the security risks the initiative poses to US interests in the region have also sought greater attention. Following arguments are given to assess how China poses security threats to US through this initiative and acts as a global challenge.

A. Aggression in the South China Sea

In the context of China's activities in the South China Sea, which are considered "assertive" by western media as well as many scholars also shaped interpretation of BRI place in China's larger strategy. China's actions do not show much respect for the interests of other countries, and thus the Americans' confidence in Chinese foreign policy is diminished to be truly constituting a "win-win" initiative (Overholt, 2015). As one scholar pointed out, "Assertiveness" in the security matters result in economic policy being seen as assertive too (Heath, 2016).

China is viewed, as choosing to further its interests, ready to tense its relations with other states, or trying to undermine America's standing in Asia and beyond. Those who notices this assertiveness in Chinese actions claims that the BRI is another plan to enhance China's geopolitical gains, hence calling it a more zero sum geopolitical game (Heath, 2016).

B. Challenge to US hegemony in Indian Ocean

The Maritime Silk Road, which is an integral part of China's Belt and Road Initiative challenges the current order in many waters in which the US Navy has enjoyed domination since World War II. The Indian Ocean, the third largest water body on the planet, and a region that many people think is also the main theater of global competition in the 21st century is also among it.

Before China's presence in IOR through Maritime Silk Road originally the maintenance of security in Indian Ocean was the job played by US and Indian navies. Now with Maritime Silk Road China presence in IOR is unavoidable which challenge US hegemony as established after second world war . Construction of China port in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Maldives in India's sphere of influence has already created angst in New Delhi, which has taken steps to expand its sea power. Thus, the United States can find itself in the middle of a strategic competition between China and India at sea (Luft , 2017).

Approaching the Arabian Sea, through Maritime Silk Road will bring China's navy closer to the Gulf than ever before, from which China imports half of its oil. China has already invested heavily in the port of Gwadar, which is expected to become a center for Chinese naval repair and maintenance. China has also completed construction of a naval base in Djibouti, the Horn of Africa where thousands of troops are expected to be deployed soon. This type of naval presence is only 250 miles from the Strait of Hormuz and the strategic point of the Bab el- Mandeb, which extends to the Red sea and the Suez Canal and will force the United States and its allies whose supremacy in these waters is still unmatched, to include new maritime players and develop new rules of engagement to promote security with Chinese presence in these regions, rather than suppressing it (Luft , 2017).

C. Security involvement in BRI countries

Another concrete concern found in the United States is that the Chinese government financial investment in Belt & Road projects would pave way for its security forces to more actively

engage outside of China. Many have noted that Peoples Liberation Army or other forces have been working on BRI projects to protect Chinese citizens who are threatened or harmed by terrorists (Djankov et al., 2016).

For this reason it is believed that the foremost geostrategic challenge of this era is not violent Islamic extremists or a resurgent Russia. It is the impact that China's ascendance will have on the U.S. led international order, which has provided unprecedented great-power peace and prosperity for the past 70 years (Allison, 2015).

2. Indian concerns

China Pakistan Economic Corridor which is the flagship project of BRI has intensified India's already strained relations with Pakistan, as the project brings two of its historic and rival nuclear powers together. The infrastructure development by the Chinese government in the disputed territory of India and Pakistan is perceived as a threat to Indian sovereignty and territorial integrity (Kajal, 2018).

In addition to this, the development of Gwadar port and militarization of makran coast with development of bases for protection purpose is also a source of concern for India. Heavy Chinese investment in the port and infrastructure development and access of its naval vessels into ports of Pakistan would initiate a competition between China and India for control over the Arabian Sea (Paneerselvam, 2018).

Resultantly, India looks upon BRI and CPEC as strategized to fulfill China's geopolitical and security ambitions rather than projects intended to enhance trade and connectivity. India is strongly concerned and fears the project would give China a strong foothold in the region by compromising Indian influence, therefore intensifying geopolitical tensions between the two arch rivals (Ali, 2019).

2.1 CPEC framing in Indian print media

Keeping in view the above discussion, the print media discourse of countries like USA and India who apparently have divergent interests and regional rivalry with China and Pakistan

have an obvious objection to Chinese Grand initiative BRI and its flagship project CPEC. A perceived narrative in the Indian print revolves around the fact that the initiative and all its projects as posing threat to their regional and global interests. The newspapers from both the countries adopted a critical approach and have negatively portrayed the initiative in their respective newspapers. Following were the dominant themes in Indian Print media editorial discourse about CPEC and OBOR.

2.1.1 Upsetting regional balance

One of the dominant frames in Indian print media discourse was related to regional “Balance of power”. B & R Initiative along with CPEC has been perceived as disturbing regional balance of power equation. China has been portrayed in both the analyzed Indian Newspapers as to alienate India in the region by encircling it with this grand initiative. OBOR and CPEC are altogether perceived as disturbing regional balance of power for following reasons.

2.1.2 Route issue

When it comes to the assessment of Indian media news discourse about CPEC, route controversy was the initial cause why the project invited criticism in the country, and had been opposed since then as it is jeopardizing the status of POK, claiming the area belongs to India. The official stance of India on CPEC can be understood through the statement of the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi who previously has maintained that CPEC is compromising the sovereignty of India (Pant, 2017). Similar account was reiterated by official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs of India that China-Pakistan Economic Corridor violates the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of India. A project can never be accepted by a country which violates the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of that country (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2018).

Gilgit Baltistan – geographically is an integral part of India’s extant claim. Any corridor which is built through a contested territory would be strongly opposed by India (Singh, 2016). The corridor has established a link between the two historical rivals of India. Chinese

infrastructure development in the contested territory between India and Pakistan is an infringement upon the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of India (Kajal, 2018).

2.1.3 Security threats

India's view point about BRI and CPEC has been developed over a period of time. Primarily the reaction against it came due to its route problem, but India's stance on the initiative became more adverse and hostile as Chinese plans in the sub-continent and Indian Ocean area became clear.

As the projects under CPEC started to get materialized, new reservations on part of Indian government and media had started to surface. The mainstream media kept speculating that, under the umbrella of CPEC Pakistan's defense mechanism is getting strengthened specially Pakistan's military and navy which are alarming for India as it can be used against the country. As according to them China's activities shows a far less benign motive. Through CPEC, China has increased funding to the Pakistan military which can be further used against India in future (Hindustan Times, 2017, May 11).

The concerns became more stronger as Chinese contingent participated on Pakistan Day's parade in Islamabad. The presence of Chinese military personnel in Pakistan occupied Kashmir, the presence of Chinese ships in the area, the establishment of a naval base in Gwadar, training centers in Karachi and the supply of eight submarines are a major threat to India and a signal that India must take steps to re assert itself against the East and North side of the two-front conflict. India also needed to ensure security of its maritime borders in the wake of growing threats (Kajal, 2018).

2.1.4 Containment strategy for India

The establishment of Gawadar port is among the many key projects designed under China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Besides Indian objection to CPEC route, the construction of Gawadar port by China is also a source of major concern for the country. The same angst is manifested in Indian print media discourse which has portrayed it as a venture to tie down Indian

resources in Indian Ocean. Pakistan's Navy has been seen by China as a helpful partner in achieving its strategic interests in the Arabian Sea, avoiding predicaments in the eastern Indian Ocean region (Hindustan Times, 2019, January 4).

As a whole the collective rhetoric of Indian print media on CPEC is a display of an entrenched mentality that CPEC has underlying geopolitical ambitions, predominantly Chinese motives to encircle India in to the Indian Ocean in a bid to hamper its rise, also causing damage to Indian regional interests and an urgency to deal the threat accordingly.

Chinese investment of \$ 60 billion in CPEC, which is a network of infrastructure projects, is part of its larger goal of curbing India's rise in Asia. China has long used its economic investment for strategic expansionism, especially in countries that share borders with India (maritime or territorial). Whether it is Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka or the Maldives, China has used the funding in order to wield its influence. In Pakistan, the Gawadar port which is the terminating point of CPEC will allow Beijing to dominate the Arabian Sea and reach the west coast of India (Dutt, 2019). Chinese presence in Gwadar port is therefore a threat to India as it is 400 nautical miles off the Indian western border of Gujarat and also to its investment in Chahbahar port which is barely 72 km away from Gawadar (Kajal, 2018).

Many analysts believe that, the OBOR will help China strengthen its agenda to ensure that the Indian Ocean no longer be dominated by India alone. Beijing is intending to pursue this goal by using the ports for military purposes as well (such as Djibouti and Gwadar). The ports can be used for its ships and submarines both for forced projection and to guard its vulnerable maritime supply routes from the Gulf region via the Straits of Malacca to eastern China. Currently, though, the Indian Navy can make matters difficult for China in the wake of a confrontation, but that edge may not last longer with the Chinese working on the project with alarming efficiency (Raza, 2017).

China strategy towards India which has been struck in strained relations with China for more than half a century seems to be similar to a noose woven to encircle and confine India within its own backyard rather than an establishment of peaceful trade linkages (Rahman, 2010).

With all the persistent reservations regarding BRI and CPEC, it is not possible for India to believe the fundamental Chinese assertion that the initiative is a financial undertaking without having any geopolitical motivations behind it. As all roads would lead to China under BRI resulting in Chinese power flowing along the supply chains as well as logistical paths that it will create and manage (Hindustan Times, 2017, May 11).

Belt and Road Initiative which was inaugurated with the vision of promoting peace and prosperity across the globe have not received the same appraisal in many countries as usually China has been credited for. The trillion dollars investment incurred by Chinese in infrastructure oriented projects is seen by many as a scheme originated to achieve the grand geopolitical motives of achieving hegemony in regional and global politics.

India and America are among those few countries who are persistently employing this rhetoric and propagating a negative propaganda against the project because both of them are threatened in their own sphere of interests. India which believes China is disturbing the balance of power equation in Asia, while United States perceives the Belt and Road initiative as a challenge for its Global supremacy. Both the countries have convergence of interest in opposing and preventing China from achieving its grand geopolitical objectives. America and India have already concluded a nuclear agreement back in 2005 to manage the same threat of Chinese ascendancy to global power position. It is for this reason the bilateral cooperation between India and U.S. are now strengthening with each passing day and are mainly directed towards countering the common enemy China. United States is indirectly putting pressure on China by empowering India in the region, which U.S. has always seen as a balancer against rising global power China. But whenever U.S. adhered to the pro-India policy, China seeks to reverse this disturbance in the South Asian Balance of Power by supporting Pakistan.

Due to all these crucial developments in South Asian region, the balance of power dynamics of south Asia which is usually described as a “Strategic quadrangle” involving China-Pakistan strategic partnership vs. Indo-US strategic partnerships is now becoming more

intensified where the United States and India are tilting towards one side whereas China and Pakistan on the other, while opposing each other.

1.9 Conclusion

The rhetoric adopted for Belt and Road initiative and CPEC in American and Indian newspapers as well as their scholarly circles was clearly negative and frequently presented with greater skepticism. There was a convergence in their stance about the project as possessing geopolitical implications for both states at regional and global level.

From an Indian perspective China and Pakistan both are damaging the longstanding stance India holds about the territory of Pakistan which provides route for CPEC and poses threat to its territorial integrity and claim over the region. Secondly, China is achieving another geopolitical advantage through the project by containing India's rise by investing enormously in Indian neighboring countries as well as getting an excess to Indian Ocean through constructing Gwadar port in Pakistan where Indian supremacy exists. Chinese presence is believed to create an atmosphere of Competition for both regional powers to establish and sustain their dominance. This initiative for these reasons is termed as threatening the regional balance of power equation and Chinese moves are presented as establishing its hegemony in the region by containing India.

On the other side the American narrative shows that the project is considered the part and parcel of the significant shift occurred in Chinese foreign policy to assertively engage in world politics whilst challenging the supremacy which U.S. enjoys at global level. It is also believed that Chinese influence will be extended in the countries where it is gearing up to start economic diplomacy as well as through establishing its own economic architecture to make the project more financially viable. All these steps are interpreted as directed towards attaining the super power status and posing a challenge to global world order led by U.S.

The research also concludes that the framing of CPEC and BRI in both the countries print media lacked objectivity and the media took full cognizance of their core national interests when the project was framed and discussed.

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