

Exploring the Impacts of the BRI of China on the Bangladesh-China Relationship

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Keywords:

Bangladesh,
China,
South Asia,
India,
Investment,
Geopolitics,
BRI

Abstract: This study examines and analyses the rising China-Bangladesh relationship. China is undertaking to upturn the traditional Indian supremacy in South Asia region to expand its range of domination over Bangladesh. The study inspects several of China's Mega investment and infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, most significantly the Padma Bridge Rail Link, Payra Power Plant and Karnaphuli Tunnel under following the Policy of Beijing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These schemes supplementary energies Chinese influence in Bangladesh economically; diplomatically and militarily. The study leads to an assumption that, in spite of having the many prospects of BRI; it also signifies a set of menaces that need to be cautiously accomplished through decent policy choices. Eventually, China appears to be pushing India down the ladder of eminence in the subcontinent while uplifting Bangladesh to an afresh growing player in geopolitics in South Asia. Besides, this article delivers a much-needed appropriate input in explanation of the regional power shifts and complications of current geopolitics as well as the impacts of the BRI of China on the Bangladesh-China Relationship.

Introduction

Since the establishment of the diplomatic relationship between Bangladesh and China from 1975, have been evolving their welcoming collaboration into the kind of strategic corporation. Considering the last five decades, it has only developed and expanded, appealing broader coverage, from defense, infrastructure development and trade and commerce. China has regarded as the biggest supplier of military hardware to Bangladesh, the major trading partner and a major infrastructure promoter. Mutual collaboration under the BRI that was started in 2013 has extended over the years with mega projects like Padma Bridge Rail Link and so on. The scope and strategic balancing act of China-Bangladesh engagement in the background of the BRI in South Asia is very crucial and it has been creating links with China, a country that, towards the end of the 90s, became closer to Bangladesh because of the historical and political bonds with India was very alive then. A good portion like

50 billion dollars bilateral relationship has been directed under the canopy of “One Belt, One Road” that is importantly an umbrella provision for infrastructure and industrial development with the investment and loans of China, total not less than \$24 billion and foreign direct investment (FDI) volume inspired at almost \$7 billion. Moreover, Bangladesh has been blemished by worries of debt and strategic dependency (Saimum, 2020). In the context of China one Road one Belt Initiative, this paper emphasizes on the numerous narratives which have been altered with regards to the Bangladesh–China relationship. It is predominantly interested in detecting how the rise of Chinese trade, investment and infrastructural partnership is reforming the technological progress, economic growth and global strategic position of Bangladesh. It also evaluates the wider local and tactical insinuations of this evolving partnership as Bangladesh and China approach.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are given bellow-

1. To examine the background of the Bangladesh–China Diplomatic and Economic relations.
2. To assess the economic impacts of BRI in Bangladesh on trade, investment and infrastructure.
3. To suggest policy recommendations.

Literature Review

Uddin, S. (2025) Bangladesh is strained through signifying the overall Chinese hegemonic strategies and tactical desire to generate dominance within the geo-strategic theatre of South Asia under its ‘Southern policy’ by the power-politics of China through China’s Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). The migration policy of China is driven by infrastructure investment as a tool of strategic influence of China. The first part of this paper includes that the infrastructure as an arm of influence, the second comprises the strategic goals of China and not least its aim at posing counter of Indian hegemony within the region.

Mashrafy (2024) highlights the contributions of BRI initiatives to improve the infrastructural base of Bangladesh uttering the economic response including trade and connectivity. On the contrary these economic supports also come with a weighty trade deficit, as Bangladesh imports far more from China than it exports. This trade imbalance has risen up the question of whether the Bangladesh’s growing reliance on China is likely to be sustained over time.

Zaman (2022) The connection of Bangladesh in Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) stands the shapes of the country in global positions where the financial desires point above ideological bonds at the time of negotiating China. Basically, Bangladesh works based on the real-world gains through dealings. It implies to the access to capital for infrastructural development without surrendering the pride and independence. Considering these perspectives, results are not trustworthiness but influence determining consequences cautiously. Where the strategic independence remains unbroken causes elections assist internal development initially. A bond made on common gains yet apprehended practical rewards guide the partnership.

Saimum (2020) through the infrastructural development and regional connections have been smoothed but there are worries about the economic sustainability challenges provided by BRI projects, explicitly in terms of debt distress and the potential of incurring a 'debt trap' a matter that has a huge impact on the corresponding BRI participating countries.

Titumir and Rahman (2019) expressed fears about its lasting effects on national sovereignty. These apprehensions center on the risk over China developing undue influence to the detriment of Bangladesh's policy autonomy, more precisely in the field of strategic infrastructure such as ports and energy grids. The critics contend that the BRI can be viewed as a type of economic imperialism in which massive infrastructure programs are packaged with strings to finance them i.e., loans or political leverage.

Wolf (2019) Bangladesh worked on with special care at the time of negotiation with China. In lieu of depending extremely on one partner, Bangladesh preferred several allies while taking only what best for her. Selection around BRI schemes implies to a meaningful approach considering gains against the long-term political pressure. The final discussion and decision were not merely about finance; it is all about the reflection on the aim at staying open to various perspectives without turning over the scale. The stance of Bangladesh is not rejecting support but by adopting it. It displays how infrastructural development Projects can be availed for real gain without surrendering the country's sovereignty. Bangladesh tries to demonstrate equilibrium, acquiring benefits without allowing pressures binding to global strategies.

Mukit (2018) Bangladesh takes a cautious approach to its policies in order to preserve space amid regional conflict. The author claims that Bangladesh's

interactions with major players, such as China, stem from a decision to forgo stable alliances. Sovereignty and adaptability become more important when making global decisions. By doing this, Dhaka creates opportunities for both political and economic support without placing itself in a precarious situation. In order to avoid escalating tensions in the region while defending independence and future goals, Bangladesh's outreach to neighboring countries entails cautious weight shifts.

Clarke (2017) asserts that the BRI is a geopolitical project that aims to strengthen China's position in the world, in addition to being an economic endeavour. The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, one of the prominent projects pursuing connectivity projects in the area, is a key component of this approach. The purpose of this corridor is to enhance trade routes and infrastructure development for these nations' economies. The fact that Bangladesh would participate in such an initiative, he continued, is simply another example of this wise strategic balancing act in the larger context of its political and historical ties to India and its desire for closer ties with China. Therefore, in the complex geopolitics of South Asia today, the BCIM Corridor represents not only an economic opportunity but also a geopolitical push.

Methodology

This study analyses the impact of BRI on the relationship between Bangladesh and China in a qualitative and descriptive way. It analyzes the effect of BRI's economic cooperation, infrastructural construction and political relationship on bilateral ties and regional politics. It is a secondary research and the information is collected from academic journals, books, government reports, policy papers and credible internet resources. For primary examples, Padma Bridge Rail Link, Payra Power Plant and Karnaphuli Tunnel are the significant BRI projects in Bangladesh. The analysis of data is done through a qualitative content analysis.

Results and Discussion:

Having signed up to China's Belt & Road Initiatives, Bangladesh has witnessed a massive uptick in infrastructure, power and, inland connectivity projects. As of now also 30 road and bridge, power generation, ICT and industrial development projects (USD 40 billion) including USD 26 billion in BRI companies direct contracts and investments (FDI) and another USD 14 billion owed to joint ventures of China investment in and outside SEZs⁴ around USD 688 million of export credit insurances since December 2015 (Nedopil-Gips et al., 2025). Perhaps the most notable success stories of the BRI funding to date (Padma Bridge Rail Link,

Karnaphuli Tunnel, Payra Power Plant and Matarbari Deep Seaport) have been welcomed in Bangladesh for their potential to enhance the country's trade and connectivity infrastructure. Now it is seen an example in Padma Bridge which is almost 1% of nation GDP growth for connecting the beauty of southwest region of Bangladesh to Dhaka city, pick up trade and mobility. Moreover, that to namely enhancing energy security for industrialization which is aligned with the Vision 2041 and aspirations of Smart Bangladesh, electricity power plants have been expanded and power grid has been strengthened (Ali et al., 2022). Bangladesh now has a development strategy centered on China for investment, technology transfer and infrastructure. Anwara: Chinese Economic and Industrial Zone to get more FDI and industrial cooperation. In sum, both these developments are an expression of the growing Chinese footprint on Bangladesh's economic modernization as well as the increasingly close relationship between Beijing and Dhaka (China Daily, 2017). However, there are also potential risks and challenges, it continued. Similarly, the Karnaphuli Tunnel and other such projects are not getting projected tolls giving rise to questions across the viability of such ventures ultimately to pay off the debt. Hence, Bangladesh needs to be mindful of debt management and must avoid 'debt trap' like other BRI member nations. There were also problem of environmental and social fights, of local industries and local community by-pass (Rahman, 2023). In order to derive a long-term optimal benefit from BRI engagement, Bangladesh needs to emphasize on transparency in project selection; development of local capacity; transfer of technology and sustainability evaluation, integrating BRI initiatives realization with assessments like Blue Economy and Social Impact Assessments would scale up its benefits (World Bank, 2019). In short, the BRI has contributed to bringing about a reinforcement of the collective Bangladesh-China friendship politically, economically, and strategically but at the same time it has also conveyed an unambiguous message: if development has to be sustained over the long-run, a transparent balancing act and sensible economic management are the only two options (OECD, 2018).

Conclusion

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has drastically changed the course of Bangladesh-China relations, turning them from a mostly diplomatic alliance into a framework for more extensive strategic-economic cooperation. Bangladesh's involvement in the BRI has created new opportunities for regional connectivity, industrial cooperation, large-scale infrastructure development, and foreign direct investment. In addition to modernizing Bangladesh's physical infrastructure, massive projects like deep seaports, bridges, tunnels, power plants, and economic

zones have improved the country's integration into regional and international supply chains. Trade flows, migration, and economic ties between South and Southeast Asia have all risen as a result of these developments. In addition, the BRI has increased collaboration in unconventional areas including capacity building, technology transfer, and health system strengthening, all of which are critical for long-term sustainable development. The strengthening of Bangladesh-China relations beyond infrastructure into a more comprehensive developmental cooperation is reflected in this multifaceted collaboration. The strategic significance of this collaboration in attaining a higher-income, knowledge-based economy is further highlighted by the integration of BRI projects with Bangladesh's national development plan, specifically Vision 2041 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But even with these favourable results, there are still a lot of difficulties with the engagement. The risk of being overly dependent on outside funding, project viability, debt sustainability, and transparency in project selection continue to be major policy concerns. The need for more equitable and inclusive development planning is highlighted by concerns about the long-term benefits of some massive infrastructure projects, the low involvement of regional sectors, and the inadequate transfer of knowledge. To guarantee that growth is equitable and sustainable, environmental and social issues including displacement, ecological disturbance, and uneven regional development must also be carefully addressed. Therefore, in order to optimize the advantages of its BRI engagement, Bangladesh needs to take a more strategic and cautious approach. This entails bolstering frameworks for managing debt, guaranteeing increased responsibility and transparency in project execution, boosting local industrial involvement, and making investments in human resource development. Long-term success will also depend on incorporating sustainability tools like social impact assessments, environmental impact assessments, and blue economy concepts into project development. In the end, the BRI has the potential to revolutionize Bangladesh and establish the nation as a vital strategic route connecting South and Southeast Asia if it is handled well. It can improve Bangladesh's economic and diplomatic independence while hastening the country's transition to a sophisticated economy. However, there is also a risk of structural dependency in the absence of sound economic governance and balanced policy implementation. Therefore, how Bangladesh can strike a balance between opportunity and prudence, ensuring that development remains sustainable, inclusive, and in line with its national goal for 2041, will be crucial to the future of Bangladesh-China ties under the BRI framework.

Policy Recommendations

A number of strategic recommendations may be made to guarantee that the advantages of such cooperation are maximized while limiting potential hazards based on the examination of Bangladesh's involvement with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). First, under the BRI, Bangladesh should establish a comprehensive and strategically balanced framework for cooperation with China. In order to ensure that borrowing terms stay in line with market-based sustainability principles, it is necessary to carefully review all loan agreements and financial commitments. To lower the risk of long-term debt vulnerability, excessive reliance on concessional or opaque financing arrangements should be avoided. Second, Bangladesh has to improve its external economic governance and debt management systems. Stronger coordination with regional partners and international financial institutions may assist limit vulnerability to unfavourable global market volatility and provide protections against future financial instability. Additionally, this would improve macroeconomic resilience to shocks from the outside world. Third, all BRI-related initiatives must institutionalize accountability and transparency systems. To routinely reveal project progress, funding distribution, procurement procedures, and implementation results, a publicly available monitoring and reporting system should be created. To guarantee adherence to good governance principles, anti-corruption oversight organizations ought to be given more authority. Fourth, Bangladesh ought to think about creating a special BRI Project Monitoring and Evaluation Unit. This specialist organization would be in charge of monitoring the effectiveness of implementation, guaranteeing prompt delivery, and reducing bureaucratic hold-ups. An entity like this will help increase overall project management efficacy and cooperation amongst pertinent ministries. Fifth, technological transfer, local capacity building, and human resource improvement should be prioritized. BRI initiatives should prioritize workforce development and the active participation of regional industries in addition to infrastructural development. Bangladesh will be able to lessen its long-term reliance on foreign expertise and develop sustainable home skills as a result. Sixth, before being approved and put into action, all significant infrastructure projects must pass stringent Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and Social Impact Assessments (SIA). These systems are crucial for maintaining natural balance, safeguarding local communities, and guaranteeing inclusive and sustainable development outcomes. Lastly, Bangladesh ought to develop a strategic diplomatic relationship with China and India as well as a balanced foreign policy. While promoting national interests, such a multi-aligned strategy will aid in preserving geopolitical neutrality. To achieve inclusive, resilient, and peaceful economic transition in the region, all BRI

interactions must be tightly integrated with Bangladesh's long-term development strategy, particularly strategy 2041 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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