



ANALYSIS

ASSESSING CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: A SOCIETAL FRAMEWORK

Safdar Hussain

Summary

This study explores China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the theoretical lens of Karl Wittfogel's concept of "hydraulic societies." Wittfogel's theory, which posits that centralized control over infrastructure leads to authoritarian regimes, provides a framework for understanding the BRI's geopolitical implications. The study begins by examining Wittfogel's concept and then traces the origins and development of the BRI, emphasizing its constitutional enshrinement within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The BRI's inclusion in the CCP's constitution demonstrates its centrality to China's long-term strategic aims and displays a determination to consolidate power both domestically and globally. Specific case studies, that include the Gwadar Deep Sea Port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), show how the BRI consolidates power and generates a potentially crippling dependency among partner governments, eroding local governance and encouraging authoritarian tendencies. The CPEC route issue, as well as China's strong influence in decision-making, demonstrate centralization and control practices.

This study fills a vital lacuna in the existing scholarship by extending Wittfogel's theory to modern geopolitical global projects, providing new insights into how infrastructure control is used as an instrument for political centralization in the twenty-first century. It presents a comprehensive examination of the BRI's impact on local governance and global power structures, drawing on both primary and secondary sources, including BRI documents and official declarations, as well as scholarly publications and media studies. The findings highlight the need for inclusive, transparent, and sustainable measures to ensure the BRI has beneficial, equitable long-term effects that do not disproportionately favor China or the CCP.

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has attracted significant interest, particularly for its potential to shift geopolitics by drawing lesser-developed nations into China's sphere of dominance.¹ A great deal of the earlier international writing on the BRI focuses on China's

¹Jean Blanchard & Colin Flint, "The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 22 ,No. 2 (April 2017), pp. 223–245, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/14650045.2017.1291503?scroll=top&needAccess=true>; Ruli Ramadhon, et al., *China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Influence on Potential United States of America Power Shifts in the Asia Pacific Region* (Routledge, 2025), pp. 531–545; Nadège Rolland, "China's 'Belt and Road Initiative': Underwhelming or



initiative and strategic goals. This narrative emphasizes the Chinese desire of establishing a China-centric global order through infrastructure development, economic integration with smaller states, and ultimately drawing them into Beijing's political sphere.²

Other discussions, however, have focused on how Western countries are reacting to China's quest for global supremacy through the Belt and Road Initiative. In response, the European Union unveiled the Global Gateway, and the United States established the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiatives, both of which seek to offset China's BRI.³ In more recent times, the subject matter has evolved to the concept of a "debt trap." It is argued that China keeps increasing loans beyond recipient countries' repayment capacity, eventually leaving them in a position of economic reliance and susceptibility to Chinese influence.⁴ The Belt and Road Initiative's incorporation in the Chinese Communist Party's constitution is a significant move that has gone underappreciated in past work. This unprecedented development suggests a significant commitment by the CCP to the BRI, embedding it within the country's long-term strategic framework.

The relationship between infrastructure development and governance has been a recurring theme in research on political and societal organizations. While Wittfogel's theoretical perception has been widely applied to historical hydraulic empires, there is a void in the literature regarding how large-scale, transnational infrastructure projects such as the BRI contribute to modern forms of centralized power. Karl Wittfogel's major work, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, developed the concept of "hydraulic societies," suggesting that the maintenance of large-scale irrigation systems in ancient civilizations required centralized bureaucratic authority. This centralized control, Wittfogel contended, gave rise to despotic regimes, where the state exerted immense authority over resources and people.⁵ While his theory has come under criticism for its deterministic approach, its core premise—the relationship between infrastructure management and

Game-Changer?," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Spring 2017), pp. 127–142, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302743>.

² William Callahan, "China's 'Asia Dream': The Belt Road Initiative and The New Regional Order," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (May 2016), pp. 226–243, available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911166647>; Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017, available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/52595>.

³ Vinod Aggarwal, "Pseudo Institutions: A Comparative Analysis of China's BRI and the US-Led B3W," in *Great Power Competition and Middle Power Strategies: Economic Statecraft in the Asia-Pacific Region*, Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland (2023), pp. 27–50, available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-38024-2_2; M. Arif Khan and Nawaz Khan, "BRI vs. B3W: A rivalry for Economic Hegemony: An Archival Research," *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (June 2022), pp. 31–44, available at <https://jsshuk.com/oj/index.php/jssh/article/view/596>; Cristian Clinci, "Global Gateway vs. Belt and Road Initiative: Towards Stronger or Weaker Global Governance?," Jean Monnet EU Centre of Excellence, *Working paper 19*, Korean University, (May 2022).

⁴ Michal Himmer & Zdeněk Rod, "Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy: Reality or Myth?," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2022), pp. 250–272 available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/19480881.2023.2195280>; Nian Peng & Ming Yu Cheng, *The Reality and Myth of BRI's Debt Trap* (Springer 2024).

⁵ Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (Yale University Press, 1957).

political centralization—is still a helpful analytical lens for interpreting modern geopolitical developments.

China's Belt and Road Initiative makes a strong case for reconsidering Wittfogel's approach. The BRI is one of the most enormous infrastructure projects in history, having been launched in 2013 and officially included into the Chinese Communist Party's constitution in 2017.⁶ The incorporation of the Belt and Road effort in the Chinese Communist Party's constitution reinforces its strategic relevance, raising it from a development effort to an essential part of China's internal and foreign policy. This latest approach emphasizes the BRI's dual purpose as both an economic instrument and a means of solidifying political and ideological control, making it a modern-day counterpart to Wittfogel's hydraulic societies.

As a result, this study investigates how the BRI, like ancient hydraulic systems, expands China's centralized control domestically while also exerting worldwide influence, transforming power dynamics through infrastructure dependency. Pakistan, a key BRI member, demonstrates this pattern with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This program not only illustrates the strategic imperatives that support Chinese investments, but also shows how they can intensify centralized governance, stifle opposition, and favor foreign interests over local democratic processes.

One of the most contentious features of CPEC has been the rerouting of its main commerce and infrastructure corridors. Originally intended to benefit underdeveloped regions such as Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the route was changed to favor the more economically viable Punjab province at the behest of China. This decision excluded provincial stakeholders, discriminated against ethnic minorities, and reinforced the appearance of official favoritism—all hallmarks of authoritarian government that hinders participative decision-making. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Information Minister Iftikhar Ahmed slammed the federal government for intentionally generating a controversy surrounding the proposed CPEC route adjustment, which he claims indicates a disrespect for the needs and development of smaller provinces, and reminded "We will resist any change in route."⁷ The route appears to have originally run from Gwadar to Quetta, then north to Zhob before deviating east towards Dera Ismail Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Gwadar Port, frequently referred to as the "crown jewel" of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, is a prime example of how BRI initiatives may unintentionally aid in the weakening of democratic institutions and the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies in recipient countries. Gwadar Port is situated in the Baluchistan province on the Arabian Sea on Pakistan's southwest coast. It is roughly 170 kilometers east of Chabahar Port in Iran and 120 kilometers southwest of Turbat. Although there had been plans since 1954 to build Gwadar as a deep-sea port, the project wasn't formally launched until 2002. China assisted

⁶ Wade Shepard, "Why China just added the Belt and Road initiative to its constitution," *Forbes*, (October 2017), available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/10/25/why-china-just-added-the-belt-and-road-initiative-to-its-constitution/>.

⁷ Syed Ali Shah, "Economic Corridor: ANP Denounces Change in Route, Calls APC," *Dawn* (May 1, 2015), available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1179361>.

in the completion of the project, and Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president at the time, officially opened the port in 2002. The port became an important component of the CPEC in 2015, with plans for additional development specified. Gwadar Port is strategically important because of its position, which provides China with an alternate way to avoid the Malacca Strait for oil shipments and global trade. It also provides Pakistan with tremendous opportunities for economic growth and regional connections.

Although Gwadar was initially touted as the "lynchpin of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" and a "gateway to economic prosperity" for Pakistan, the reality of its operations shows how BRI initiatives can stray from their original objectives. There are questions about how much Pakistan will actually gain from this strategically important facility given the 40-year lease given to the Chinese state-owned China Overseas Port Holding Company. It has effectively transferred operational control of Gwadar deep sea port from Pakistan to COPHC.⁸ This essentially means Pakistan has limited direct control over how the port is run. Basically, the distribution of economic gains is at the heart of the problem. Although Gwadar Port can boost Pakistan's economy by facilitating commerce, building infrastructure, and creating some jobs, the magnitude of these advantages is in doubt because a Chinese business controls the port's operations. The question is whether the majority of the earnings are going abroad or if Pakistan is receiving a fair portion of the economic pie.

Gwadar and the surrounding area are undergoing a major securitization process as a result of security concerns arising from Baloch dissent. In the face of continuing tensions with certain local Baloch residents, this entails the deployment of more security personnel and the application of more stringent security measures to protect Chinese employees, businesses, and CPEC-related assets. Therefore, the securitization of Gwadar and its surrounding areas has led to widespread discontent among local Baloch communities as they view it as an expropriation of their land and resources. The Pakistani government's crackdown on dissent in Gwadar—justified under the guise of maintaining security for Chinese investments—has only deepened the perception that CPEC advances a neo-colonial agenda, prioritizing Chinese strategic objectives over local autonomy. These developments illustrate how the BRI can inadvertently—or deliberately—entrench authoritarian governance in partner states. By aligning national policies with Beijing's strategic imperatives, governments often suppress local voices, centralize power, and prioritize foreign interests.

In Pakistan, the BRI has not only transformed the country's economic environment, but it has also reinforced pre-existing authoritarian inclinations, resulting in increased state control, diminished provincial autonomy, and suppression of dissent. Pakistan's experience with CPEC demonstrates this problem, emphasizing the importance of increased openness, inclusivity, and accountability in BRI implementation. Without these safeguards, the BRI might become a tool for authoritarian rule, reflecting Wittfogel's theory of hydraulic despotism: control over key resources helps centralized political power.

⁸ Anil Chawla & Jabin Jacob. *"Gwadar Seaport, Pakistan": Chinese Overseas Ports in Southeast and South Asia* (Routledge, 2024), pp. 112-133.

This research aims to answer the following critical questions: How does Karl Wittfogel's concept of hydraulic societies apply to the Belt and Road Initiative? What is the significance of incorporating the BRI into the Chinese constitution, and how does this reflect the CCP's long-term strategic goals? To what extent does the BRI reinforce authoritarian tendencies in partner states? And finally, can the BRI be considered a modern parallel to ancient systems of infrastructure-driven despotism?

This research begins by looking at Karl Wittfogel's concept of hydraulic societies. It then discusses the origins and growth of the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as its unique position in the Chinese Communist Party's constitution. The paper then investigates specific case studies, such as the Gwadar Deep Sea Port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, to demonstrate how the BRI may contribute to authoritarianism in partner countries.

This paper is considered seminal as it addresses a critical lacuna in the existing body of literature. While Karl Wittfogel's "Oriental Despotism" has been recognized for its valuable insights into the intricate relationship between infrastructure and centralized power in the context of ancient hydraulic societies, its relevance to contemporary governance, particularly within the framework of global initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, has been largely overlooked by scholarly discourse. This work, which revives and adapts Wittfogel's theory to contemporary state-driven projects, provides a new perspective on how infrastructure control continues to serve as a tool for political centralization in the twenty-first century, making a significant contribution to political science and geopolitics studies.

This qualitative investigation uses both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include publicly available BRI documents, CPEC websites, government policy declarations, and parliamentary debates. Secondary sources come from a variety of sources, including scholarly papers, government reports, and media analysis from China, Pakistan, and Western academic and journalistic institutions.

Theoretical Foundation: Karl Wittfogel's Concept of Hydraulic Societies

This section examines Karl Wittfogel's concept of hydraulic societies and their relationship to centralized power as a framework for later study. Karl Wittfogel, a well-known historian and political scientist, first presented the concept of hydraulic societies in his important work *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (1957). Wittfogel argued that the majority of historic nations arose from hydraulic civilizations, which he defined as societies in which elites ruled people through control of the water supply. These civilizations usually relied on complex irrigation systems that required central management.⁹ Wittfogel's argument is based on the assumption that certain ancient civilizations, especially those in

⁹ Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (Yale University Press, 1957).

arid or semi-arid locations, relied on large-scale irrigation systems to maintain agricultural output and economic stability.

The hydraulic state's emphasis on state-controlled infrastructure encouraged centralized and authoritarian rule. The development, maintenance, and management of these systems necessitated substantial cooperation, expertise in technology, and centralized authority, which influenced the social and political structures of these nations. Wittfogel asserted that this reliance on state-controlled infrastructure facilitated the establishment of autocratic regimes in which governing elites retained ultimate control over resources, labor, and governance.¹⁰ The bureaucratic network directed forced labour for irrigation projects. As a result, Karl Wittfogel's vision of the hydraulic state included a highly centralized and bureaucratic type of governance.

The hydraulic state represented a management state. The state has the potential to exercise enormous influence over the populace by controlling key resources such as water. This centralized authority frequently resulted in the suppression of independent social and political forces as the state fought to preserve power. The state's control over water resources enabled it to regulate economic activity, redistribute wealth, and maintain social order. This level of control stifled innovation, restricted individual liberty, and maintained a rigid social structure. Wittfogel commented:

The hydraulic state is a genuinely managerial state. The fact has far-reaching societal implications. As manager of hydraulic and other mammoth construction, the hydraulic state prevents the nongovernmental forces of society from crystallizing into independent bodies strong enough to counterbalance and control the political machine.¹¹

The hydraulic state was essentially a potent instrument for social engineering, molding the lives of its people to suit the goals of the state. The main thrust of Karl Wittfogel's theory is that considerable coordination and control were necessary for large-scale irrigation systems, which were essential to ancient cultures' agricultural output and survival. According to Wittfogel, flood monitoring and irrigation water distribution are the two most notable applications of hydraulic management.

The monopolization of vital infrastructure made it possible for leaders to have total control over their subjects' lives and the economy. As Fekri Hassan contended:

Control over the vital resource of water gave rise to social classes and widespread specializations typical of centralized urban life, while it also gave the government

¹⁰ Shmuel Eisenstadt, "The study of Oriental despotisms as systems of total power," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1958), pp. 435-44, available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-asian-studies/article/abs/study-of-oriental-despotisms-as-systems-of-total-power/780B99ECF3F6D16618FAE4C343AD1C2C>.

¹¹ Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, op. cit., p.49.

power of life and death over its population. Thus, a particularly extreme form of despotism is typical of hydraulic empires.¹²

The reliance on the state for existence resulted in a hierarchical social order that strengthened dictatorship. This dependency on the state for existence hindered the formation of autonomous institutions and effective checks on authority, promoting a hierarchical social order that perpetuated tyranny. Rulers maintained authority through a variety of direct and indirect tactics, frequently relying on a centralized bureaucracy to carry out and enforce their policies.

The centralized bureaucracy, led by a powerful elite, helped to strengthen the ruler's power by repressing opposition and limiting social and political plurality. The bureaucracy, which was loyal to the central authority, helped to strengthen the ruler's power by repressing opposition and limiting social and political plurality. The bureaucratic machinery, which was frequently headed by a powerful elite, evolved as a crucial tool of state control. By controlling resource allocation and administering critical parts of society, the state efficiently suppressed dissent and maintained its supremacy, fending off threats to its power. Frederick Mote claims that:

Despotism was one of 'total power' because it permitted neither effective constitutional checks nor effective societal checks upon itself; there were also no checks in 'laws of nature' or 'patterns of cult.'¹³

The consequent governance paradigm was one in which political, economic, and social power was concentrated at the top, with little participation or influence from the larger population.

Wittfogel contended that the centralized governance and robust state machinery of hydraulic societies served as a model for authoritarian governments throughout history. Large-scale irrigation projects were required in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley to ensure consistent agricultural production. As stated by Arnab Roy Chowdhury:

China was the epitome of a hydraulic society, according to Wittfogel (1957), but that view has also been contested. Though to some extent northern Vietnam can be considered an example of a hydraulic society, Wittfogel's view is particularly insightful for civilisations like ancient Egypt, Indus Valley, and Mesopotamia.¹⁴

Wittfogel contended that bureaucrats in these hydraulic societies functioned with limited oversight, limiting individual autonomy and grassroots engagement. The hierarchical organization emboldened authorities, giving them broad influence over the population with

¹² Fekri Hassan, *Water history for our times*, IHP essays on water history, 2, SC-2011/WS/5, Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000210879>, p.74.

¹³ Frederick Mote, "The Growth of Chinese despotism: A critique of Wittfogel's theory of Oriental Despotism as applied to China," *Oriens extremus*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1961), p.1, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43382295>.

¹⁴ Arnab Chowdhury & Sanjay Kumar, "Revisiting Wittfogel: 'Hydraulic society' in colonial India and its post-colonial legacies in hydropower management," in *Theory, Policy, Practice* (Routledge, 2021), p.124.

little supervision. This lack of transparency and accountability allowed bureaucratic elites to consolidate power, aligning their interests with the governing class. The reliance on centralized administration generated a dependency that strengthened the state's control, leaving little room for independent initiatives or local decision-making. This institutionalization of control guaranteed the survival of hierarchical government, impeding the creation of alternative systems or more egalitarian power distributions.

Wittfogel recognizes that competing forces, such as independent military leaders or religious groups, may challenge the state's monopoly on power. While these pressures may have had some effect or power to undermine the state's authority, Wittfogel contends that the sheer scope and complexity of hydraulic systems naturally favored the state in the long run. Military commanders and religious groups frequently lacked the organizational strength, resources, and coordination required to sustain a large-scale, efficient irrigation system. Wittfogel suggested:

In some cases, the rise of hydraulic despotism was probably contested by the heads of powerful clans or by religious groups eager to preserve their traditional autonomy. In others, semi-independent military leaders may have tried to prevent the masters of the hydraulic apparatus from attaining total control. But rival forces lacked the propriety and organizational strength ...¹⁵

Wittfogel contended that hydraulic civilizations were intrinsically resistant to change due to their centralized power structure. The centralization of power resulted in a strict hierarchical structure, in which the elite's control over resources inhibited innovation and prevented alternative governance models. The massive infrastructure required for irrigation was both expensive and complex, impeding the development of decentralized systems or alternative forms of government. Also, the bureaucratic system was self-sustaining, with officials intensely committed to maintaining the status quo to protect their power.

While Wittfogel's theory has had an impact, it has also been criticized for its deterministic approach and wide generalizations. Scholars have questioned how much irrigation systems alone can explain the formation of authoritarian administration, pointing to other elements such as geography, culture, and foreign threats.¹⁶ Furthermore, Wittfogel's categorization of Asian civilizations as particularly dictatorial has been criticized for its Eurocentric perspective, which downplays the diversity of government arrangements in non-Western contexts.¹⁷ Several critics have called out that a complicated framework and network of hydraulic works was not necessary for the formation of a centralized, strong, bureaucratic, and totalitarian state; alternative historical antecedents led to such a state in Sri Lanka.¹⁸

¹⁵ Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, op. cit., p.49.

¹⁶ Anne Bailey & Josep Llobera, "Karl A. Wittfogel and the Asiatic mode of production: A reappraisal," *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (1979), pp. 541-559, available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1979.tb00349.x>.

¹⁷ Charles Redman, *The Rise of Civilization: From Early Farmers to Urban Society in The Ancient Near East* (Freeman, 1978).

¹⁸ Arnab Chowdhury & Sanjay Kumar, "Revisiting Wittfogel: 'Hydraulic Society,'" op. cit., p.124.

Despite these objections, Wittfogel's notion of hydraulic societies provides a useful framework for analyzing the relationship between infrastructure and power, particularly in circumstances where centralized control over resources is a distinguishing feature of governance. This theoretical framework gives a perspective through which to study modern geopolitical phenomena, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI offers a modern manifestation of this dynamic, just as ancient hydraulic societies relied on state-controlled infrastructure to consolidate authority. By investing in large-scale infrastructure projects that develop economic dependency and boost political influence, China mirrors the practices of hydraulic societies, but on a global scale.

The Belt and Road Initiative: Origins, Scope, and Constitutional Significance

This section examines the Belt and Road Initiative's origins, breadth, and constitutional importance. Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, making it one of the most ambitious infrastructure and economic undertakings in modern history.¹⁹ Xi Jinping is frequently considered as a president with a significant emphasis on foreign policy, pursuing an ambitious agenda that highlights his efforts to consolidate power and cement his reputation as a revolutionary leader in modern Chinese history.²⁰ His ambition manifests itself in the BRI's broad scope and strategic importance, which seeks to increase China's worldwide influence through significant investments in infrastructure and commercial ties across numerous regions. The Belt and Road Initiative, sometimes known as the "new Silk Road," seeks to resuscitate ancient trade routes by establishing a vast network of infrastructure corridors across Asia, Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. The initiative's combined focus on overland (the Belt) and maritime (the Road) connectivity emphasizes its goal of integrating global markets, stimulating economic development, and positioning China as the center hub of a linked world.

Under President Xi, BRI has emerged as a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, aiming to enhance global connectivity through substantial infrastructure development, expansive commercial networks, and strategic relationships that span Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond.²¹ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), under its China Power Project noted:

¹⁹ Michael Clarke, "The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Grand Strategy?," *Asia Policy* (July 24), pp. 71-79, available at <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2017.0023>.

²⁰ Pedro Falcone, "Chinese Nationalism and Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping: China's Role in International Society" (Master's thesis), University of Coimbra (2024), available at https://estudogeral.uc.pt/retrieve/276291/PF_CSFM.pdf.

²¹ Matthew Enright, "Chinese foreign policy in the age of Xi Jinping: a 'fundamental' shift or staying the course? An analysis of the Xi presidency's foreign policy direction," July 2021, available at <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/8ca00fe7-043c-46bc-8890-5ccbda391971/content>; Robert Blackwill & Kurt Campbell, *Xi Jinping on the global stage: Chinese foreign policy under a powerful but exposed leader* (Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2016).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is Chinese president Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy project aimed at strengthening China's connectivity with the world. It combines new and old projects, covers an expansive geographic scope, and includes efforts to strengthen hard infrastructure, soft infrastructure, and people-to-people ties.²²

Xi's commitment to the Belt and Road Initiative goes beyond economic goals; it represents a larger ideological and geopolitical plan to establish China as a dominating global power, challenging Western-led institutions and ideals.²³ It represents a shift in global power dynamics, with China emerging as a major player on the world stage.²⁴ As Goldstein has emphasized, the BRI is part of China's bigger aim to change the global economic and strategic landscape.²⁵

In fact, the Belt and Road Initiative provides significant economic and political incentives to China. China's official policy communiqués expressly identify a number of these benefits. For example, the BRI helps China expand its export markets, boosting economic growth and fostering trade ties. Furthermore, the effort supports the internationalization of China's currency, the Renminbi (RMB), increasing China's financial power on a worldwide scale. Moreover, by eliminating trade frictions, including customs and transportation costs, the BRI aims to simplify commerce and enhance economic efficiency.²⁶ From a theoretical point of view, the BRI's emphasis on infrastructure development and connectivity increases China's economic relations with participating countries while also broadening its geopolitical horizons. Strategic investment in important regions enables China to secure essential supply chains, exert influence over regional trade routes, and establish economic ties that strengthen its global position. This multidimensional approach demonstrates China's desire to transform the world economic and strategic environment, establishing itself as a key factor in global affairs.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a large and ambitious project that spans over 150 nations, merging global infrastructure and trade networks to position China as a dominant force in global growth.²⁷ It is structured around six major economic corridors, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the New Eurasian Land Bridge. These corridors connect

²² "How is the Belt and Road Initiative advancing China's interests?," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), under its *China Power*, 2017 available at <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

²³ Suisheng Zhao, *China's Big Power Ambition under Xi Jinping: Narratives and Driving Forces* (Routledge, 2021).

²⁴ John Garrick & Yan Chang Bennett. "Xi Jinping Thought: Realisation of the Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation?," *China Perspectives* 2018, No. 2018/1-2 (November 2020), pp. 99-105, available at <https://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7872>.

²⁵ Avery Goldstein, "China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, reform, and resistance," *International Security*, Vol. 45, No.1, 2020, p. 22.

²⁶ Jing Yuan, "Research on China's One Belt and Road Initiative: From the perspective of geopolitics" (Master's thesis), UiT Norges arktiske universitet (2019), available at <https://munin.uit.no/bitstream/handle/10037/16462/thesis.pdf?sequence=2>.

²⁷ Bora Ly, "Retracted Article: China and global governance: leadership through BRI," *Cogent Social Sciences*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2020), pp. 1-23, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23311886.2020.1801371>.

highways, railways, ports, and energy projects, resulting in physical and digital infrastructure that promotes trade and investment. The maritime element is focused on strategic port development, connecting vital nodes across the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and South Pacific.

China just opened the Chancay megaport in Peru, a \$1.3 billion investment designed to boost trade between South America and the Asia-Pacific. This port is part of a larger goal to establish a "21st-century maritime Silk Road" and strengthen China's presence in Latin America.²⁸ The Chancay Multipurpose Port Terminal is a large infrastructure project located around 70 kilometers north of Lima. Cosco Shipping Ports Perú S.A. partnered with Volcan Compañía Minera S.A.A. to create this megaproject, which is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative.²⁹ The port is equipped to handle containerized, general, and rolling goods, including the world's largest container ships. It is anticipated to span 992 hectares and manage up to one million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) each year once it is finished. The project is being developed in two stages. Four ports (two for containers and two for multipurpose use), an administrative and logistics complex, and a 1.8-kilometer tunnel linking the logistics complex and the operating zone are all part of the first stage, which was funded with 1.3 billion USD. Eleven more docks will be added in the second stage, increasing the total number of berths to 15.³⁰

The Chancay megaport symbolizes China's strategic strategy to increase its influence in Latin America. The port is planned to cut congestion and logistical costs at Peru's main port, the Lima-Callao hub, while also positioning itself as a critical gateway to Asia and a global economic hub for cargo redistribution. However, this collaboration has prompted concern regarding Chinese influence in key Peruvian industries, the impact on local people, and the possibility of reliance on an external actor with its own goals. The project also emphasizes the larger geopolitical consequences of China's increasing dominance in the region. While the immediate economic benefits include attracting investment and creating local jobs, the long-term hazards include possible geopolitical and social issues.

In terms of finances, the BRI is backed by Chinese state-owned banks and institutions such as the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The overall expected investment surpasses \$1 trillion, with monies earmarked for infrastructure, industrial parks, and energy projects. The World Economic Forum reported:

²⁸ Juan Cardenal, "China in Peru: The Unspoken Costs of an Unequal Relationship," U.S. Institute of Peace (July 2024), available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep61323.pdf?acceptTC=true&coverpage=false&addFooter=false>.

²⁹ Elia Apostolopoulou and Alejandra Pizarro, "Contesting the Anticipated Infrastructural City: A Grounded Analysis of Silk Road Urbanization in The Multipurpose Port Terminal in Chancay, Peru," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (2025), pp. 223-241, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/24694452.2024.2415718>.

³⁰ Mark Townsend, "China's \$1.3 Billion Peru Gamble Redraws Global Trade," *Global Finance* (December 4, 2024), available at <https://gfmag.com/news/china-peru-chancay-port-deal-bri/>.

Total BRI spending has already surpassed \$1 trillion—an enormous sum China plans to recoup through various debt repayment plans. Today, BRI lending has made China the world's largest debt collector.³¹

This vast amount of investment places China as a prominent factor in global infrastructure development, threatening established multilateral institutions such as the World Bank.

The Belt and Road Initiative and the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party: Interplay and Implications

During its 19th National Congress in 2017, the CCP made two significant amendments to its constitution. One amendment was the enshrining of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.”³² This inclusion marked a notable shift, as it was the first time a sitting leader's ideology was incorporated into the constitution since Mao Zedong. What surprised many was the inclusion of the BRI in the constitution. The amendment emphasized “following the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration and pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative.”³³ This move underscored the importance of the BRI in China's strategic vision and its commitment to global infrastructure development. It is important to note that even though Jiang Zemin introduced significant reforms, he did not include his name in the constitution. Instead, he incorporated his “Three Represents” theory. Similarly, Hu Jintao added his “Scientific Outlook on Development” to the constitution without personal attribution.³⁴ The inclusion of Xi Jinping's name and the BRI highlights the unique and elevated status of these initiatives in China's political and strategic framework. Wade Shepard noted:

Basically, Xi Jinping Thought and what could be called Xi Jinping action have both been etched into China's premier governing charter, further implanting President Xi Jinping—the public architect of the Belt and Road (BRI)—deeper into the wheelworks of the Chinese future.³⁵

³¹ Spencer Feingold, “China's Belt and Road Initiative Turns 10. Here's What to Know,” *World Economic Forum* (November 2023), available at <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/11/china-belt-road-initiative-trade-bri-silk-road/>.

³² Wade Shepard, “Why China Just Added the Belt and Road Initiative to Its Constitution,” *Forbes* (October 25, 2017), available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/10/25/why-china-just-added-the-belt-and-road-initiative-to-its-constitution/>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Shepard further elaborated, BRI:

Is a program that is inseparably connected with Xi Jinping, which could turn out to be on a similar level as the Great Leap Forward is connected with Mao and Reform and Opening with Deng Xiaoping. The writing of this initiative into the constitution could very well be used as a driver to extend Xi's leadership a little farther into the future.³⁶

This strategic move not only reinforced President Xi Jinping's leadership within the CCP's ideological framework but also elevated the BRI to the status of a national strategic priority.³⁷ By institutionalizing the BRI within the party's constitution, Beijing underscored its unwavering commitment to realizing its vision of global connectivity and economic integration. This formal inclusion serves several critical functions. First, it solidifies the BRI as an integral component of China's long-term strategic agenda, ensuring continuity and stability in its implementation. This institutionalization centralizes the governance of the BRI within the highest echelons of Chinese leadership, facilitating coordinated and efficient execution of the initiative. Furthermore, it aligns the project with Xi's broader objectives of enhancing China's global influence and domestic legitimacy, thereby consolidating his political power and ensuring the party's unified support.³⁸ From an analytical perspective, embedding the BRI in the CCP's constitution signifies a deliberate effort to integrate economic and geopolitical ambitions into the party's core mission.

This action is part of a larger goal to increase China's worldwide influence by leveraging infrastructure development and commercial ties, confronting Western-dominated institutions and redefining international norms and power dynamics. This constitutional authorization establishes a strong legal and intellectual underpinning for the BRI, easing the mobilization of resources and investments required for large-scale infrastructure projects across numerous nations. It also ties the project with the CCP's overarching strategic goals of regional stability, economic growth, and strategic alliance formation, smoothly combining local and international ambitions. Thus, by putting the BRI into the party's primary goal, the Chinese Communist Party has successfully linked the initiative's success to its own legitimacy. This strategic effort lifts the BRI to the level of national pride and strategic importance, emphasizing its centrality in China's political and economic framework.

Likewise, by institutionalizing the BRI, the CCP increases its domestic legitimacy and establishes legal frameworks that enable state actors to pursue more aggressive development efforts abroad. This constitutional backing serves as a legal framework for the BRI's broad reach, expanding the party's oversight into foreign policy problems, consolidating authority, and providing a unified front in international debates. It also highlights the crucial corridors stressed by the BRI, as well as the projects' ability to influence

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ John Garrick & Yan Chang Bennett, "Xi Jinping Thought: Realisation of the Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation?," *China Perspectives* (2018/1-2), pp. 99–105. available at <https://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7872>.

global trade dynamics in China's favor. The focus on critical corridors displays the strategic implementation of infrastructure to consolidate power and extend China's geopolitical influence, aligning with Wittfogel's argument that control over essential resources is fundamental to maintaining a hierarchical and centralized governance structure.

Ultimately, the BRI's placement in the CCP constitution demonstrates the initiative's importance to China's internal and external affairs. By putting it into the constitution, the CCP has elevated it from a flagship economic program to a critical component of China's long-term strategic plan, ensuring its continuation and priority during leadership transitions. This tactic connects the BRI to the party's ideological goals of declaring China's rise to global prominence, as well as its governance policy of supporting centralized, state-led development, thereby positioning China as a leader in global infrastructure development and fostering economic and diplomatic ties that challenge Western-led institutions.

One could posit that the constitutional enshrinement of BRI in the CCP constitution provides a strong shield against internal opposition or inspection, echoing Wittfogel's notion of a hydraulic society's lack of accountability and transparency. This move protects the effort against any challenges from legislators, academics, and the general public. Opposing the BRI would undermine not merely a specific policy, but also the CCP's overall vision of China's economic development and global aspirations. This insulation is strengthened by the centralized character of Chinese governance, where policies stated in the party's constitution are followed with steadfast consistency, as suggested by Wittfogel's model of unaccountability and non-transparency.

Although private investors or banks are permitted to finance or participate in projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese government retains ultimate authority to regulate and approve such financing and projects, particularly in developing nations.³⁹ This focused control over decision-making indicates a larger goal of power consolidation, similar to Karl Wittfogel's concept of hydraulic societies. In these cultures, the management of key resources—such as water—was centralized to retain control over populations and assure cooperation with the ruling authority.

Furthermore, Chinese investment often involves Chinese companies. For example, contracts for roads, ports, airports, hospitals, and other infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative are frequently awarded to Chinese firms. Even when projects benefit from Chinese expertise, this raises concerns about potential dependency and a lack of local ownership. This dynamic can lead to economic and political dependencies on China, which may limit the host countries' sovereignty and influence, e.g., in Pakistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, major infrastructure and energy projects were predominantly financed by Chinese banks and companies, all of which required approval from Beijing. This dynamic has led to the prioritization of projects that align with China's strategic interests, often at the expense of local governance or democratic input. The Gwadar Port development in Baluchistan exemplifies this, where Chinese state-owned enterprises spearheaded the

³⁹ Spencer Feingold, "China's Belt and Road Initiative Turns 10," *op. cit.*

project under agreements largely negotiated by Pakistan's central government, bypassing significant input from regional authorities or communities.

Another such example is Sri Lanka's Hambantota port. The port was initially financed using Chinese loans, but due to Sri Lanka's failure to meet financial requirements, it was leased to a Chinese business for 99 years. This arrangement highlights the centralized structure of Chinese oversight in the BRI, where financial ties are used to exert control, diminishing recipient states' autonomy. Projects like the Hambantota Port development recall strategies used by 19th-century European imperialists against Qing dynasty China, emphasizing the strategic importance of these projects.⁴⁰ It is consistent with Wittfogel's theory that control over critical resources—whether water in hydraulic civilizations or infrastructure in the modern era—serves as a vehicle for consolidating power and maintaining a hierarchical structure. The BRI's finance and project approval processes successfully put China at the center of decision-making, cementing its role as a dominant power in the economic and political landscapes of emerging nations.

The BRI's Centralization of Control and Its Impact on Authoritarianism in Partner States

This section examines how CPEC, a key component of BRI, has aroused controversy and raised concerns about expanding Chinese influence in the Pakistani government, bypassing provincial input and legislative approval. Two key concerns have emerged: the CPEC conflict and the handover of Gwadar Port control to a Chinese corporation. It is suggested from the onset that the CPEC and Gwadar developments have exacerbated authoritarian tendencies in Pakistan by centralizing authority in the executive, marginalizing local government, and consolidating control in the hands of a few political and military leaders.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

CPEC is a flagship project of the BRI. CPEC was announced in 2013, but was officially launched in April 2015, when Xi visited Pakistan. It represents a multi-billion-dollar investment in infrastructure, energy, and trade connectivity between China and Pakistan.⁴¹ The initial investment for CPEC was announced to be \$46 billion, focusing on infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, energy corridors, and economic zones, however, the scope and investment have since expanded, with estimates now reaching \$62 billion.⁴²

⁴⁰ J. W Yu Ji, "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?," Chatham House–International Affairs Think Tank (September 2021), available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-bri>.

⁴¹ David Sacks, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor-Hard Reality Greets BRI's Signature Initiative" (2021), FIU Security Research Hub, available at <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/srhreports/cybersecurity/cybersecurity/845/>.

⁴² Ibid.

CPEC aims to link China's western Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea, providing China with a shorter and more secure trade route to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.

Prime Minister Shabazz Sharif has remarked:

Pakistan-China friendship is deep rooted and eternal. This friendship is rooted in the hearts of people of the two countries. The all-weather strategic cooperation relationship has stood the test of time. Over the time, the bilateral cooperation between China and Pakistan has witnessed new culmination with addition of new dimensions of cooperation in multifaceted sectors under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework, a principle strategic component of Belt and Road Initiative... We are committed to ensure the high quality development of CPEC initiatives with 'Pakistan speed' and take it forward to new heights.⁴³

CPEC consists of three major routes: eastern, western, and central. However, effort has mostly been concentrated on the Eastern Route, with approximately 90% of projects on that route nearing completion. For China, CPEC bears enormous geopolitical value by growing its influence in South Asia, strengthening its energy security, and integrating its undeveloped western regions, such as Xinjiang, into the global economy. Zheng Shanjie, Chairman of China's National Development and Reform Commission, noted that CPEC is: "An important loop in the larger chain of the Belt and Road Initiative and would enable the possibility of a 21st Century Maritime Road."⁴⁴

It offers China substantial strategic advantages, particularly in the context of potential conflicts with the United States or other nations. For instance, China imports the majority of its oil from the Middle East, utilizing both the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz. As Geoffrey Sloan notes in *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History* (2017), China's seaborne "oil supplies have to pass through strait of Hormuz and Malacca. In 2012, 80 per cent of China's oil imports went through the second of these straits."⁴⁵ Sloan further maintains that the U.S. Navy, being the most powerful and capable of projecting its power, remains dominant in these straits. This could pose a challenge for China, as it depends on these risky routes for its maritime activities.

Sloan postulates that the Strait of Malacca represents a significant chokepoint due to its narrow passage and the high volume of trade passing through it. At its narrowest point, the strait is only 1.7 miles wide, increasing the risks of collisions and groundings.⁴⁶ Also, the considerable volume of oil supplies delivered through this route provides a continual concern for Chinese strategic experts, as any disruption could have severe consequences for China's energy security and economic stability.

⁴³ CPEC Secretariat, Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, Government of Pakistan, "Response to Western Media Reports on CPEC," China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), available at <https://cpec.gov.pk/news/100>.

⁴⁴ 'How is the Belt and Road Initiative advancing China's interests?,' op. cit.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Sloan and Colin S. Gray, *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History* (Routledge, 2017), p.209.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Gwadar and CPEC both help to alleviate China's strategic issue caused by the Strait of Malacca. For example, China is developing ports at Gwadar and Hambantota, Sri Lanka, a tactic sometimes referred to as the "String of Pearls" by India.⁴⁷ As Sloan argues, by constructing a network of ports, China is altering the geopolitical landscape to counter these strategic vulnerabilities.⁴⁸ This infrastructure expansion enables China to secure other maritime routes, lessening its dependency on the Strait of Malacca and increasing its strategic flexibility and resilience.

Historically, moving oil from the Middle East to eastern Chinese ports has been expensive and time-consuming, putting a strain on China's economy and exposing it to a number of risks. The CPEC reduces these risks by providing a more efficient and secure route. Arguably, by importing oil to Pakistan's Gwadar Port and then transferring it via the CPEC-developed road and railway networks, China may drastically reduce transit time and costs. Nonetheless, this alternative route provides continued access to critical oil supplies, even in the event of a disruption in the Strait of Malacca. Under the project "Up-gradation and Dualization of ML-1 and establishment of Dry Port near Havelian," China and Pakistan are collaborating on the development and improvement of the ML1 railway line, with investments amounting to billions of dollars.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, it will benefit Pakistan's infrastructure, which needs a massive upgrade to fuel economic development and industrialization. The Pakistan Institute of Parliamentary Services maintains:

A major infrastructure project under the China – Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the ML-1 (Main Line 1) project aims to modernize Pakistan's railway network, particularly its main rail artery from Karachi to Peshawar. With an estimated cost \$6.8 billion, this project is expected to improve Pakistan's transportation capabilities, shorten travel time and boost the effectiveness of both passengers and freight movement as part of Pakistani border connectivity strategy with Central Asia.⁵⁰

The railway network, combined with the road infrastructure connecting western China to Gwadar, is intended to ensure China's uninterrupted supply lines. By building alternate channels, the program intends to limit any interruptions and maintain a continuous flow of logistics, strengthening China's strategic resilience in the region.

⁴⁷ Rajeshwari Mitra & Jaspreet Gill, "The Strength of the String: The Realities of the String of Pearls Theory," *Calcutta Journal of Global Affairs* (2019), available at <https://www.globaljournalceners.org/article.php?e=55>.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Sloan and Colin S. Gray, op. cit., p.210

⁴⁹ Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, Government of Pakistan, "Up-gradation and Dualization of ML-1 and Establishment of Dry Port near Havelian," China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), available at <https://cpec.gov.pk/project-details/30>.

⁵⁰ Fakiha Mahmood, *ML1 Project of CPEC and Pakistan's Connectivity with Central Asia Through Rail and Road*, Briefing Paper No. 05, Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services (September 25, 2024), available at <https://www.pips.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Briefing-Paper-No.-5-CPEC-AND-ML1-project.pdf>.

China's western area falls well behind its eastern counterparts in terms of development. To rectify this discrepancy, China intends to invest billions of dollars in infrastructure and resources to spur growth in the western China. Transporting these goods from eastern ports over thousands of miles is costly and time-consuming.⁵¹ Using the Gwadar Port and its large infrastructure network, China can efficiently move raw materials to its western areas, reducing geopolitical risks and saving time and resources. Furthermore, CPEC provides critical access to the landlocked western area by connecting it to global markets via Gwadar, supporting greater economic integration and development.

Despite China's geopolitical advantages, Pakistan stands to earn considerably from both Gwadar and the CPEC. It provides access to the landlocked Central Asian states, and if stability returns to Afghanistan, Pakistan might benefit considerably in terms of dividends. Pakistan hopes to benefit from trade through Gwadar because these countries will pay transit fees, enhancing Pakistan's economic prospects.⁵²

In essence, CPEC is viewed by Pakistan as a transformative initiative capable of addressing longstanding economic and infrastructure challenges. The corridor has facilitated the introduction of large-scale energy projects aimed at resolving chronic electricity shortages and reducing power deficits.⁵³ Additionally, it has spurred the construction of highways, railways, and special economic zones, thereby boosting trade and industrial activity.⁵⁴ CPEC also strengthens the bilateral ties between China and Pakistan, increasing Pakistan's economic reliance on China while furthering Beijing's geopolitical strategy in the Indian Ocean region. This project counterbalances India's regional dominance and the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, strengthening China's influence and strategic stance in South Asia.

CPEC: A Chinese Blueprint or a Pakistani Path? Analyzing Route Shifts and Their Implications, with Emphasis on Gwadar Deep Sea Port Representation

Despite the reciprocal benefits of CPEC, the project has been marred by controversy, mismanagement, and disagreements over route alignment. CPEC consists of three routes:

⁵¹ Hassan Butt, "China's Belt and Road Initiative 2.0-A Recipe for Development-A Case Study of the CPEC," *Tidal View from Boao: Building Belt and Road in the Past Decade* (2023), pp. 120, available at <https://amro-asia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/1700550202984373.pdf#page=127>.

⁵² Nawaz, et al., "Pakistan's Economic and Trade Potential in Regional and Global Power Shifts: A Way Forward," *Journal of Asian Development Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2024), pp. 623-635, available at <https://poverty.com.pk/index.php/Journal/article/view/535>.

⁵³ Helen Blackwell, "Pakistan Refocuses on Counter-Terrorism to Protect China's Investments," *International Institute for Strategic Studies* (September 2019), available at <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2019/09/sasia-pakistan-protects-chinese-investments>.

⁵⁴ Umar Farooq & Asma Shakir, "China-Pakistan economic corridor: geo-political implications, regional constraints and benefits of CPEC," *South Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2020), available at <http://111.68.103.26/journals/index.php/IJSAS/article/viewFile/3287/1413>.

central, eastern, and western. The Central Alignment links Gwadar and Talagang via Basima, Khuzdar, Sukkur, Rajanpur, Layyah, Muzaffargarh, and the Brahma Bahtar-Yarik Motorway. The Eastern Route, which spans 2,686 kilometers, connects Khunjerab to Gwadar via Burhan, Faisalabad, Multan, Khuzdar, and Basima, with a 793-kilometer overlap with other roads. The Western Alignment begins in Quetta, connects Surab via the N25, links to Hoshab via the N85, and ends in Gwadar via the M8 Motorway.

The route dispute revolves around the perceived priority of certain regions of Pakistan over others, which raises concerns about equitable development and regional inclusion. Initially, the proposed CPEC route aimed to develop disadvantaged and conflict-prone areas, including Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This route would have proceeded via western Pakistan (western route), connecting Gwadar to the economically challenged districts of southern Baluchistan and central Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), offering to elevate marginalized communities through infrastructure development, trade, and employment opportunities.

However, further adjustments to the CPEC plans shifted the emphasis to the eastern alignment, highlighting Punjab and Sindh, Pakistan's more developed and politically influential provinces. This move targeted areas with existing relatively stronger infrastructure and economic conditions, such as Lahore and Karachi. Proponents of the new route said that the eastern alignment was more realistic due to improved road networks, ease of execution, and higher returns on investment, given Punjab and Sindh's larger markets and established businesses. As a result, the Eastern route was prioritized over the Western and Central lines.

The CPEC route experienced substantial revisions due to China's demand, leaving the Pakistani government with limited options other than to comply with Chinese orders.⁵⁵ A report in 'China Power' suggests:

The BRI can also win China political gains. Beijing may be able to exploit its financial largesse to influence partner country policies to align with its own interests, particularly in certain countries in Central and South Asia that lack good governance and robust rule of law.⁵⁶

There is an argument to be made that this underscores the project's complicated power dynamics, with China's influence and Pakistan's reliance on Chinese investment and expertise playing critical roles in determining the corridor's growth. Just as rulers in hydraulic cultures used control over irrigation systems to govern outlying regions and preserve authority, China uses its economic resources and expertise to impose the conditions of the CPEC. This dynamic strengthens a centralized decision-making framework, with Pakistan's government and military ignoring local voices and democratic processes to fit China's strategic goals. Bypassing the Western route exacerbates feelings of isolation and

⁵⁵ Filippo Boni & Katharine Adeney. "The impact of the China-Pakistan economic corridor on Pakistan's federal system: the politics of the CPEC," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2020), pp. 441-465, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48735729>.

⁵⁶ "How is the Belt and Road Initiative advancing China's interests?," op. cit.

marginalization in regions like Baluchistan, where hostility toward the federal authority has traditionally fueled insurgent activities.⁵⁷ Similarly, people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have expressed dissatisfaction with the missing prospects for economic development and integration into the larger CPEC framework.

The Pakistani government has mainly controlled the CPEC's design and execution since its inception, with central officials in Islamabad making crucial choices concerning routes, infrastructure projects, and investments, frequently in close collaboration with China. Pakistan and China formed the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) as the CPEC's highest decision-making body. This committee is made up of representatives from Pakistan and China, and it makes all major project decisions together. While this centralized approach has been justified by expediency and national security considerations, it has left little possibility for democratic engagement with local communities. Communities in Baluchistan, which is strategically vital due to the Gwadar Port, have felt ignored in decision-making.⁵⁸ Baloch nationalist leaders and local activists have criticized the lack of transparency and consultation, claiming that their region's development requirements and local viewpoints have been overlooked in favor of economic and geopolitical objectives.

Similar reservations have been expressed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with the provincial government condemning the region's exclusion from major CPEC projects. Local leaders in Baluchistan and KPK have complained that centralization of decision-making has exacerbated regional imbalances and damaged the democratic process, which requires people to have a say in choices that directly affect their lives and livelihoods. These grievances have caused political instability, with demands for more provincial autonomy and the devolution of power over CPEC-related projects.

The militarization of the CPEC has been a major worry, particularly in sensitive regions like Baluchistan and KPK. As CPEC projects spread throughout Pakistan, the military's role increased, prompting concerns about the balance of power between civilian governance and military oversight. The military's growing engagement in infrastructure security, project monitoring, and strategic decision-making has raised worries about power consolidation within the military establishment and the weakening of civilian oversight. One of the most visible signs of militarization is the establishment of the CPEC Security Division, intended to defend the infrastructure and personnel involved in CPEC projects, particularly in dangerous regions. This division was primarily motivated by the necessity to safeguard Chinese workers who were threatened by terrorist incidents around the country, as well as China's demand of the Pakistani government to improve Chinese worker protection. Baluchistan has witnessed a considerable military presence due to the strategic importance of the Gwadar Port and ongoing insurgency issues.

⁵⁷ Ishaque Gul, & M. Asghar, "Impact of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on National and Integration in Pakistan" (2021), *Global Political Review*, available at <https://www.gprjournal.com/article/impact-of-chinapakistan-economic-corridor-cpec-on-national-development-and-integration-in-pakistan>.

⁵⁸ Filippo Boni & Katharine Adeney. "The impact of the China-Pakistan economic corridor on Pakistan's federal system," op. cit.

Baluchistan has witnessed a significant military presence due to the strategic importance of Gwadar Port and ongoing insurgency issues. To defend the port and its surroundings, the Pakistani military has set up many checkpoints, outposts, and patrols across the region. Baluchistan has a much higher military presence than other portions of Pakistan, owing to a combination of strategic and security considerations. In comparison, other parts of Pakistan, such as Punjab and Sindh, have a lesser military presence. These regions are more politically stable and economically developed, with less insurgency problems. The military presence in these locations largely focuses on border security and counter-terrorism activities.

Baluchistan's military presence, on the other hand, is motivated by the need to secure the Gwadar Port, a critical component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, as well as to combat the ongoing insurgency headed by separatist groups such as the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA). The military's mission in Baluchistan includes not only securing the port but also preserving law and order, carrying out counter-insurgency operations, and ensuring the safety of Chinese workers and investments in the province.

Thus, the military's involvement in protecting CPEC infrastructure has expanded beyond security to encompass administrative and logistical support in a variety of areas. This change in responsibility has sparked worries about civilian authorities' declining influence in the design and implementation of CPEC projects. The military's role has grown in tandem with the political marginalization of Baluchistan's indigenous population. In areas such as Baluchistan, where nationalist movements and insurgencies have long existed, greater military presence under the premise of CPEC protection is sometimes interpreted as an attempt to repress dissent and cement control over resource-rich regions. This has aggravated the already hostile political climate in the region, as local populations and political leaders have expressed discontent with the military's expanding involvement in both governance and economic affairs.

The Management of Gwadar Port by China Overseas Ports Holding Company (COPHC)

Gwadar Port is strategically placed near the mouth of the Persian Gulf, right below the Strait of Hormuz. It serves as Pakistan's third commercial port, after Karachi and Qasim. While the two older ports handle 95 percent of Pakistan's seaborne business, their capacity is fully utilized, with no room for expansion. In response, China has made considerable expenditures in the development of the Gwadar Deep Sea Port, which is located near the strategic Strait of Hormuz, a vital route for global oil transportation. The development of Gwadar Port is a vital component of the ambitious CPEC, illustrating the strength of the Sino-Pakistani partnership and the broad scope of China's geopolitical aims. According to the vision statement of the Gwadar Port Authority, government of Pakistan, "Gwadar deep sea

port is the second great monument of Pakistan-China friendship after the Karakoram Highway linking Pakistan and China.”⁵⁹

Gwadar offers an essential substitute because Pakistan’s current major ports are very close to capacity and have little space for growth. Gwadar Port, which can handle one million tons of cargo annually, will be an important commercial center as well as an essential piece of infrastructure for the energy, transportation, and industrial sectors, greatly boosting Pakistan’s economic potential. A previously unknown group of fishing villages on Pakistan’s Makran coast, Gwadar has become a vital component of the \$62 billion CPEC. South Asia’s ‘New Great Game,’ as the region’s growing geopolitical rivalry is known, has made Gwadar, which is only 172 kilometers from Chabahar, an Iranian port under Indian development, a focal point.⁶⁰ The Gwadar Port’s expansion plans include a floating liquefied natural gas terminal with a daily capacity of 500 million cubic feet, a desalination facility, and a 2,292-acre special economic zone. The planned investment for these new infrastructure projects is \$1.62 billion.⁶¹

In a significant shift, the Pakistani government handed over operation of Gwadar Port to the Port of Singapore Authority for a 40-year period in 2007. This move was partly prompted by U.S. fears over China’s expanding influence in the region.⁶² However, rising tensions between the United States and Pakistan, particularly over Pakistan’s policies in Afghanistan, forced Islamabad to reconsider its foreign policy. In 2013, Pakistan handed over control of Gwadar Port to China Overseas Ports Holding Company (COPHC) for a 43-year period, hoping to counteract U.S. influence and gain Beijing’s backing.⁶³

To regain its massive investment, COPHC would get a considerable share of the money generated by Gwadar Port’s operations: 91% from port and terminal activities, and 85% from the accompanying free zone.⁶⁴ While the port is expected to handle one million tonnes of cargo annually, there have been suspicions in Pakistan that the revenue-sharing pact will unfairly benefit Chinese enterprises.

The Pakistani government has granted considerable sovereign guarantees for Chinese investments, some at high interest rates. However, a significant portion of these funds did not enter the Pakistani financial system. Instead, they primarily moved from Chinese financial institutions to Chinese infrastructure development companies. While Pakistani

⁵⁹ Kartik Gurmeet, “Pakistan’s Gwadar Port: A New Naval Base in China’s String of Pearls in the Indo-Pacific,” *CSIS Briefs*, Center for Strategic & International Studies (April 2018), pp. 1-5, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pakistans-gwadar-port-new-naval-base-chinas-string-pearls-indo-pacific>.

⁶⁰ Fazl-e-Haider, “Gwadar: an emerging centre of the New Great Game,” *ISPI policy brief 162* (2009), available at https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/pb_162_2009_0.pdf.

⁶¹ Frédéric Grare, “Along the Road: Gwadar and China’s Power Projection,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (July 2018), available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/07/along-the-road-gwadar-and-chinas-power-projection?lang=en>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Isaac Kardon, et al., “China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China’s Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan” (2020), U.S. Naval War College, available at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

businesses reaped minimal benefits from these investments, the Pakistani government is ultimately responsible for repaying the loans and upholding the sovereign guarantee. In this regard, Wittfogel's insight provides a useful framework for understanding the power dynamics at work, in which China's control over the flow of money and infrastructure development mimics the control exercised by a hydraulic authority over water resources in a conventional hydraulic society.

The building of Gwadar Port in Baluchistan, like the CPEC, has created tension. Despite their abundance of natural riches, the people of Baluchistan have long felt ignored by the federal government, which has concentrated power and economic rewards in more politically significant provinces such as Punjab and Sindh. Local Baloch stakeholders claim disenfranchisement, claiming that they have little say in the planning, execution, and development of Gwadar Port and its associated developments, including Gwadar Airport, hospitals, and free trade zones. They push for expanded Baloch ownership and control over development projects within Baluchistan and propose a shared ownership model with the federal government to guarantee that local interests are fully represented.

Can the BRI be Considered a Modern Parallel to Ancient Systems of Infrastructure-Driven Despotism?

The BRI's concentration on large-scale infrastructure projects has intriguing parallels with Wittfogel's concept of hydraulic societies. The BRI, like past civilizations that relied on complicated irrigation systems, requires centralized management over resource allocation and project implementation thanks to its large network of highways, ports, and energy projects. This concentrated control, which is frequently exerted by Chinese state-owned firms, has the ability to concentrate power and influence, limiting recipient nations' agency.

In a nutshell, CPEC, a key component of the BRI, is an example of this dynamic. The contentious change in the CPEC path, which was motivated by China's geopolitical objectives, demonstrates how Beijing influences Pakistani choices. Another example of how Chinese investment can have a big influence on a host country's strategic decisions is the initial awarding of Gwadar Port's management to a Singaporean business, which was later transferred to a Chinese entity. Additionally, Wittfogel's hydraulic societies' centralized management is echoed by the top-down approach to CPEC implementation, which has limited local involvement and prompted worries from smaller provinces about the federal government's supremacy in decision-making. These examples demonstrate that, while the BRI may provide economic benefits, it also has the potential to strengthen centralized power structures and limit participant states' autonomy.

Conclusion

This study has critically assessed the BRI via the theoretical lens of Karl Wittfogel's notion of hydraulic societies, making analogies between ancient civilizations' centralized control and

authoritarian inclinations and modern infrastructure-driven geopolitics. By examining the BRI's constitutional enshrinement and its consequences for Chinese domestic and foreign policy, we have shown how the project can be used to consolidate power both within China and among participating countries. The BRI's centralization of power not only boosts China's political and economic dominance but also generates dependency among partner governments, often eroding local governance institutions and promoting authoritarian paradigms.

This analysis has determined that the BRI centralizes authority in a manner similar to the bureaucratic systems of hydraulic societies. China's supremacy in financing, building, and managing key infrastructure projects gives it tremendous clout with participating countries, resulting in long-term dependence that can constrain political sovereignty and move governance toward more centralized, state-driven regimes. This pattern is particularly visible in nations like Pakistan and Sri Lanka, where Chinese participation has influenced decision-making and, in certain cases, the failure to repay loans has resulted in the cession of critical assets, such as the Hambantota Port.

One of the most significant critiques leveled at the BRI is the debt load it places on recipient countries, which can lead to economic dependency and strategic vulnerability. Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port is an excellent example of this dynamic. In the early 2010s, Sri Lanka borrowed around \$1.1 billion from Chinese state-owned banks to build the port, with the hope that it would become a significant regional commercial hub. However, the project failed to generate enough cash, leaving Sri Lanka unable to pay its loan. In 2017, the Sri Lankan government was obliged to lease the port and 15,000 acres of adjacent land to China Merchants Port Holdings Company for 99 years. This contract effectively handed over control of a strategically important marine asset to a Chinese state-owned firm, raising worries about Sri Lanka's sovereignty and China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean region.

Similarly, Pakistan's participation in CPEC, the BRI's flagship project, has resulted in both benefits and challenges. CPEC includes more than \$25 billion in Chinese loans and investments to fund infrastructure projects such as roads, trains, power plants, and the expansion of Gwadar Port. While these expenditures have filled essential infrastructure gaps, they have also contributed to Pakistan's growing debt. Although these reports have been dismissed by the Pakistani state as misleading, factually inaccurate, and one-sided, they have been criticized for distorting facts and relying on irresponsible statements.⁶⁵

Gwadar Port, a vital component of CPEC, is operated by China Overseas Port Holding Company on a 40-year lease, giving China extensive influence over a strategically placed deep-sea port near the Strait of Hormuz. This raises concerns about Pakistan's long-term sovereignty and capacity to pursue independent economic and geopolitical strategies. Furthermore, the BRI's influence on governance patterns in partner nations demonstrates its propensity to strengthen authoritarian tendencies. While the program promises

⁶⁵ CPEC Secretariat, Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, Government of Pakistan, "Response to Western Media Reports on CPEC," China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), available at <https://cpec.gov.pk/news/100>.

economic growth, it frequently has considerable political consequences, as local government systems are bypassed or undermined, and democratic accountability is jeopardized. This pattern shows that the BRI, like the ancient hydraulic systems Wittfogel described, might serve as a vehicle of centralized control, limiting local political agency and promoting top-down governance.

Future study on the BRI should concentrate on the long-term political and economic implications of Chinese infrastructure investments for local governance models. Comparative case studies of BRI recipient nations could give information on how various political systems respond to or oppose China's influence. Furthermore, research on the BRI's environmental and social impacts, particularly on indigenous populations and local communities, would provide a more complete picture of its consequences. Finally, investigating the role of the BRI in transforming global power structures, particularly in regard to the decline of Western influence and the rise of China, will provide vital insights into the changing dynamics of global geopolitics.

In conclusion, while the BRI has the potential to boost economic growth, its broader ramifications for governance and authoritarianism must not be underestimated. As this project grows, it is critical that both China and its partner nations prioritize inclusive, transparent, and sustainable measures to guarantee that the BRI's long-term impact is good, equitable, and favorable to democratic principles.

Dr. Safdar Hussain is a Visiting Fellow at the University of Reading, UK.