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Maritime Power and Infrastructural Statecraft: A Comparative Study of China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Coastal Zones

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Abstract

This paper studies the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its significant impact on littoral regions around the world. It explains how the BRI began and how it has expanded over time through both land and maritime routes, especially focusing on the Maritime Silk Road, which is changing global trade, infrastructure, and sea connectivity. The study also looks at China's rapid naval modernization, such as the development of submarines, surface ships, and aircraft carriers, and how this has increased China's maritime assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea, where its actions have caused rising tensions. Through detailed case studies of BRI port projects in Africa, Eurasia, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Indian Ocean, the paper examines the strategic, economic, and political effects of China's global investments. At the same time, it highlights various challenges, including concerns about debt sustainability and unequal partnerships. Despite these issues, the BRI is seen as a powerful tool that could secure vital trade routes, encourage economic cooperation, and expand China's global influence. Overall, the paper presents a thoughtful analysis of how the BRI is reshaping littoral corridors and influencing future global trade and power structures.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Coastal Zones

Introduction

Launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a far-reaching infrastructure and connectivity program spearheaded by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Initially known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), the initiative originally included the term "strategy" in its description; however, this was later omitted to prevent misinterpretation or suspicion among prospective partner countries. In 2017, the BRI was formally incorporated into the PRC's constitution, reflecting its central role in China's long-term strategic vision. The BRI consists of two core components: the Silk Road Economic Belt, which emphasizes land-based networks connecting Asia and Europe via road and rail infrastructure, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which focuses on developing sea routes linking Chinese ports to regions including Southeast Asia, Africa, Eurasia, and Eu-

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rope. Although the BRI's official narrative highlights goals such as regional cooperation, economic development, and cultural interaction, it is also widely interpreted as a mechanism for China to manage domestic industrial overcapacity and enhance its access to international markets. As of 2017, the BRI encompassed over 70 countries, accounting for more than 65% of the global population and over 40% of the world's GDP. The initiative, slated for completion by 2049 marking the PRC's centennial is described by Beijing as a pathway to mutual development and prosperity. However, analysts and critics argue that the BRI is equally a vehicle for China to enhance its geopolitical influence and challenge the unipolar global order. Many suspect that beneath its development rhetoric, the initiative supports China's aspirations for a more bipolar world, with itself positioned as a counterweight to Western dominance. Despite international skepticism, China continues to push forward with large-scale investments across Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe, particularly targeting developing and underdeveloped regions. These investments largely focused on infrastructure such as roads, ports, and energy facilities are perceived as mutually beneficial by host nations facing infrastructure deficits. According to the World Pensions Council (WPC), non-Chinese Asian countries alone require nearly $900 billion annually in infrastructure investment, a gap the BRI attempts to help fill. Nonetheless, concerns remain about the sustainability and underlying intent of these projects. Many countries already face trade imbalances with China, and critics argue that China's dominant economic position in BRI-related trade will only deepen. Additionally, the potential for political leverage, debt dependency, and strategic influence has led to accusations of "debt trap diplomacy." Still, China maintains that the BRI is a collaborative endeavor aimed at fostering long-term development and connectivity across continents.

Evolution in BRI

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is aligning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the historical legacy of the Ancient Silk Road, which served as a trade and cultural link between China and the Western world. Historically, this route facilitated the travels of figures such as Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, symbolizing East-West connectivity across the Eurasian landmass. In the modern context, this ancient trade network serves as the conceptual foundation for the "Belt" component of the BRI, which emphasizes overland connections. Simultaneously, the "Road" aspect of the initiative traces the maritime exploration routes of Admiral Zheng He, reinforcing southward naval connectivity much like the historical sea routes once did. In essence, the Belt signifies land corridors in the northern hemisphere, while the Road represents maritime pathways in the southern hemisphere reflecting the dual structure of historic trade dynamics. Participating countries view the BRI as a catalyst for infrastructure-led development, with expectations that it will boost trade, stimulate economic growth, and integrate them more deeply into global economic processes. For many, the BRI represents an alternative to the existing Western-dominated economic order, offering a fresh growth trajectory anchored in transcontinental cooperation. Analysts have drawn parallels between the geopolitical vision embedded in the BRI and Sir Halford John Mackinder's Heartland Theory. As a foundational figure in the fields of geopolitics and geostrategy, Mackinder proposed in Democratic Ideals and Reality (1919) that global dominance hinged on control of the "Heartland"—the central region of Afro-Eurasia, then dominated by the Russian Empire. He divided the world into three strategic zones: the World-Island (encompassing Asia, Europe, and Africa), Offshore Islands (such as the British Isles and Japan), and the Outlying Islands (including the Americas and Oceania). His famous assertion—"Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World-

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Island. Who rules the World-Island commands the World." Emphasizes the geopolitical significance of central Eurasia.

Today, some political theorists and strategists interpret the BRI as a modern manifestation of Mackinder's ideas. Through the development of transcontinental trade routes and strategic infrastructure, China is seen as seeking greater influence over the Afro-Eurasian heartland, thereby reshaping global power dynamics in its favor.

Asia, Europe, and Africa through key trade corridors.

Numerous governments and independent experts have expressed concerns that the People's Republic of China (PRC), through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), may be engaging in a modern form of neocolonialism. This skepticism stems from the PRC's approach of channeling massive investments into economically vulnerable countries—primarily through loans provided by Chinese state-controlled financial institutions. These loans are often secured with collateral such as strategic infrastructure assets (e.g., ports, mines), or agreements involving commodity supplies, raising fears of what critics call "debt-trap diplomacy." Several real-world examples have already fueled this narrative, prompting warnings from policy circles and civil society alike.

In response to such critiques, the Chinese government defends its strategy by asserting that it is offering access to Chinese markets for goods from partner countries, often at favorable prices. Furthermore, Beijing emphasizes that its investments are not merely transactional but developmental focusing on building infrastructure, stimulating industrial growth, creating jobs, and transferring technology to partner nations, thus contributing to their broader economic progress. Despite these claims, skepticism persists, even among advanced economies. Notably, Italy and Greece, both G-7 or EU member states, have formally joined the BRI, signaling a degree of endorsement from within the Western bloc. Still, influential European leaders have voiced caution. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has stressed the need for reciprocity in all BRI related dealings something she argues is currently missing. Similarly, French President Emmanuel Macron, during his 2019 visit to China, reminded the PRC that the ancient Silk Road was never a one-sided affair, nor was it solely Chinese in character or benefit. His remarks underscored the importance of mutual exchange rather than unidirectional gain in any global economic partnership.

The Maritime Silk Road and Littoral States

The study indicates that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is likely to reshape global maritime networks, enhancing connectivity for countries involved in the project. One of the primary improvements expected is a reduction in the number of transshipments, which can, in turn, lead to a significant rise in bilateral export volumes. This transformation is expected to be driven by a reconfiguration of maritime supply chains, entailing not only the development of new infrastructure but also a revision of the existing patterns of material flow. The result would be more streamlined, efficient, and cost-effective logistics systems at a global level. The research also underscores the importance of strategic maritime chokepoints—such as the Suez Canal, Panama Canal, and the Strait of Malacca—in the global shipping network. The BRI's influence on these vital nodes could lead to notable shifts in regional and international shipping routes, particularly for countries that rely heavily on these maritime passages. Importantly, the study finds that the impacts of the BRI are not uniformly distributed. Countries more deeply integrated into the BRI framework stand to gain more, especially in terms of enhanced trade connectivity and logistics

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efficiency. This unequal distribution suggests that while the BRI could spur widespread changes in trade patterns and maritime infrastructure, the extent of the benefits will vary depending on a country’s geographic location and level of participation. Ultimately, the reorganization of maritime networks prompted by the BRI may lead to a broader re-globalization of trade, requiring participating nations to rethink their roles in the international supply chain. Though the long-term implications are still unfolding, the initiative holds the potential to transform global trade dynamics in profound and lasting ways.

China: A Rising Sea Power

Chinese naval modernization is a crucial aspect of China's comprehensive military modernization efforts, reflecting the country's increasing ambitions and evolving strategic priorities.

Submarine Force Development

China has prioritized the expansion and modernization of its submarine fleet, resulting in the world's largest and most advanced tactical submarine force. This includes both conventional diesel-electric submarines and nuclear-powered vessels. The emphasis on undersea warfare capabilities suggests a strategic choice to challenge potential adversaries, particularly the United States, in the maritime domain. Surface Fleet Upgrades. The PLAN has significantly upgraded its surface fleet with the introduction of modern destroyers, frigates, and corvettes. These vessels are equipped with advanced weapons systems, sensors, and combat management systems, significantly enhancing China's naval combat capabilities.

Aircraft Carrier Program. China has made substantial progress in developing its aircraft carrier capability, including the construction and commissioning of its first domestically built carrier. This represents a significant leap in China's ability to project power beyond its coastal waters, marking its entry into the elite group of nations with carrier capabilities. Advanced Weapons Systems. The modernization effort includes the development and deployment of sophisticated anti-ship and land-attack cruise missiles, as well as improved air defense systems on naval platforms. These advancements significantly enhance the PLAN's offensive and defensive capabilities.

Command, Control, and Intelligence

China has invested heavily in improving its naval command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities. These enhancements are crucial for modern naval operations and network-centric warfare.

Amphibious Warfare Capabilities

The PLAN has expanded its amphibious warfare capabilities, potentially with scenarios involving Taiwan in mind. This includes the development of large amphibious assault ships and associated landing craft. Naval Aviation. Modernization efforts extend to naval aviation, encompassing the development of carrier-based aircraft, improvements in maritime patrol capabilities, and enhancements in anti-submarine warfare aircraft.

China's Maritime Incidents and Law Enforcement

A comprehensive examination of China's maritime law enforcement operations concerning Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam reveals a consistent pattern of behavior that undermines international maritime norms and contributes to instability in the South China Sea region. Indonesia. China's maritime law enforcement activities near Indonesia's Natuna Islands reflect a clear disregard for Indonesia's sovereign rights within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Beijing's justification—asserting these waters as part of its so-called "traditional fishing grounds"—stands in direct conflict with the 2016 South China Sea arbitration ruling, which invalidated claims of historic rights that exceed the limits established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), unless explicitly recognized under Article62(3). This friction underscores the broader legal and geopolitical tension between China's historical claims and Indonesia's UNCLOS-based maritime entitlements.

Malaysia

China's conduct near Malaysia, especially in the vicinity of the Luconia Shoals, underscores its broad maritime assertions. The entry of Chinese state vessels into Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)—notably in the case involving the Haiyang Dizhi—brings into question China's compliance with Article 58(3) of UNCLOS, which obligates states to respect the rights of coastal nations. Such actions may represent a violation of Malaysia's sovereign entitlements within its EEZ.

Philippines

China's maritime law enforcement actions against Philippine vessels—particularly around Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal—openly contradict the 2016 arbitral tribunal decision on the South China Sea. Incidents such as ramming Filipino boats and seizing catches from local fishermen directly violate the Philippines' sovereign entitlements and breach China's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Additionally, China's obstruction of resupply efforts to the Second Thomas Shoal and the mass deployment of vessels near Thitu Island reflect an ongoing pattern of nonadherence to international legal norms and persistent dismissal of the tribunal's ruling.

Vietnam

The ramming and eventual sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands exemplifies the growing assertiveness of China's maritime law enforcement activities. These actions breach Articles 74(3) and 83(3) of UNCLOS, which require disputing states to act with restraint, refrain from unilateral measures, and engage in sincere cooperation to resolve maritime boundary issues peacefully. More generally, China's maritime enforcement activities in the South China Sea demonstrate an ongoing strategy to assert sovereignty and so-called "historic rights" based on the nine-dash line claims that were ruled invalid by the 2016 arbitral tribunal decision. These actions violate the legitimate maritime rights of countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, and present a serious challenge to the rules-based international maritime order. By favoring unilateral claims over the cooperative frameworks and legal obligations outlined in UNCLOS, China's behavior threatens regional stability and weakens adherence to international law in the Asia-Pacific region.

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BRI and AFRICA

Africa remains one of the most economically vulnerable regions globally, grappling with deeprooted poverty and underdevelopment. Despite these urgent needs, Western nations have shown limited interest in investing in Africa due to high perceived risks and uncertain returns. Moreover, Western financial institutions often impose stringent conditions for extending loans demanding structural reforms that many African governments find difficult to implement. This, combined with the historical trauma of colonization, has fostered deep-seated suspicion of Western involvement. Recognizing these challenges, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has strategically positioned itself as a more empathetic and reliable development partner through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has made a conscious effort to differentiate its approach byassuring African countries that it has no intention of seizing strategic assets in case of loan defaults. It has emphasized a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of its BRI partners and has consistently asserted that it does not seek regime change or political influence in participating countries. Despite criticisms—especially from Western analysts—that Chinese loans may result in debt dependency or "debt-trap diplomacy" due to opaque lending terms, the PRC has actively engaged in soft power diplomacy to mitigate these concerns. Beijing often frames its narrative through a shared anti-colonial past, asserting that China, too, was once exploited by Western powers. This narrative strengthens China's image as a sympathetic partner rather than a neocolonial actor. China also invokes historical ties with Africa, notably referencing the peaceful maritime expeditions of Admiral Zheng He during the Ming dynasty, which are portrayed as symbols of mutual trade and cultural cooperation. According to Chinese scholars, some members of Zheng He's fleet even settled in parts of East Africa, including present-day Kenya (Chan, Ying-Kit, 2019). To reinforce its peaceful intentions, the PRC has launched several education initiatives, such as scholarships and joint research programs, and regularly emphasizes that the BRI is driven by economic and social cooperation—not by military or political motives. However, skepticism persists. Howard W. French, a prominent critic of BRI, points to the Chinese worldview of 'tianxia'—suggesting that China's foreign policy may be underpinned by a civilizational belief in its destined global leadership. French argues that China views its expanding influence as part of a historical mission to reclaim its rightful place at the center of the global order.

In aligning the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) with the BRI, Beijing has amplified its vision of creating a multipolar world where developing nations play a central rolein global economic governance. This model contrasts starkly with the Western-led unipolar system and is presented as a more inclusive, equitable, and pragmatic approach to development. While critics warn that such alignment might deepen African countries' dependency on China, many African leaders have publicly defended the BRI, asserting that it aligns closely with their Agenda 2063 development blueprint. These leaders argue that China remains one of the few global actors genuinely willing to support African nations in becoming meaningful players in international trade.

Nevertheless, the situation is complex. The PRC's own economic slowdown and the broader volatility of the global economy raise concerns about the long-term sustainability of Chineseled infrastructure investments. With several African nations approaching deadlines for loan repayments, the coming years will be critical in evaluating whether the BRI can deliver on its promis-

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es—or whether concerns about debt sustainability and sovereignty will resurface more prominently.

BRI and Eurasia (EAEU)

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is composed of five member states: Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia. Among them, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus have already established a customs union, while Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are in the process of achieving a similar status. This group of countries holds significant geostrategic importance for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) due to their central location along the primary land corridor connecting China and the European Union. Efficient connectivity through this region is essential for realizing the logistical and trade benefits that the BRI promises to China, the broader Eurasian region, and Europe. A large number of BRI land routes traverse the territories of these countries. One of the most vital routes is the Trans-Siberian corridor, which is seen as a promising channel for achieving the BRI’s goals of reduced transportation time and lower shipping costs between Asia and Europe (Czerewacz-Filipowicz, 2019). The ongoing expansion of trade between China and Europe, in terms of both volume and value, has created an urgent need for reliable, fast, and cost-effective transportation options. Compared to maritime shipping, overland freight via rail offers faster delivery, and in comparison to air freight, it is more economically viable. However, the current rail network still faces challenges. Long transit times, frequent cargo transfers, and cumbersome customs and documentation processes have made overland trade less competitive and, in some cases, impractical.

The situation has been further complicated by geopolitical tensions, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the imposition of sanctions on Russia by several Western countries, which have disrupted cross-border trade flows. For China, advancing this corridor is not only about external trade. It is also a critical part of its domestic strategy to develop its western and northwestern regions, which remain economically underdeveloped compared to the coastal provinces. Recent developments indicate that the Trans-Siberian corridor is undergoing significant upgrades and is already being extensively used for transporting goods between Asia and Europe.For this segment of the BRI to deliver long-term, sustainable outcomes, there needs to be a coordinated effort and mutual understanding among the European Union, EAEU member states, and the Chinese government. One of the key obstacles is the prevailing skepticism toward Russia’s role in the region, with many countries viewing Moscow’s influence with caution. Additionally, underlying tensions between Russia and China, which go beyond economic issues, could potentially hinder cooperation, even though both nations stand to benefit substantially from improved trade relations.

From a regional perspective, the EAEU countries have the opportunity to experience substantial economic growth if they successfully position themselves as a logistical hub linking

China with Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

However, the current global trade landscape is marked by a significant Chinese trade surplus, especially with the EU and EAEU (Pomfret, 2018). This imbalance means that freight trains moving from China to Europe are often full, while the return journeys carry far fewer goods. The majority of exports from China to Europe and Eurasia consist of industrial and manufactured goods. Several land corridors have been established to facilitate trade between China and a wide range

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of regions—not just the EU and EAEU, but also Central Asia and the Middle East, which holds strategic importance as a major supplier of energy resources to China. These corridors extend across the continent, reaching destinations as far west as the Netherlands and Spain. Yet, a major challenge lies in managing high volumes of cargo at key logistical transition points, such as the border crossing at Poland, which has emerged as a significant bottleneck.

Addressing these issues—particularly those related to infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and administrative efficiency—requires concerted political cooperation, which is a central aim of the BRI. Once these foundational challenges are resolved, there is broad optimism among stakeholders that the BRI will not only enhance transportation networks but also drive comprehensive economic development across participating nations.

BRI and CCE (Central & East Europe)

Chinese investments, particularly in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, align with Dunning's Investment Development Path (IDP) theory. However, deeper analysis reveals that the motivations behind these investments are more complex than standard foreign direct investment (FDI) patterns. China views the CEE as a strategic gateway to the more lucrative European Union (EU) common market, making investment in infrastructure and logistics in this region a logical move (Bielinski et al., 2019). A unique aspect of the CEE region is the mixture of countries within and outside the EU. This distinction influences the type and scaleof investment, as EU member countries have access to European funding mechanisms, while non-EU states often rely on external financing.

As a result, China has increasingly channeled financial and developmental assistance, primarily in the form of loans, to Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries outside the EU. According to Dunning’s Investment Development Path (IDP) model, a country's net outward investment position (NOIP) correlates with its economic development level, typically assessed through GDP per capita. The model outlines five stages of progression, where nations move from being net recipients of foreign direct investment (FDI) to becoming prominent outward investors. However, later modifications to the IDP model acknowledge that certain states may skip stages and accelerate along the development path. China is frequently highlighted as a key example of such "leapfrogging" behavior. Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) is generally driven by four key motivations: the pursuit of natural resources, access to new markets, efficiency gains, and the acquisition of strategic assets. Within the CEE-16 group, Chinese investments have been primarily directed toward countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Lithuania. In contrast, investment levels in countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia remain comparatively low. Other nations within this cohort include Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Romania, and Slovenia. Notably, a significant portion of Chinese investment is concentrated in the Balkans, a region offering strategic logistical benefits—especially for transporting goods from the Chinese-operated port of Piraeus in Greece into Western European markets. China’s substantial investment in the Piraeus port illustrates this strategic approach. However, financing remains a critical concern. Chinese backed projects are predominantly funded through loans that typically require sovereign guarantees, placing the financial risk on recipient countries. If these nations default, they risk losing control over strategic assets—as demonstrated by Greece’s experience with the Piraeusport. Such outcomes have raised alarms among countries involved in the Belt and Road.

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Initiative (BRI), especially across the Afro-Eurasian corridor.

Another ongoing issue is the trade imbalance between China and the CEE nations. Nonetheless, the BRI continues to be viewed positively in the region. CEE countries are benefiting from enhanced participation in infrastructure projects and logistics networks, helping them ascend the value chain. Despite the associated risks, most countries in the region remain optimistic and willing to engage with China through the BRI.

BRI and EU (European Union)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is fundamentally rooted in the goal of optimizing and reorganizing global supply chains by enhancing infrastructure and improving logistics networks. Its primary objective is to strengthen China's economic linkages with major markets, particularly in Western Europe. Research suggests that a 10% boost in connectivity among nations along the BRI's overland "Belt" corridor can reduce China's trade costs by 3%, increase exports by 9%, and raise imports by 6%. This strategic focus explains China's commitment to developing both land and maritime trade routes that streamline access to these critical markets. One major project under this vision is the development of Greece's Piraeus port, which China intends to expand significantly. This would likely make it the largest port in Europe. Additionally, through BRI, China is creating various economic corridors that span from Dutch ports like Rotterdam to Valencia in Spain and other parts of Portugal, enhancing its logistical network. Such infrastructure initiatives are not only designed to facilitate smoother trade flows but also to secure access to vital energy supplies in the Middle East while penetrating deeper into European markets. The BRI has brought revolutionary changes in the field of supply chain logistics across Europe and Asia. For instance, while only about 300 block trains ran between China and Europe (including Russia) in 2014, the number skyrocketed to almost 5,000 by 2018, linking 53 cities in 16 different countries. Between 2013 and 2018, trade volumes between China and BRI participating regions reached around US$6 trillion. With the rise of transnational corporations constantly seeking higher profits, their production and distribution systems have evolved significantly—with China emerging as the global manufacturing hub. As Chinese consumers' purchasing power has grown, their consumption patterns have shifted, resulting in increased demand for both high-quality and high-volume goods. This necessitates a more comprehensive transportation and distribution network beyond just building basic trade corridors. However, several challenges remain in establishing this integrated network. These include inconsistent planning, technical discrepancies in rail systems, limited capacity at border crossings, differing rail gauges, train length restrictions, bureaucratic hurdles, and financial constraints.

At the same time, the European Union is expressing concern over its growing trade deficit with China. In 2018, the EU exported goods and services worth 210 billion euros to China, while imports from China totaled 395 billion euros—resulting in a trade imbalance of 195 billion euros. With the ongoing implementation of BRI, this gap is expected to widen unless China opens its markets more substantially to EU businesses. However, this is complicated by China's existing overproduction in sectors like steel and cement, as well as its slowing domestic growth. As a response, China is aiming to utilize its excess industrial capacity through international trade.

The Chinese government often provides financial backing—either through subsidies or state owned enterprises (SOEs)—to support massive BRI-related projects. These SOEs are more prominent than private firms in China's investments within the EU, which raises concerns among EU policymakers. China is now the source of 20% of the EU's total imports and the destination for 11% of its exports, making it one of the bloc's key trading partners alongside the United States. Notably, telecommunications form a significant portion of China's exports to the EU, with Huawei alone supplying nearly 60 billion euros' worth of equipment. Huawei's attempt to offer 5G infrastructure in the EU has sparked security concerns among several member states. To strengthen its trade routes, China has also pursued strategic partnerships with Mediterranean countries. For example, Italy joined the BRI, especially after China faced resistance from Greece regarding its expansion plans for the Piraeus port, a site under cultural protection. The EU leadership in Brussels has voiced concerns about member states independently engaging with China, particularly when it involves strategic infrastructure. The sale of the Piraeus port to the Chinese firm COSCO has been particularly controversial. Although Greece views this investment as crucial for revitalizing its economy, it clashes with the EU's broader strategic interests. In response, the EU established a foreign investment screening mechanism to monitor and regulate non-EU investments in critical sectors. Since its implementation, Chinese investments in the EU reportedly dropped by 40% in 2018 compared to the previous year. Despite this, deals like the Piraeus port sale cannot be reversed, revealing internal disagreements within the EU. A clear divide has emerged: northern EU countries advocate for a unified stance on foreign investments, while southern nations like Greece, Portugal, and Cyprus argue that such regulations limit their ability to attract necessary funding.

As former U.S. diplomat Henry Kissinger suggested in 2018, Europe could potentially become an extension of the broader Eurasian economic zone if China's ambitions materialize fully. Whether this will lead to competition or cooperation remains uncertain, but a balancedpartnership between the EU and China could benefit global economic development in the long run.

Key BRI Projects in the Indian Ocean and Beyond

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a sweeping infrastructure and development campaign, aims to improve connectivity and stimulate economic growth across Asia, Africa, and Europe by establishing robust land and maritime networks. In the Indian Ocean region and surrounding areas, the BRI includes several strategically important projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the development of ports in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), as well as significant infrastructure investments in East Africa. These projects not only serve economic purposes, such as facilitating trade and energy transport, but also enhance China's geopolitical influence by expanding its maritime reach and securing key logistical hubs along vital sea lanes.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), valued at around $62 billion, is among the most prominent projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), linking China's western region with Pakistan. Central to CPEC is Gwadar Port, located in Pakistan's Balochistan province along the Arabian Sea. This port holds significant strategic value due to its proximity to crucial maritime routes, granting China direct access to the Indian Ocean and offering a shorter pathway to the energy-abundant Middle East. By bypassing the longer and potentially risky route through the Strait of Malacca, Gwadar strengthens China's energy security and enhances trade efficiency.

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Additionally, its location near China's Xinjiang province and its integration with CPEC's network of roads, railways, and pipelines enables quicker and safer movement of goods and energy between China and international markets (Wikipedia, 2023;

Merics, 2023). Economically, Gwadar Port is envisioned as a deep-sea port that will catalyze regional development through the establishment of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) modeled on Chinese SEZs. The SEZ aims to attract manufacturing, logistics, and trade businesses with significant tax incentives, potentially creating tens of thousands of jobs and transforming Gwadar into a central economic hub. China has committed over $1 billion in infrastructure investments surrounding the port, including roads, power plants, desalination facilities, and an international airport, underscoring the comprehensive development approach tied to the port (Wikipedia, 2023; GDA, 2023). Despite its promise, Gwadar Port has faced challenges. Nearly two decades after its initial completion, the port remains underutilized, with limited cargo throughput and incomplete ancillary infrastructure. Political instability, security concerns, and financial constraints have hindered progress, raising questions about the project's pace and sustainability. Nevertheless, China continues to invest in Gwadar as part of its long-term vision for the BRI and CPEC, emphasizing the port's potential to reshape regional trade dynamics (DW, 2023).

Geopolitically, Gwadar Port enhances China's influence in the Indian Ocean region, which India and other regional powers have traditionally dominated. It provides China with a strategic maritime foothold that complements its broader ambitions to secure sea lanes, project power, and counterbalance rival influences. The port also strengthens China-Pakistan ties, reinforcing their strategic partnership and aligning with China's Western Development strategy by connecting underdeveloped western provinces, such as Xinjiang, to global markets (Wikipedia, 2023; Emerald Insight, 2020).

The Hambantota Port

Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port stands out as a key illustration of how China leverages BRI infrastructure to extend its influence and secure strategic positions. Located near Sri Lanka's southern coast, the port is situated close to critical Indian Ocean shipping lanes that handle a substantial share of global trade and energy transport. Its proximity to these major maritime routes enhances Hambantota's value as a strategic asset, aligning closely with China's broader maritime interests and ambitions. Positioned close to the Indian Ocean's key shipping lanes, the port offers China a crucial foothold to secure its sea lines of communication and energy supply routes. This is particularly important given China's concerns about vulnerabilities in its maritime trade, such as the "Malacca Dilemma," where narrow straits pose risks to uninterrupted shipping. By establishing a presence in Hambantota, China enhances its ability to safeguard these vital routes and extend its influence in a region traditionally dominated by India.

Economically, Hambantota Port was developed to alleviate congestion at Sri Lanka's main port in Colombo and to stimulate growth in the country's southern region. Chinese investment transformed Hambantota from a relatively underdeveloped area into a growing hub for trade and logistics. The port's development is also linked to the creation of adjacent industrial zones, which have generated employment and contributed to regional economic development. The port's development was primarily financed through Chinese loans, which contributed significantly to Sri Lanka's mounting debt burden. As a result, Sri Lanka eventually agreed to lease the Hambantota

Port to China Merchants Port Holdings for 99 years. This move has ignited discussions on debt sustainability and fueled allegations of "debt-trap diplomacy”a term referring to the strategy where a lending nation extends unsustainable loans to gain leverage over a debtor state unable to repay. While this scenario also underscores Sri Lanka’s internal fiscal issues and governance decisions, the notion of debt-trap diplomacy has become a key concern surrounding many BRI-linked initiatives.

For China's Belt and Road Initiative, Hambantota Port is a key maritime node that facilitates the Maritime Silk Road, one of the BRI's main corridors. The port enhances China's ability toproject economic and geopolitical influence across Asia, Africa, and beyond by securing critical infrastructure along vital trade routes. Furthermore, the port's development is part of a broader economic corridor that involves infrastructure such as roads and power plants, integrating Hambantota into a network that promotes regional connectivity and economic integration, aligning with BRI goals. The BRI has brought significant economic benefits to Sri Lanka, including job creation, infrastructure development, and increased trade opportunities.

Malé Port, Maldives

Malé Port, officially known as Malé Commercial Port, is the principal maritime gateway of the Maldives, an island nation heavily reliant on maritime transport for both domestic inter-island connectivity and international trade. The port is crucial for the import of goods, as the Maldives' narrow economic base heavily relies on external supplies. Approximately 40% of imports are redistributed to outer islands, and 90% of domestic inter-island trade passes through Malé Harbor. Under the BRI, China has played a significant role in supporting the Maldives' infrastructure development, including port expansion projects and broader connectivity initiatives. Recent efforts include plans to relocate and expand the Malé Commercial Port to Thilafalhu, shifting from the previously planned site at Gulfasha, to accommodate growing maritime traffic and logistical needs better. This expansion aligns with the Maldivian government's strategic vision to enhance maritime capacity, reduce congestion, and facilitate smoother movement of cargo and passengers. The port's development is closely linked with other infrastructure projects, such as the expansion of Velana International Airport and the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which connects Malé with Hulhumalé Island, improving land connectivity and economic integration. These projects collectively aim to transform the Maldives into a more connected hub within the Indian Ocean, boosting tourism, trade, and economic diversification. However, the Maldives faces challenges, including environmental vulnerability due to climate change, which threatens its low-lying islands and infrastructure. The Maldivian leadership views China as a crucial partner, not only for infrastructure development but also for climate resilience initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework. The partnership is built on mutual respect for sovereignty and aims to foster long term socio-economic growth.

Mombasa Port, Kenya

Mombasa Port is East Africa's most prominent and busiest seaport, serving as a critical gateway for Kenya and several landlocked neighboring countries, including Uganda, Rwanda, and South Sudan. It handles a significant portion of the region's maritime trade, making it a strategic asset for regional economic integration and development. China's involvement in Mombasa has been substantial, with investments focused on expanding port capacity, modernizing facilities, and improving hinterland connectivity. These efforts are part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Maritime Silk Road strategy, which aims to secure maritime trade routes and enhance logistics networks connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe. The modernization of Mombasa Port includes constructing new berths, upgrading container terminals, and introducing advanced cargo-handling systems to ease congestion and improve turnaround efficiency. China has also backed the expansion of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), linking Mombasa with Nairobi and other inland regions, streamlining the movement of goods from the port to the interior. Despite these developments, Mombasa Port still grapples with issues such as inefficiencies in operations, safety concerns, and environmental degradation. The port's growth has sparked debates around debt sustainability and the actual economic gains for local communities—frequent concerns tied to BRI projects in Africa. Nonetheless, China has increasingly begun to address environmental considerations in its BRI initiatives, striving for reduced ecological harm and sustainable progress. Mombasa remains a strategic hub for China's efforts to strengthen economic integration and secure its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean.

Comparative Insights and Strategic Importance

Both Malé and Mombasa ports are integral to China's vision of a connected Indian Ocean region under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), yet they differ in scale and context. Malé Port serves a small island nation with unique geographic and environmental vulnerabilities, focusing on inter-island connectivity and tourism-driven economic development. In contrast, Mombasa is a central continental hub with extensive regional trade responsibilities and broader geopolitical significance. China's investments in these ports reflect a dual strategy that supports economic development in partner countries while securing strategic maritime footholds along key shipping lanes. This has implications for regional power dynamics, particularly concerning India's traditional influence in the Indian Ocean, which views expanding Chinese presence with caution.

The Red Sea and Suez Canal to Mediterranean hubs such as Haifa, Istanbul, and Athens

The Red Sea, Suez Canal, and Mediterranean hubs, such as Haifa, Istanbul, and Athens, form a critical maritime and logistical corridor within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), serving as a strategic nexus that connects Asia, Africa, and Europe. This corridor not only facilitates global trade but also plays a pivotal role in regional economic development and geopolitical dynamics. The Red Sea and Suez Canal. The Red Sea is a key maritime passage linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal, one of the globe's most strategically important shipping lanes. The Suez Canal significantly reduces travel time and distance for trade between Asia and Europe by eliminating the long route around Africa's Cape of Good Hope. This critical waterway handles a large share of international trade, including vital commodities such as oil, natural gas, and manufactured products, making it central to global commerce and energy distribution networks. Within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Suez Canal holds a central position along the Maritime Silk Road. It acts as a key entry point for Chinese exports headed to Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Recognizing its strategic importance, Egypt has invested around $100 billion to enhance the canal's capacity and to develop surrounding infrastructure. This includes the creation of the Suez Canal Economic Zone, which hosts major ports such as Ain Sokhna and East Port Said. These initiatives are designed to transform the area into a major logistics and industrial center, integrating sea, rail, and road networks to improve connectivity and streamline trade across the region.

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The strategic importance of the Suez Canal extends beyond its economic significance

The control and development of this maritime chokepoint have a significant influence on regional security and global supply chains. The canal's expansion projects, including the New Suez Canal, have increased its capacity and reduced transit times, reinforcing its role as a linchpin in global trade and a cornerstone of China-Egypt cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework. Egypt's Vision 2030 aligns closely with BRI objectives, seeking to leverage the canal's strategic location to boost economic growth and regional integration. Mediterranean Hubs: Haifa, Istanbul, and Athens. Beyond the Suez Canal, the BRI's maritime network extends into the Mediterranean Sea, connecting key ports such as Haifa (Israel), Istanbul (Turkey), and Athens (Greece). These ports serve as critical transshipment and logistics centers linking the Maritime Silk Road to European markets. Haifa, Israel: The Haifa port is strategically positioned on the eastern Mediterranean, serving as a gateway for goods moving between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Its development under BRI-related investments enhances Israel's role in regional trade corridors, facilitating faster and more efficient cargo handling and distribution.

Istanbul, Turkey. Istanbul's unique geographic location, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, makes it a vital hub in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) network. The city's ports and transport infrastructure connect maritime routes with extensive overland corridors, including railways and highways, linking the Mediterranean with Central and Eastern Europe. Istanbul's integration into the BRI supports China's ambition to establish seamless multimodal transport chains across continents.

Athens, Greece.

The port of Piraeus near Athens has emerged as a flagship BRI project in Europe, with significant Chinese investment transforming it into one of the Mediterranean's busiest container ports. Piraeus acts as a significant entry point for Chinese goods into Europe, with efficient rail and road connections extending into Central and Northern Europe. Its development exemplifies the BRI's goal of creating a "hub of hubs" in the Mediterranean, facilitating trade flows across Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Strategic and Economic Implications.

This corridor, spanning from the Red Sea through the Suez Canal to Mediterranean hubs, forms the backbone of the Maritime Silk Road, enabling China to secure vital trade routes, reduce transit times, and expand its economic influence across three continents. The integration of ports, industrial zones, and transport infrastructure along this route fosters economic corridors that boost regional development and trade. However, the corridor also presents challenges. The Suez Canal and surrounding maritime routes are geopolitical hotspots, with regional powers and global actors closely monitoring developments. Security concerns, such as piracy in the Red Sea and political instability in adjacent regions, pose risks to uninterrupted trade. Additionally, the environmental impact of expanding ports and shipping traffic requires careful management. Expansion Beyond the Indian Ocean. The expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) beyond the Indian Ocean marks a significant evolution in its global infrastructure and trade strategy, extending connectivity deep into Europe through a network of ports, railways, and logistics hubs. This expansion focuses on integrating maritime and land corridors to facilitate smoother and faster trade flows between Asia and Europe, thereby enhancing China's economic reach and geopolitical influence.

Key Elements of Expansion beyond the Indian Ocean

Strategic Port Investments in the Mediterranean and Europe.

Chinese investments have targeted several major European ports, transforming them into critical nodes within the BRI network. The port of Piraeus in Greece is the flagship success story, where the Chinese state owned COSCO Shipping acquired a majority stake and invested heavily to turn it into one of the fastest-growing container ports globally and the busiest in the Mediterranean. This port acts as a primary gateway for Chinese goods entering Europe, with efficient rail and road connections extending into Central and Northern Europe. Following Piraeus, China has expanded its investments to other Mediterranean ports such as Trieste and Genoa in Italy. Trieste, in particular, is a deep-water port strategically located near the northern Adriatic Sea, serving as a crucial link between maritime routes and Europe's rail networks. Chinese companies have signed agreements to increase the port's capacity and develop logistics platforms, supported by European Union and Hungarian investments aimed at enhancing rail connectivity and freight handling. These developments position Trieste as a vital hub connecting the Mediterranean to Central Europe via rail corridors, such as the Baltic Adriatic axis, and tunnels, including the Brenner Base Tunnel, enabling integration with Rail Networks and Hinterlands. Beyond maritime infrastructure, the BRI's expansion emphasizes multimodal transport, linking ports with extensive rail networks. The development of rail corridors from Mediterranean ports into the European hinterland is designed to reduce transit times and costs compared to traditional sea routes. For instance, the Brenner Base Tunnel and other Alpine rail tunnels facilitate faster freight movement from southern Europe to Germany and beyond. This integration facilitates a shift from maritime to rail transport for inland distribution, thereby enhancing the efficiency of supply chains. While rail freight volumes between China and Europe have grown, they remain modest relative to maritime trade but are expected to increase as infrastructure improves and trade volumes rise.

Economic and Geopolitical Implications.

The expansion into Europe has significant economic benefits, including job creation, port modernization, and increased trade volumes. However, it also raises geopolitical concerns. European countries have mixed reactions to Chinese investments, with some welcoming the economic opportunities and others expressing concerns about strategic dependency, transparency, and the potential for political influence. For example, the Netherlands has expressed concerns that the rise of Southern European ports, such as Piraeus and Trieste, as BRI gateways could divert trade volumes away from traditional Northern European hubs, like Rotterdam, potentially impacting their economies. The European Union is increasingly scrutinizing Chinese investments to strike a balance between economic interests and security and regulatory standards. Challenges and Future Prospects Despite successes, challenges remain. Some port projects face local opposition, archaeological constraints, or underutilization issues, as seen in specific BRI ports outside Europe. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and global supply chain disruptions have highlighted vulnerabilities in global trade networks, prompting calls for greater resilience and diversification. Looking ahead, the continued expansion of the BRI beyond the Indian Ocean will depend on

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deepening cooperation with European partners, addressing regulatory and environmental concerns, and enhancing the interoperability of transport and logistics systems. The development of new corridors and the modernization of existing infrastructure will be crucial to sustaining growth and maximizing the benefits of the initiative.

Strategic Importance of BRI Littoral Corridors

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, is a comprehensive infrastructure and economic development project aimed at enhancing connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe. A critical component of the BRI is the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," which focuses on developing littoral corridors, maritime routes and port infrastructures along key coastal regions. These littoral corridors are strategically vital to China's economic, geopolitical, and security objectives, shaping global trade flows and regional power dynamics.

Securing and Diversifying Maritime Trade Routes

One of the foremost strategic imperatives behind the BRI littoral corridors is securing China's maritime trade routes, which are crucial for its energy imports and export-driven economy. China relies heavily on sea lanes passing through narrow chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca, through which a significant portion of its oil and goods transit. This dependence creates vulnerabilities, a concern known as the "Malacca Dilemma," first articulated by Chinese leadership in the early 2000s. The littoral corridors under the Maritime Silk Road aim to mitigate this risk by expanding China's influence over existing maritime routes and developing alternative pathways to circumvent potential blockades or geopolitical disruptions (OECD/ITF, 2020). For example, investments in ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan and Djibouti in East Africa, as well as developments in Malaysia's Malacca Gateway, are designed to enhance China's control over critical sea lanes and provide it with strategic footholds along these routes. These ports serve as logistic hubs, refueling stations, and potential naval support points, enabling China to maintain uninterrupted trade flows even amid regional conflicts or tensions (Wikipedia, 2015; OECD/ITF, 2020). By establishing a network of ports and maritime infrastructure, China not only secures its supply chains but also projects power into the Indian Ocean and beyond, challenging the traditional dominance of regional powers such as India.

Promoting Economic Integration and Trade Facilitation

Beyond security, the littoral corridors are central to the BRI's economic vision of fostering regional development and trade integration. The Maritime Silk Road connects China's eastern seaboard to Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Africa, and Europe through a chain of deep-water ports, logistics hubs, and transport infrastructure. This network facilitates smoother and more cost-effective maritime trade, which remains the dominant mode of global goods transport due to its economies of scale and cost efficiency. The corridors link major economic centers, such as Singapore, Colombo, Mombasa, and the Mediterranean port of Piraeus, integrating them with hinterland transport networks, including rail and road. This connectivity reduces trade costs, shortens delivery times, and opens new markets for Chinese exports and imports. Studies estimate that improving connectivity along these maritime routes could reduce Chinese trade costs by approximately 3%, thereby significantly boosting imports and exports (OECD/ITF, 2020). For developing countries along the corridors, the BRI offers infrastructure investments that can alleviate economic disadvantages, create jobs, and stimulate poverty reduction through enhanced trade linkages (Wikipedia, 2015).

Geopolitical Influence and Regional Connectivity

China's strategic use of littoral corridors reflects its broader geopolitical ambitions. By securing footholds along critical maritime routes, China is expanding its influence in areas traditionally under the sway of other global and regional powers. The Indian Ocean, historically viewed as part of India's strategic domain, has seen increased Chinese engagement through infrastructure and port development in countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti. These moves challenge established dynamics and allow China to project maritime power while fostering strategic alliances. This maritime push complements the overland Silk Road Economic Belt, forming a wide-reaching Eurasian connectivity network that integrates China with Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Beyond economic cooperation, these corridors also open avenues for diplomatic engagement and military collaboration. For example, China’s first overseas military base in Djibouti highlights the dual-use functionality of many Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, blending commercial and security objectives (Chatham House, 2021).

Infrastructure Development and Modal Shifts

The littoral corridors also promote modal shifts in global trade by integrating maritime ports with rail and road networks. This multimodal connectivity enables goods to move seamlessly from sea to land, enhancing supply chain efficiency. Ports such as Piraeus in Greece have become major gateways for Chinese goods entering Europe, supported by rail links that facilitate the expedited movement of cargo inland. Additionally, China's investments in port expansions, logistics centers, and industrial zones along the littoral corridors stimulate new trade flows and economic opportunities. These projects often target untapped markets or resource-rich regions, particularly in Africa, where ports such as Mombasa and Dar es Salaam serve as gateways to the hinterland economies. By linking maritime infrastructure with inland transport corridors, the BRI fosters regional economic integration and diversification (OECD/ITF, 2020).

Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite the significant strategic advantages offered by the littoral corridors, they are not without their challenges. Some port projects, such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan, have struggled with underutilization and local political resistance. Security concerns, debt sustainability, and geopolitical rivalries complicate the realization of the corridors' full potential. Furthermore, the future of alternative maritime routes proposed under the BRI, suchas the Kra Canal or the Nicaragua Canal, remains uncertain or unlikely to materialize in the near term (OECD/ITF, 2020). Despite the challenges, the littoral corridors remain central to China's vision of a connected global economy underpinned by secure trade routes and expanded influence. As maritime trade continues to dominate global commerce, the corridors are expected to grow in importance, shaping the economic and geopolitical landscape of the 21st century.

Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a sweeping global development strategy launched by China to enhance connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa through expansive infrastructure networks. The initiative consists of two main components: the overland "Silk Road Economic Belt," which connects China with Central Asia and Europe via road and rail, and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," which strengthens maritime ties with Southeast Asia, Africa, and Western Europe (Choros-Mrozowska, 2019). While the primary goal is to facilitate trade, the BRI also involves significant investment in the infrastructure of participating nations. Officially, China promotes the BRI as a platform for regional cooperation and shared prosperity. By 2017, over 70 countries had joined the initiative, representing more than 65% of the world's population and contributing over 40% of global GDP. Targeted for completion by 2049—coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China—the BRI is widely regarded as one of the most extensive infrastructure and investment efforts ever undertaken.

Despite its scale, the BRI has drawn criticism. Observers question China's underlying motives, suggesting the project aims to cement its global influence and shift the balance of power toward a bipolar world order. Critics argue the initiative may mask economic and geopolitical ambitions beneath lofty ideals of cooperation and development (Siu, 2019). Ports like Malé and Mombasa illustrate the BRI's strategic reach in the Indian Ocean, blending development with geopolitical considerations. Similarly, China's investments in Mediterranean and Red Sea ports—including Haifa, Istanbul, Athens, and Suez—form a crucial corridor that strengthens trade connectivity and shifts geopolitical dynamics across Eurasia and Africa. By targeting key European ports such as Piraeus, Trieste, and Genoa and linking them through integrated rail and logistics networks, China is positioning itself to lower transportation costs, expand market access, and extend its geopolitical reach. Ultimately, the BRI is not just an infrastructure project—it is a strategic blueprint for China's global ascendancy.

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