

Geopolitical Impacts of China's Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities and Risks Across Asia, Africa, and Europe

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Abstract: Taking the Belt and Road Initiative as the object of study, this paper explores how the Belt and Road strategy enhances China's geopolitical discourse and its specific impacts in Asia, Africa and Europe, and at the same time explores the opportunities and potential risks of the Initiative, revealing the role of the Belt and Road in international relations and providing a reference for national policymaking. Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a crucial strategy for China to enhance globalization and foster international collaboration. By investing in infrastructure and promoting trade across Asia, Africa, and Europe, the BRI has significantly expanded China's influence and established it as a key player among emerging economies. However, this initiative has also raised concerns about geopolitical implications and shifts in global power dynamics, particularly regarding dependency on Chinese investments. As China strengthens its ties with countries along the BRI route, it faces challenges from Western nations wary of its expanding influence. Overall, the BRI represents both opportunities for economic growth and risks associated with increased competition and geopolitical tensions on the global stage.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China, African, Europe, geopolitics globalization.

1. Introduction

Since its inception in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has evolved into a key catalyst for fostering international economic collaboration and cultural interactions. The initiative seeks to establish the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, focusing on enhancing cross-regional connectivity in infrastructure, facilitating trade, promoting financial integration, strengthening people-to-people exchanges, and aligning policy efforts. By doing so, it aims to inject fresh impetus into the framework of global economic governance [1]. At present, globalization is facing multiple challenges, with problems such as weak economic growth, unbalanced regional development and geopolitical risks becoming increasingly prominent. At the same time, the need for countries to strengthen infrastructure development, promote regional economic integration and achieve sustainable development has become more pressing. Against this backdrop, the Belt and Road Initiative, with its open and inclusive concept of cooperation, provides a new development model and cooperation platform for all countries, which not only has far-reaching significance for China's economic development and international status, but also has an important impact on the reshaping of the global power pattern. However, the Belt and Road Initiative has faced many controversies and challenges during its promotion. Some countries have questioned the

geopolitical risks, debt problems, and environmental impacts that it may bring, which has led to widespread international concern about China's strategic intentions and global role. At the same time, it explores the opportunities and potential risks posed by the initiative and reveals the role of the "Belt and Road" in international relations, to serve as a reference for decision-making in various countries [2]. In conclusion, while the BRI offers a promising avenue for economic growth and cooperation among nations, it is imperative to critically assess its implications for global governance and international relations.

2. Analysis

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) enhances regional economic integration by facilitating infrastructure development, trade, and investment across Asia. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) plays a crucial role in supporting these projects, solidifying China's leadership in regional governance. Geopolitically, the BRI expands China's influence through improved connectivity with Southeast and Central Asia, fostering economic cooperation and energy partnerships. However, the initiative faces challenges such as concerns over debt sustainability, environmental impacts, and rising competition from the U.S. and India, which could alter the regional power balance and escalate geopolitical tensions.

2.1. China's Influence in Asia

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) enhances regional economic integration by promoting infrastructure development, trade, and investment across Asia. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) plays a key role in supporting these projects, strengthening China's leadership in regional governance. Geopolitically, the BRI expands China's influence by improving connectivity with Southeast and Central Asia, fostering economic cooperation, and securing energy partnerships. However, the initiative faces challenges, including concerns over debt sustainability, environmental issues, and rising competition from the U.S. and India, which may shift the regional power balance and increase geopolitical tensions.

2.1.1. Regional Economic Integration

The Asian Investment Bank (AIIB) is a significant component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has strengthened economic linkages within the region by supporting infrastructure development in countries along the route [3]. The BRI provides development opportunities for participating countries, promotes trade, investment, and cultural exchanges, and lays the foundation for regional economic integration [4]. The AIIB fosters economic cooperation and development among countries in the region through collaboration with other international financial institutions. For example, it conducts joint projects with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to share resources and complement each other's strengths in addressing regional development challenges more effectively. Meanwhile, the AIIB focuses on providing financial support for infrastructure projects in Asia, effectively addressing the shortcomings of traditional international financial institutions in this area. Through the AIIB, China is better positioned to promote regional connectivity and facilitate trade and investment flows, thereby enhancing economic ties with other Asian countries. This cooperative mode enables China to play a more active and leading role in regional economic governance.

2.1.2. Geopolitical Impact

Since its launch in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has served as a key strategy for China to strengthen its geopolitical influence across Asia. By investing heavily in infrastructure and fostering economic cooperation, China has built stronger relationships with countries in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and beyond. These ties have not only facilitated regional economic integration but also enabled China to play a more significant role in the political and economic affairs of these countries. China has enhanced its connectivity with neighboring countries through the construction of transport, energy, and other infrastructure projects. For example, the Central South Peninsula Economic Corridor, which connects China with Southeast Asian countries, aims to promote intra-regional trade and investment by improving transport and logistics networks. According to recent studies, Southeast Asia occupies an important position in Belt and Road-related construction projects, with 131 projects making it one of the largest in the Asia-Pacific region [5]. The China-Laos Railway is a key project under the BRI that not only connects Laos to China but also links the entire Belt and Road network. This project reduces trade costs, accelerates regional economic growth, and facilitates trade links between countries. Through improved connectivity, economic dependence among these nations has increased, thereby enhancing economic integration and collective prosperity in the region. Such economic integration contributes to more stable and sustained regional development. The countries of Central Asia cooperate closely with China, particularly in infrastructure modernization and energy sectors. Through the BRI, Central Asian countries are increasingly collaborating with China, especially regarding energy cooperation. This initiative strengthens China's energy partnerships with Central Asian nations and promotes the development and utilization of regional energy resources. It not only fosters economic development in Central Asia but also enhances China's energy security by channeling oil and gas resources to the Chinese market through BRI projects. In summary, the Belt and Road Initiative promotes China's strategic global presence, particularly its economic and political influence in Eurasia. This initiative enables China to establish closer economic and political cooperation in several regions, especially among Asian countries neighboring China. Through such cooperation, China further consolidates its significant position in global affairs [6].

2.1.3. Potential Challenges

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has promoted cooperation between China and the countries along its route, enhancing China's position in the global strategic layout by fostering regional economic integration, promoting interconnectivity, and deepening energy cooperation. Through collaboration with international financial institutions and close ties with regional countries, China has not only stimulated its own economic growth but also secured a more favorable position in the global geopolitical landscape. This initiative is crucial for achieving China's global development goals and for promoting global economic cooperation. While the BRI presents numerous opportunities, it also faces several challenges. Some countries have expressed concerns regarding Chinese investments due to issues such as debt sustainability, environmental protection, and social backlash. For instance, nations like Sri Lanka and Pakistan have encountered debt crises attributed to an over-reliance on Chinese investment, raising questions about the sustainability of the BRI. Furthermore, China's rise in Asia has intensified competition with other powers, particularly the United States and India. The U.S. has sought to curb China's influence in the region by strengthening cooperation with ASEAN countries and promoting initiatives like the high-standard Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). India, as a rapidly growing economy, is also actively working to expand its influence in Asia. Through its "eastward policy" and increased cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, India aims to counterbalance China's presence in regional affairs. This rivalry could lead to a shift in the power balance in the region and increase geopolitical uncertainty [7].

2.2. China's Strategic Layout in Africa

Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is significantly enhancing its access to Africa's abundant natural resources, including minerals and energy, which are vital for its economic growth and technological advancement. Major investments in mining and energy projects, such as the Khoemacau copper mine in Botswana and the Mambilla hydropower plant in Nigeria, illustrate China's expanding influence in the region. Additionally, China is strengthening its soft power in Africa through cultural exchanges and educational initiatives, fostering goodwill and deeper ties with African nations. This multifaceted approach not only bolsters economic cooperation but also cultivates a positive image of China, creating a mutually beneficial relationship that supports its long-term strategic interests on the continent.

2.2.1. Resources and Market Expansion

Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is actively accessing Africa's rich natural resources, including minerals, oil, and gas. These resources are crucial to China's economic development, particularly in promoting green industries and high-tech products. Chinese companies have significantly increased their mining investments in Africa. For example, China Minmetals Resources acquired the Khoemacau copper mine in Botswana, making it one of the largest copper mines in the world. Additionally, China Golden Integrity Mining Management Co. is investing in Zambia and other countries to develop key resources such as cobalt and lithium mines [8]. Meanwhile, China's energy projects in Africa encompass hydropower, wind, and solar energy. The Mambilla hydropower plant built by Chinese companies in Nigeria is set to be the largest power station in the country, further consolidating China's influence in the African energy sector. With rapid economic growth in Africa, Chinese enterprises are actively expanding into emerging markets to achieve a win-win situation. According to statistics, the China-Africa trade volume reached USD 282.1 billion in 2023, demonstrating the growing economic ties between China and African countries [9]. China's imports of agricultural and mineral products from Africa have been increasing year by year, fueling economic development on both sides. In recent years, Chinese companies have diversified their investments in the African market, expanding from traditional infrastructure to emerging areas such as manufacturing, digital economy, and e-commerce. Such diversified investments have not only enhanced China's competitiveness in the African market but also promoted local economic development.

2.2.2. Soft Power Enhancement

In addition to economic interests, China enhances its soft power in Africa through cultural exchanges and educational cooperation to build a positive image of the country. China actively promotes cultural exchanges with African nations and fosters understanding and friendship between the two peoples by organizing cultural activities and art exhibitions. For instance, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) serves as an important platform for both sides to promote humanistic exchanges and cooperation. Through platforms like FOCAC, China not only showcases its culture but also deepens cultural ties with the African people through art exhibitions, concerts, and other activities. Such interactions have enhanced mutual understanding and friendship, creating a friendlier social atmosphere for China's various cooperations in Africa [10]. Every year, the Chinese government brings in a significant number of African students through scholarships, vocational training, and educational cooperation programs to help African countries improve their educational standards. This educational cooperation further deepens China's influence in Africa. By providing scholarships and training opportunities, the Chinese government actively cultivates African talent, which not only aids in enhancing education levels in African countries but also lays a foundation for

China's long-term strategic interests on the continent. Through cultivating and attracting African students, the relationship between China and African countries has grown closer. Many of these students return to their home countries after completing their studies, serving as "bridges" and "links" between China and Africa. These individuals not only bring back Chinese ideas, technology, and culture but also promote exchanges and cooperation between Chinese and African governments. The enhancement of soft power and China's strategic deployment in Africa are mutually reinforcing. With the combined effect of economic, political, and cultural dimensions, soft power helps shape China's international image while providing a more favorable external environment for its hard power actions in Africa, such as resource development and infrastructure construction [11]. By enhancing its attractiveness and sense of identity among the African populace, China can better promote its strategic goals in Africa, thus realizing a virtuous circle of economic interests, political interests, and cultural influence.

2.3. Expansion of China's Influence in Europe

The "17+1 Cooperation Mechanism" established between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries aims to enhance economic relations by fostering investments in infrastructure, trade, and energy. This initiative has led to significant growth in trade and investment, helping CEE nations recover economically and improve regional connectivity. However, it has also raised concerns about dependency on Chinese investments and potential geopolitical tensions within Europe. In Western Europe, Chinese investments in key sectors have sparked fears regarding strategic autonomy, prompting countries like Germany to tighten regulations on foreign direct investment. Overall, while China-EU cooperation presents opportunities for mutual economic benefits, it also brings challenges related to influence and dependency that need careful navigation.

2.3.1. Cooperation with Eastern European Countries

The "17+1 Cooperation Mechanism" between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) serves as a key platform for enhancing economic and trade relations. Established in 2012, this framework aims to deepen economic collaboration across various sectors, including infrastructure development, trade, and investment [12]. As a result of this initiative, trade between China and the CEE nations has seen remarkable growth. In 2022, CEE countries attracted significant investments under the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly in the infrastructure and energy sectors, which have played a vital role in boosting the recovery of their local economies. China's infrastructure projects in Eastern Europe, such as the Hungarian-Serbian railway and Polish motorways, have not only improved transport conditions but also promoted regional connectivity. These projects have helped boost the economic development potential of CEE countries and better integrate them into the European market. China's cooperation with CEE countries addresses the economic gap in the region; many CEE nations face challenges in capital, technology, and modern infrastructure. By providing direct investment and technical cooperation, China effectively fills these gaps and promotes modernization processes within these countries. The "17+1" mechanism has allowed China to strengthen its influence in the region while offering CEE countries opportunities for development. However, it has also raised concerns about dependency on Chinese investments and the potential for geopolitical tensions within Europe [13]. Despite these challenges, the initiative remains a significant aspect of China's strategy to enhance its presence in Europe through economic engagement.

2.3.2. Implications

Chinese investment and cooperation in the core countries of Western Europe, such as Germany, France, and Italy, while fostering economic ties, has also triggered alarm about strategic autonomy.

Investment by Chinese companies in Western Europe continues to increase, covering a wide range of sectors, including high-tech, energy, and infrastructure. For example, Chinese firms have established research and development centers in Germany and are involved in key infrastructure projects that have helped promote deeper economic integration between the two economies. However, as Chinese investment in these critical areas increases, some European countries have expressed concern about their economic dependence on China. In response to these concerns, Western countries have begun to tighten regulations on foreign direct investment (FDI) to protect strategic assets from being acquired by foreign entities. A notable instance of this caution is Germany's decision to block a Chinese state-owned enterprise from acquiring a controlling stake in the Port of Hamburg. This reflects a growing apprehension regarding the expansion of Chinese influence in vital infrastructure sectors.

2.3.3. Impacts

With the rise of China's economy, particularly its increasingly important position in the global market, China-EU cooperation is poised to enhance the competitiveness of both sides. By strengthening cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Western Europe, China can better participate in global economic governance and amplify its voice in areas such as international trade, investment, and technical standards. Simultaneously, Europe can leverage the potential of the Chinese market to expand its influence globally, especially in sectors like technology, energy, and green development. The EU recognizes that engaging with China is essential for addressing global challenges such as climate change and economic stability. As both regions deepen their economic ties, they can work collaboratively to uphold a rules-based global trading system while navigating the complexities of their interdependence. Moreover, by enhancing cooperation with CEE countries, which typically have a weaker voice within the EU due to geographic and economic disparities, China can influence EU policy direction to some extent. This is particularly relevant as CEE nations often seek investment and support for their development needs. Conversely, if Western European countries maintain closer cooperation with China, they may garner more support for China within the global political and economic landscape and promote China's voice in multilateral institutions [14].

3. Discussion

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significantly bolstered China's role in the global economy by enhancing infrastructure, trade, and investment partnerships, particularly with emerging economies. This initiative fosters cooperation among participating countries, enabling them to address common challenges like trade barriers and climate change while promoting regional connectivity. However, it also raises concerns about geopolitical tensions and dependency on Chinese investments, especially in Europe. As China expands its influence through initiatives like the "17+1 Cooperation Mechanism" with Central and Eastern European nations, it faces scrutiny from Western countries regarding strategic autonomy and economic reliance. Overall, the BRI contributes to a shift towards a multipolar world but presents both opportunities and risks for global governance.

3.1. Trend of Global Multipolarity

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significantly strengthened China's position in the global economic system by promoting infrastructure construction, trade flows, and investment cooperation among countries along the route. As the BRI is implemented more deeply, China's influence in global economic governance continues to rise, particularly among emerging economies and developing countries. China is gradually becoming an important economic partner and leader in these regions. In the traditional international economic system, particularly within institutions like the International

Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, Western countries have long held dominance. However, through the BRI, China has fostered cooperation with numerous nations and regions worldwide, especially in emerging markets and developing countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This has led to the formation of a cooperation network that operates relatively independently of Western countries. This cooperation not only strengthens China's voice in global economic discussions but also boosts the involvement and influence of other countries in international affairs. Meanwhile, as the economic growth of Western nations slows, the dominance of the US dollar in the global financial system is increasingly being questioned. By promoting the internationalization of the renminbi and strengthening ties with other emerging economies, China is gradually undermining the dollar-dominated global financial system and further advancing global multipolarity. China's rise creates competition at various levels—economic, political, cultural, and technological—challenging the traditional dominant position of Western countries. This shift has profound implications for global governance structures as more countries seek to assert their interests and influence on the world stage [15].

3.2. Deepening of South-South Cooperation

The BRI not only promotes infrastructure connectivity but also enhances regional trade facilitation. Countries participating in BRI projects have received much-needed infrastructure investment and technical support, which has helped raise their levels of economic development and increase their competitiveness in the global economy. For example, investments in transportation networks have significantly improved trade routes and access to markets for several developing countries. At the same time, there is growing cooperation among these countries to address challenges in the global economy, such as trade barriers, financial crises, and climate change. The initiative encourages collaboration on common issues that affect developing nations, allowing them to share resources and strategies to enhance resilience against external shocks. This collective approach is vital as it promotes a unified voice among developing countries in international discussions. Moreover, South-South cooperation under the BRI allows for knowledge exchange and capacity building. Countries involved can learn from each other's experiences in areas such as sustainable development practices and governance models. This exchange is essential for empowering these nations to assert their interests on the global stage and seek alternatives to traditional North-South cooperation models dominated by Western powers.

3.3. Potential Risks

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) enhances China's geopolitical influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe by promoting infrastructure development, trade, and investment. While it fosters economic cooperation and regional integration, it also raises concerns about increased geopolitical rivalry, particularly with the United States and India, who view the BRI as a challenge to their influence. Countries along the BRI route face complex geopolitical situations, including political instability and economic fragility, which can threaten project sustainability. Additionally, as China's economy slows, concerns about debt sustainability and dependency on Chinese investments grow, potentially leading to resistance against BRI initiatives. Overall, while the BRI offers significant opportunities for development, it also presents substantial risks that could impact both China's relationships with partner countries and regional stability.

3.3.1. Regional Conflict and Strategic Confrontation

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) involves a wide range of countries and regions, covering Asia, Africa, Europe, and other areas. Given the geopolitical and strategic significance of some regions,

particularly in Asia and Europe—where certain countries are at the center of great-power rivalries—the promotion of the BRI could intensify international geopolitical competition. Such competition may lead to a rise in regional tensions and even result in conflict and strategic confrontation. China's efforts to expand its influence over the countries along the Belt and Road route may trigger alarm and counteraction from other powers, especially the United States, the European Union, and India. The U.S. perceives the BRI as a means for China to expand its global influence and may use political, economic, and diplomatic means to counterbalance it, intensifying its strategic confrontation with China. For example, the United States has been checking China's expansion in Asia through its Indo-Pacific Strategy, while India is concerned about China's investment in South Asia. At the same time, some of the countries along the Belt and Road routes are facing complex geopolitical situations and security challenges. Long-standing political instability and conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia may pose threats to the smooth implementation of BRI projects. The promotion of infrastructure construction and economic cooperation in these regions may lead to more political and military conflicts due to unstable security environments, increasing risks for Chinese enterprises and investments. Additionally, in some areas, countries along the route may have differing interests regarding the BRI project or even experience internal political conflicts. Some nations may adopt a conservative attitude towards foreign investment and external involvement due to fears of losing control over their national economies and resources. This apprehension can lead to resistance against BRI initiatives, thus affecting the smooth progress of cooperation [16].

3.3.2. Challenges

As China's economic growth slows, the pressure on the domestic economy is gradually increasing, particularly regarding debt risk, instability in the property market and industrial structure transformation, which may have an impact on the financial support for the Belt and Road. The Chinese government and enterprises are investing more and more in Belt and Road projects every year, but the uncertainty in the global economy, especially due to trade protectionism, economic sanctions, and volatility in the international financial market, is also increasing, so it is a big challenge for the Chinese government to ensure the effective investment of funds and the reasonable control of risks. At the same time, many "Belt and Road" projects are financed through loans, especially for some developing countries, which may rely on low-interest loans or preferential loans provided by China due to their poor financial situation. However, if the economic development of these countries fails to progress as expected, they may not be able to repay their debts on time, thus falling into a "debt trap". This debt risk will not only affect China's financial stability but may also lead some countries to question and resent the Belt and Road Initiative, affecting China's cooperative relationship with these countries. In addition, the economic levels of different countries along the Belt and Road Initiative vary greatly, and some countries are economically fragile and politically unstable, and even face serious problems such as inflation and debt default. These factors make the implementation of the Belt and Road project in these countries more challenging. If the economic situation in those countries fails to improve or regresses, the sustainability of the project will be threatened [17].

4. Recommendations

To effectively address the challenges facing the Belt and Road Initiative, China must prioritize strengthening multilateral cooperation with participating countries and international organizations. This approach will ensure that the initiative is carried out in a more transparent and open manner. Such collaboration will not only build external trust in China's efforts but also foster the long-term sustainability of the projects. It is essential for China and its partners to develop and implement clear,

actionable plans that strike a balance between the social, economic, and environmental benefits of the initiative.

Building mutual trust with participating countries is crucial for the successful implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. Strengthening humanistic exchanges, educational collaborations, and the sharing of scientific and technological knowledge can enhance cross-cultural understanding and respect. This, in turn, helps reduce potential political and economic conflicts, fostering a more harmonious and cooperative environment for the initiative's growth.

To address concerns about China's strategic intentions, it is essential for the country to present itself as a responsible major power within the international community. In response to skepticism surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative, China should clarify its global strategy, emphasizing peace, cooperation, and mutual benefit through a more transparent and proactive foreign policy. On the world stage, China should promote the values of win-win cooperation and multilateralism, actively engaging in addressing global challenges like climate change and public health. This will help shape the image of a responsible power and alleviate doubts and misconceptions about China's strategic goals.

5. Conclusion

Since its inception, the Belt and Road Initiative has become a key strategic instrument in China's global efforts. By expanding its geopolitical reach across Asia, Africa, and Europe, and driving infrastructure development and economic partnerships, the initiative has played a pivotal role in transforming China from a regional power into a global force. Through strengthened economic ties and cultural exchanges with countries along the route, China's influence and voice in global governance have steadily grown. Despite the significant development opportunities offered by the Belt and Road Initiative, it also faces several challenges. First, geopolitical competition, particularly with other major powers, may intensify, potentially leading to regional conflicts and strategic rivalries. Second, issues of economic sustainability remain pressing, especially the risks of debt and economic instability in some countries along the routes, which could hinder the smooth implementation of the projects. Moreover, there are concerns within the international community regarding China's strategic intentions behind the initiative, with some countries questioning whether it is a means for China to expand its influence.

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