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Connectivity Imperialism and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Infrastructure, Structural Power, and World Order

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Abstract

This article analyzes China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a tool for establishing structural power within the global framework, exploring how infrastructure and cross-border connectivity are transformed into new manifestations of imperial influence. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has strategically utilized the Belt and Road Initiative to invest in infrastructure, logistics, digital technology, and finance, establishing standards, fostering dependence, and transforming international relations. To encapsulate this dynamic, the article introduces the concept of Connectivity Imperialism, which reinterprets the BRI as a framework of power constructed through networks and delineates how connectivity is transformed into structural dominance across various cooperation initiatives. The concept theoretically integrates global systems theory, new imperialism, and structural power frameworks. Its primary contribution is to elucidate how routes, standards, finance, and data architectures connect partner states into asymmetric interdependence without the need for territorial occupation or direct military coercion. This framework effectively integrates material infrastructure, institutional standard-setting, and discursive legitimation within a cohesive analytical vocabulary. In this regard, the article enhances the current body of research on the Belt and Road Initiative and provides a framework for comprehending modern power dynamics that is not reliant on military might. It also recognizes the limitations of the concept in addressing intra-state resistance and local social dynamics, indicating a need for further research.

Keywords: Connectivity imperialism, Structural power, Belt and road initiative, New imperialism, New silk road

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also referred to as One Belt One Road, is a strategic foreign policy introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2013 aimed at enhancing China's global influence through cross-border networks focused on economic and infrastructure collaboration (Belt and Road Portal, n.d.). Envisioned as a modern resurgence of the historic Silk Road, this initiative aims to enhance the physical, economic, and cultural connections between China and regions including Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (Boonsue, 2023). The central premise involves leveraging infrastructure as a strategic tool to integrate markets and logistics systems across various regions, structured along two axes (Figure 1): the overland "Belt" (Silk Road Economic Belt), which extends from Xi'an through Central and West Asia toward Eastern and Northern Europe, and the maritime "Road" (21st Century Maritime Silk Road), which connects China's southern ports through Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa before arriving in Europe via the Mediterranean (Chatzky & McBride, 2023; Sukdanon, 2019).



Figure 1 Belt and road initiative routes
Source: Sharifli (2020); Notteboom et al. (2022)

China's aspirations, however, reach far beyond mere physical geography. The formation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 has served as a significant mechanism for mobilizing capital and providing loans to member states in sectors such as energy, transportation, communications, and rural infrastructure. This initiative reflects a strategic exercise of influence that directs the trajectory of regional development and investment (Santasombat, 2023; Charassangsomboon, 2019). The initiative has evolved into a framework comprising six economic corridors: the China–Central Asia–West Asia Corridor; the China–Pakistan Corridor; the Bangladesh– China– India–Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor; the Indochina Peninsula Corridor; the China–Mongolia–Russia Corridor; and the New Eurasian Land Bridge (Figure 2). Together, these corridors illustrate China's objective to restructure the political economy and cultural landscape of entire regions through strategic networks (Treewisessorn & Poungchingngam, 2019; Ohashi, 2018).

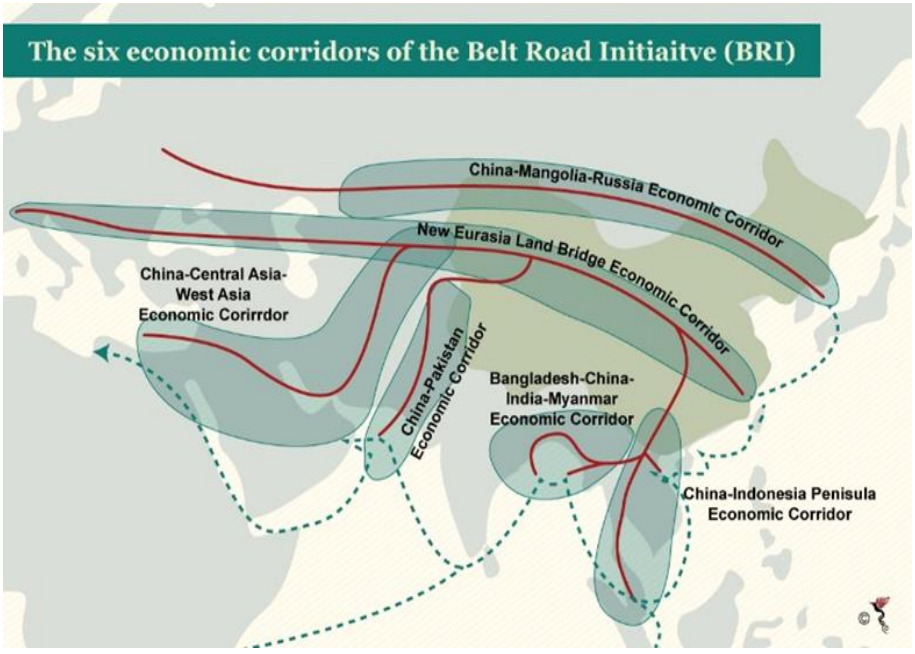


Figure 2 Economic corridor network of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)
Source: Gnanasagaran (2017)

The magnitude of this transformation is significant. As outlined in an official Chinese white paper, The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future, China has systematically transformed global geopolitics and geoeconomics over the past decade through the BRI (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The initiative has successfully implemented over 3,000 cooperation projects, with a total investment surpassing USD 1 trillion. Notable projects include the China–Laos railway linking Vientiane to Yunnan, the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed rail in Indonesia, and significant port upgrades in nations located along crucial trade routes (The Standard, 2023; Dunford & Liu, 2019). Such projects represent a shift from traditional development cooperation to a strategic framework that connects China and its partners through interdependent relationships.

Recently, the BRI has expanded its focus from physical infrastructure to include environmental protection and sustainable development. More than fifty projects currently focus on conservation and sustainable development, backed by agreements with over thirty-one countries (Teo et al., 2019). This demonstrates China's initiative to align structural power with an ethical narrative that strengthens the legitimacy of its global standing. Simultaneously, Chinese outward foreign direct investment under the Belt and Road Initiative has experienced significant growth, positioning China as the world's third-largest outward investor by 2022 (The Standard, 2023). What sets the BRI apart from previous development programs is the integration of economic power with a development narrative (Charoensin-o-larn, 2017). Its inclusion in the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017 affirms that the initiative is not a temporary measure but a long-term strategy integrated into China's overarching vision of power.

Despite a comprehensive body of literature on the BRI, three analytical limitations continue to be inadequately addressed. Many studies primarily focus on infrastructure as a tool for economic development, often overlooking its role as a mechanism for establishing rules and standards. Secondly, analyses of debt, geopolitics, and infrastructure diplomacy often occur in isolation, complicating the understanding of how material projects, financial dependence, and institutional norms interact cohesively. Third, existing approaches such as geoeconomics, network power, infrastructure diplomacy, and neo-imperialism address significant aspects of the phenomenon but fail to fully conceptualize connectivity as the medium through which structural power is generated. A new conceptual framework is required to elucidate how the BRI transforms connectivity into enduring power relations across the physical, digital, financial, and institutional domains.

This raises the primary inquiry of the article: how, and through what mechanisms, does the BRI under Xi Jinping convert "infrastructure" into "structural power" on a global scale, and in what ways does a new form of imperialism emerge through this process? In response, the article presents a conceptual framework referred to as "Connectivity Imperialism." It posits that the BRI transcends a mere international economic policy; it serves as a strategic mechanism that transforms connectivity, encompassing infrastructure, technical and membership standards, financial systems, and data networks, into structural power intricately integrated into both regional and global frameworks. These connections do not function independently but create a type of asymmetric interdependence (Neuss, 2009) that can be leveraged as continuous, organized bargaining power over partner states.

To analyze this dynamic, the article incorporates three theoretical frameworks: World-Systems Theory, which highlights core–periphery dynamics within the global economy; New Imperialism Theory, which emphasizes domination through discourse and economic mechanisms rather than military force; and Structural Power Theory, which investigates control exercised through rules, standards, and the organization of international institutions. When considered collectively, these viewpoints enable a comprehensive understanding of the BRI, not just as a development initiative, but as a strategic tool with lasting effects on the framework and governance of the global order.

The article ultimately contends that the BRI signifies a transition from a "development project" to a "power architecture," one that creates new norms of international relations through investment,

infrastructure, and institutional interconnection, while subtly embedding China's influence within the geopolitical and geoeconomic frameworks of the modern world.

Theoretical framework and literature review

To address the central question of this article regarding the transformation of "infrastructure" into "structural power" on a global scale through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under President Xi Jinping, as well as the manifestations of new imperialism within this context, the analysis utilizes three complementary theoretical frameworks. Instead of functioning independently, they create an interconnected analytical progression that transitions from the overarching structure of global capitalism, to the methods of control, and ultimately to the practical tools that transform connectivity into power.

World-systems theory offers an initial framework by delineating the macro-structural relationships among core, semi-periphery, and periphery states. This analysis elucidates the hierarchical status that China and its partners hold within the context of global capitalism, as well as the structural position that the Belt and Road Initiative aim to establish. New imperialism theory examines the secondary aspect, elucidating how modern domination can be manifested through finance, trade, and the narrative of "cooperation and development." This perspective positions the BRI as a strategy for power expansion that favors economic and institutional mechanisms rather than military intervention. Structural power theory provides the third layer with its concept of "power through rules," which encompasses the governance of standards, institutional networks, financial systems, and regulatory frameworks. This framework shapes the choices available to other actors and converts connectivity into a strong yet flexible form of power.

From this integrated perspective, connectivity does not emerge in isolation; it creates asymmetric interdependence that transforms bargaining potential into enduring, systematic power (Neuss, 2009). Building on this foundation, the article presents the conceptual framework of "Connectivity Imperialism" to encapsulate the operational essence of the BRI as an innovation in power, rather than simply a development policy. The three theoretical strands are presented sequentially below.

World-systems theory

Wallerstein's framework illustrates global capitalism as a structured spatial division of labor, comprising core, semi-periphery, and periphery regions. This structure sustains inequality by facilitating the extraction of resources from peripheral regions to core areas (Wallerstein, 2004; Petras, 1981; Agnew, 2021; Sorinel, 2010). However, this methodology has been expanded and challenged by subsequent research indicating that Wallerstein's temporal framework is too restrictive; consequently, scholars have extended the time-frame of the "world-system" to examine core–periphery dynamics across different historical periods up to the present (Frank & Gills, 1993; Chase-Dunn & Lawrence, 2011). At the same time, a notable critique points out the rigidity of the theory's three-tier circular model, which arguably prioritizes economic factors to an extent that it diminishes the importance of political and cultural dimensions (Kostoska et al., 2020; Agnew, 2021).

When viewed comprehensively, world-systems theory provides valuable insights into the patterns of inequality shaped by globalization and extraction processes in peripheral regions. This is particularly applicable when it is modified to tackle contemporary challenges associated with digital capitalism, transnational financial networks, and its significance to marginalized sub-regions and areas where identity dynamics, local politics, and economic structures intersect in intricate manners (Robinson, 2011). In conclusion, despite its modeling limitations and specific substantive focus, world-systems theory remains a conceptual foundation that, when critically examined and allowed to broaden its temporal and spatial dimensions, is both open to discussion and adaptable for clarifying the structural hierarchies of contemporary capitalism.

New imperialism theory

This theory posits that domination is no longer reliant on territorial colonialism; rather, it is established through finance, trade, development policy, and the narrative of cooperation, particularly in the post-Cold War era. Harvey (2017) introduces the concept of

"accumulation by dispossession" to elucidate the mechanisms of resource appropriation, privatization, and the employment of state and market forces to advance regional structures. Arrighi (2001) discusses the extended cycles of capital and the shifting global power centers facilitated by financial institutions and the liberal market order. Hardt and Negri (2005) present an argument that defines "Empire" as a decentered, supra-state structure formed by global capitalism and transnational organizations. According to Wood (2009), an "empire of capital" exerts its influence via free markets and trade agreements, operating without the necessity of military force. Chomsky (2003) critiques the use of "democracy" as a legitimizing discourse for interventions that serve strategic interests. The evolution of new imperialism theory has broadened its focus to encompass various fields, including epidemiology (Peckham, 2013), technology and blockchain (Jutel, 2021), epistemology and scientific knowledge (Mercer & Simpson, 2023), critical value- chain analysis (Selwyn, 2021), as well as international law and higher education (Bamberger & Morris, 2024; Obregón, 2006). This article finds this conceptual strand to be significant in elucidating the evolving world order, especially regarding China, where the Belt and Road Initiative demonstrate imperial characteristics through mechanisms such as debt structures, infrastructure investment, and geostrategic positioning, rather than through military occupation.

Structural power theory

Strange (1994) posits that power functions within a "structural context" that influences the actions of others, rather than depending exclusively on direct coercion (Fawcett, 2012). Building on this, Barnett and Duvall (2005) identify four dimensions of power: compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive. This framework offers an explanation for global outcomes that cannot be attributed to any single actor. In the realm of political economy, Culpepper (2015) highlights the ability to "set the menu of options" via financial institutions and market regulation, whereas Gill and Law (1989) consider capital as a structural force that generates asymmetric dependence. Gwynn (2019) connects structural power to rule-based regimes that influence the identities and capacities of actors. In the financial sector, Braun (2018) presents the concept of "infrastructural power" of central banks, which complements Konings' (2009) analysis of U.S. financial power as a result of historical and institutional dynamics. Recent academic research has broadened the concept across various sectors, identifying cross-sectoral "power blocs" that encompass energy, finance, and the digital realm (Bärnthaler et al., 2024). Additionally, it has introduced the idea of "multidimensional power" to address overlooked cultural norms (Lécuyer et al., 2024) and the "coloniality of power," which reflects the enduring impact of racial and geographic hierarchies (Quijano & Ennis, 2000).

In conclusion, the article suggests that the Belt and Road Initiative should be analyzed through a unified perspective alongside the notion of "Connectivity Imperialism." Its primary mechanisms extend well beyond capital flows and visible infrastructure to include the governance of standards, value-chain networks, financial entanglements, legal frameworks, data management, and the institutionalization of roles that necessitate adherence to established regulations. These three theoretical approaches have been chosen specifically for their ability to fulfill the methodological criteria required to elucidate how the BRI transforms "connectivity" into "power" and to make the mechanisms of a new imperialism apparent through infrastructure.

Analytically, the argument unfolds through a structured theoretical synthesis consisting of four steps: identifying recurring BRI mechanisms from the existing academic and policy literature; mapping these mechanisms onto the three theoretical traditions; comparing the explanatory limits of each tradition when applied in isolation; and deriving Connectivity Imperialism as a bridging concept that elucidates how infrastructure, finance, digital standards, and institutional linkages collectively generate asymmetric interdependence. This procedure clarifies that the concept is presented not merely as a descriptive label but as an analytical framework developed through the systematic integration of the literature.

From revolutionary thought to global strategy: the evolution of China's governing approach and the role of the BRI in world ordering

This article initiates the discussion by outlining the origins and development of the BRI's influence within the region and the global system. Although the BRI has garnered significant attention as China's new-era macro strategy under the leadership of President Xi Jinping (BBC News Thai, 2022), a comprehensive understanding of the BRI necessitates revisiting the historical and geopolitical foundations that initially shaped the concept. The BRI did not arise in isolation; it is the result of China's extensive strategic repositioning, influenced by the China Dream (Callahan, 2013), the resurgence of a multipolar civilizational order, and China's reactions to the evolving dynamics of the post–Cold War world order. Xi Jinping's speeches in 2013 in Kazakhstan and Indonesia represented not just a symbolic beginning, but a declaration of a systematically endorsed "vision of power" (Dabphet, 2017). The development of the BRI is significant as it is grounded in the historical and geopolitical foundations of China's new era, providing a clearer understanding of the transition from policy to the establishment of a global power structure. This development did not happen suddenly; instead, it is a result of the evolution of China's state ideas and strategies over the past century. The conceptual continuity from the Mao Zedong era to Deng Xiaoping, and subsequently to Xi Jinping, has led to a process of structural adaptation that is intricately embedded and dynamically reproduced within state institutions and discourse. This context is essential for understanding the analysis presented in this article.

During the initial stage of ideological transition in Chinese politics, Mao Zedong committed to a comprehensive communist governance model, with the objective of establishing a classless society through proletarian revolution and widespread engagement, particularly among the youth, who were perceived as the political force of the future (Cohen, 1961). Mao's speech during his visit to the Soviet Union illustrates this orientation, as he commended youth as the "hope of the nation" and metaphorically compared them to the morning sun (Galway, 2017). Nonetheless, while this approach highlighted the importance of popular participation, it resulted in social turbulence and prolonged policy instability (Katchwattana, 2018). Following the Mao era, Deng Xiaoping guided China towards reform and opening up, establishing a pragmatic ideological foundation that emphasized results over doctrine. His notable statement, "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice", illustrates this policy flexibility with particular clarity (Mondragón, 2019). Deng Xiaoping highlighted the importance of economic development through the acceptance of market-oriented capitalism, all while ensuring the continued leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. This policy generated significant momentum that advanced China's position as a stable economic center in the global arena. China did not dismiss Marxism; instead, it modified the ideology to align with its unique circumstances (Katchwattana, 2018). This article asserts that this hybrid configuration has significantly influenced China's current strategic thinking.

Deng Xiaoping's ideas and strategies have been conveyed to Xi Jinping, the current leader, who has broadened and institutionalized China's vision on a larger scale, most notably through the announcement of the BRI, known as "Yidai Yilu," in 2013 in Kazakhstan (BBC News Thai, 2022). This event represented not only the initiation of a global infrastructure endeavor but also signified an evolution of Deng's strategy in a more ambitious capacity. China transitioned from economic opening to geopolitical opening and the pursuit of structural power. This article contends that the origins of the BRI must be interpreted as a continuation of a state-centric approach that integrates power through development. During the 40th anniversary of the reform and opening-up policy, Xi Jinping delivered a speech highlighting that China's achievements serve as evidence of the effectiveness of scientific socialism. China's GDP has risen from 1.8 percent of the global economy in 1978 to 15.2 percent today, demonstrating the country's ability to maintain its independence and make its own decisions without external influence. The statement that "opening up brings progress; closing off brings backwardness" (Katchwattana, 2018) has thus established a discursive and visionary foundation for China's new era, an essential element for understanding how the BRI gained significant internal and external drivers as a strategic initiative.

Furthermore, Xi Jinping stated that China would not aim to become a global hegemonic power, but would rather focus on contributing to the establishment of a "shared future for mankind." This includes promoting cultural influence through soft power, enhancing governance practices, and protecting the global environment. Party and state security continue to be central to strategic planning (Goldstein, 2020; Economy, 2022). This suggests that China's objectives extend beyond mere economic growth; instead, they involve the establishment of a new world order in which China takes on a prominent position. This article suggests that this approach indicates a transition from domestic policy to the formulation of international relations. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is rooted in China's historical context, drawing inspiration from the ancient Silk Roads, both terrestrial and maritime, that facilitated connections with the outside world since the Han and Ming dynasties. The Silk Road has historically functioned as a conduit for trade, civilization, and cultural exchange. In contrast, the "New Silk Road," or the BRI, has been redefined as a project that intricately integrates structural power across economic, financial, logistics, and geopolitical dimensions. This article contends that allusions to these historical legacies serve as a means of establishing discursive legitimacy and authority, thereby considerably enhancing the policy influence of the BRI.

In conclusion, the evolution of the BRI represents a culmination of ideological history, strategic adaptation, and the ongoing vision of the state, from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping. This has been integrated into a new power structure that China utilizes to systematically shape and redefine the global order in the twenty-first century, with a focus on long-term goals. This article suggests that comprehending these intellectual-historical foundations is essential for understanding China's structural ambitions in the BRI era, which clarify China's actions and reasoning regarding the region and the global system.

Power architecture through networks*:* Analyzing the BRI through the perspective of infrastructure imperialism

In today's world, the architecture of power encompasses more than just military strength or traditional economic sway. "Connectivity" has evolved from being a developmental option to an indispensable factor for economic and political sustainability, serving as a mechanism that significantly influences power dynamics among states and regions. It goes beyond merely facilitating transport, investment, and the exchange of goods; it establishes a framework of structural relationships that defines the "rules" and the "direction" of long-term interdependence. In this context, networks of the twenty-first century serve not merely as conduits for the transfer of commodities, capital, or data; rather, they function as a complex system of power that subtly and consistently perpetuates political, economic, and security influence (Sujaritthanarak, 2018). The Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies this trend. Launched in 2013, the initiative experienced steady expansion over the subsequent decade, with 2019 representing a significant milestone: Italy became the first G7 country to endorse the initiative (Charoenwongsak, 2019), and President Xi Jinping delivered a landmark address at the 2nd Belt and Road Forum. These developments indicated a strategic intent to establish a "power architecture" within the project (Song et al., 2018).

While the BRI is often described as a "global economic development project" that fosters win-win cooperation and shared long-term growth, this article argues that it represents more than this characterization. The initiative has developed into a comprehensive system of structural relationships that amplifies China's geopolitical influence by redefining dependence across three levels: state-to-state (bilateral interdependence), regional (regional integration), and global (supply-chain restructuring) (Zhang et al., 2022).

A critical reading should not, however, portray partner states as passive recipients of Chinese power. Recipient governments may choose to actively select, renegotiate, delay, or cancel BRI projects based on their domestic political considerations, fiscal capabilities, and development priorities. Some projects provide measurable benefits, such as enhanced transport capacity, increased energy access, trade facilitation, and regional integration. The analytical task is to explore the conditions under which mutual gains coexist with, or are transformed into, asymmetric dependence and long-term rule-setting power, rather than to deny their existence.

At the operational level, the BRI has produced notable geopolitical impacts in three key areas. The initial concern is the increasing dissatisfaction among developing recipient states, many of which have encountered unsustainable debt, contracts that favor Chinese interests, a lack of transparency in implementation, and a dependence on Chinese labor and materials that does not significantly enhance local economies. Beijing has announced enhancements in its collaboration with European partners; however, these issues continue to be insufficiently addressed, resulting in an "infrastructure trap" that confines certain countries to cycles of dependence and diminishes their bargaining power (Lai et al., 2020). Such claims, however, necessitate careful analysis. The existing literature does not endorse a universal or automatic debt-trap thesis; rather, the risk associated with debt is influenced by factors such as project design, domestic institutions, bargaining capacity, and the presence of restructuring mechanisms. BRI-related dependence is therefore contingent and uneven rather than predetermined (Brautigam, 2020; Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Lai et al., 2020).

The second effect is fragmentation within Europe, arising from China's inclination towards negotiations on a country-by-country basis. This approach has prompted countries like Greece, Italy, and Hungary to take more favorable stances toward China in collective EU decision-making—occasionally obstructing resolutions that critique China's human rights record. Meanwhile, there are concerns that the Belt and Road Initiative could threaten EU unity, highlighting China's ability to leverage strategic networks to exert influence in specific regions (Möller, 2002). This fragmentation is best understood as a tendency within specific diplomatic and institutional settings rather than a complete breakdown of EU unity. China's engagement in Central and Eastern Europe, both bilaterally and sub-regionally, has the potential to create varied national preferences. However, these effects are influenced by EU regulations, domestic political discussions, and the incomplete execution of certain pledged projects (Matura, 2018).

The third effect is an increase in tension among major powers, especially between China and the United States, regarding digital infrastructure, competition in 5G technology, cybersecurity, data management, and investments in ports or strategic locations that may have future military applications. A significant example is China's acquisition of century-long management rights over specific internet infrastructure (IPv9), which poses a challenge to the United States' position as the global standards-setter. This situation demonstrates that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) establishes power networks across various dimensions of modern life, extending beyond mere transport links (Charoenwongsak, 2019). In this context, the digital dimension is more accurately characterized as a contested arena for standard-setting, rather than a clear indication of total Chinese dominance in digital governance. The Digital Silk Road illustrates the efforts of Chinese state agencies and technology firms to globalize platforms, infrastructure, and technical standards. However, the results are still influenced by domestic regulations, market acceptance, security issues, and counter-strategies from other major powers (Shen, 2018).

Simultaneously, numerous developing nations continue to depend on the BRI due to a lack of alternative infrastructure financing options. The withdrawal of countries such as Italy and Panama may indicate a level of global uncertainty; however, many states still consider the initiative a necessary option despite the associated risks (Mueanmart, 2023). Significantly, the BRI has evolved from conventional infrastructure like roads, railways, and ports into a new phase of "new infrastructure" that includes information technology, AI systems, the industrial internet, and data centres (The Standard, 2025). These elements play a crucial role in shaping technical standards and influencing future user behaviour. Research in network economics indicates that trade and financial systems linked to the BRI are progressively relocating the "connectivity centre" toward China, signaling a shift in the balance of the global economy.

In conclusion, as power transcends traditional military strength and trade statistics, connectivity has emerged as a crucial component of global order. It establishes the frameworks, pathways, and dynamics of enduring interdependence, resulting in ongoing political, economic, and security influence. Within this framework, the BRI transcends a mere infrastructure initiative; it functions as a power structure operating on three levels. It binds states into conditions of asymmetric dependence, reshapes regions through

strategic networks that undermine the cohesion of negotiating counterparts, and integrates global supply chains through standards and technological platforms that China can increasingly oversee. The repercussions are threefold: an infrastructure trap in developing nations, institutional fragmentation within Europe, and escalating major-power tensions across both physical and digital domains. Together, these elements highlight that networks represent a new political space, serving not merely as the "background" of the global economy but as the "arena" that fundamentally influences who benefits and who incurs the costs.

This article argues that perceiving the BRI as a power architecture is not merely one methodological choice among several, but rather a crucial theoretical foundation for comprehending world order in the twenty-first century. It serves as a necessary basis for developing strategies that enable medium and small states to transform connectivity from a source of dependence into a position of sustainable structural bargaining power.

Theoretical examination of infrastructural structural power: China and new imperialism in the context of the twenty-first-century silk road under the belt and road initiative (BRI)

This article illustrates that the definition of "infrastructure" has evolved significantly, extending far beyond traditional physical structures like roads, ports, or railways. In the twenty-first century, infrastructure has emerged as a crucial mechanism of structural power and a medium through which relationships among states, regions, and the global economy are progressively influenced. Under President Xi Jinping, China's Belt and Road Initiative has transitioned from a development project to a power architecture. This shift is intentional and aims to establish global structural conditions that China can oversee in the long term. The initiative therefore aims to achieve objectives beyond mere economic interests or infrastructure collaboration: by enhancing connectivity across physical, digital, financial, and institutional realms, it fosters new power dynamics designed to establish China at the center of global governance. In this context, the contemporary Belt and Road Initiative should be understood as part of a larger reconfiguration of geopolitics and the emergence of a new form of imperialism, characterized not by military presence but by the establishment of interconnected infrastructure and standards that other nations are increasingly compelled to adhere to. The subsequent theoretical discussion analyzes the functioning of BRI infrastructure as a mechanism of structural power and examines how the dynamics of this new imperialism are manifested, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 should be interpreted as an analytical sequence rather than merely a summary diagram. The left side outlines three theoretical inputs: world-systems theory elucidates structural hierarchy; new imperialism theory addresses non-territorial mechanisms of domination; and structural power theory examines rule-making through institutions and standards. The central box outlines the mechanisms of the BRI, physical infrastructure, finance, digital networks, corridors, and institutional agreements, that transform connectivity into asymmetric interdependence. The right side presents the analytical outcomes: improved structural authority, increased bargaining leverage, regional reorganization, and the emergence of "Connectivity Imperialism." The framework outlines the process by which material projects evolve into lasting power dynamics, influenced by regulations, standards, financial mechanisms, and interdependencies within networks.

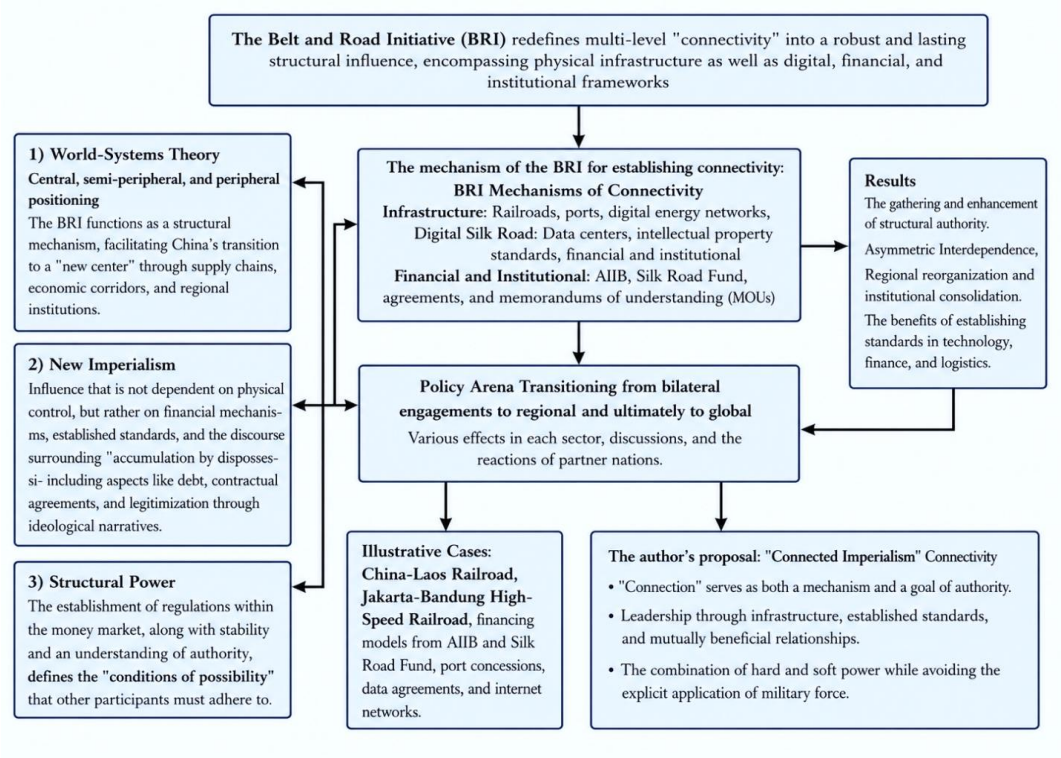


Figure 3 A Visualization of the theoretical discussion of infrastructural structural power: China and new imperialism on the twenty-first-century silk road under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
Source: Author.

World-systems theory and the advancement of china's structural position via the BRI

Wallerstein (2004) world-systems framework categorizes the world into core, semi-periphery, and periphery, which collectively form the spatial structure of global capitalism. The core is pivotal in managing resources, technology, and financial power, whereas the periphery serves as an export zone for labor and resources, and the semi-periphery acts as a transitional zone that partially progresses toward core status. Through this framework, this article contends that the BRI serves as a structural instrument by which China aims to enhance its position from the "semi-periphery" to a "new core" within the global capitalist system. This is achieved by managing global supply chains, developing economic corridors and digital networks that align with China, and establishing regional institutions that establish China as a leading force, examples include the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Silk Road Fund, and the BRI Digital Silk Road (Zhang et al., 2022; Wallerstein, 2004).

While world-systems theory has faced criticism for its rigid framework and emphasis on economic factors at the expense of political and cultural aspects (Agnew, 2021; Kostoska et al., 2020), Frank and Gills (1993) along with Chase-Dunn and Lawrence (2011) advocate for a broader temporal perspective and comparative studies of world-system dynamics throughout various epochs. The extensions enable the positioning of the BRI within the extensive historical framework of the Silk Roads, which China historically leveraged to establish economic and civilizational strength, and which it is now revitalizing to emerge once more as a new global center. Therefore, the BRI represents not just a development strategy, but a framework for China's structural role within the global system, one that systematically incorporates economic, financial, cultural, and informational networks.

New imperialism theory: Current methods of control via economic and discourse strategies

The BRI's approach, which does not rely predominantly on military power to extend its influence, allows for a clear analysis within the context of "new imperialism." Harvey (2017) concept of "accumulation by dispossession" indicates that this process has

supplanted classical territorial colonialism as a primary means of domination in the contemporary world, highlighting the role of financial institutions, free markets, and states that adhere to external conditions as intermediaries for resource appropriation. This article contends that the BRI operates in accordance with a new- imperialist framework, as China employs infrastructure investment policies, credit provision, and the governance of standards via economic– digital networks to create asymmetric dependence among the countries involved. This situation forces numerous nations to acknowledge China' s dominant position without adequate leverage for negotiation. An analysis of collaboration among BRI member states indicates that these states have modified their policies to facilitate such cooperation (Lai et al., 2020).

Arrighi (2001) and Hardt and Negri (2005) highlight that modern imperialism is not rooted in specific territories or military installations, but is instead distributed across "networks" (Empire as networked power), especially via international organizations, legal frameworks, and financial systems. This aligns with China's strategy, which focuses on building institutional networks across various dimensions, law, finance, and the digital realm, within the framework of win- win cooperation. The BRI is not simply a development initiative; it serves as a framework that illustrates the principles of contemporary imperialism without the use of military power, instead depending on economic strategies and ideological narratives, such as the concept of a collective future for humanity. In the BRI case, China enhances environmental and energy collaboration to bolster its legitimacy for expanding influence, while converting connectivity into a mechanism for sustained dominance.

Structural power theory: Connectivity as regulations and as a tool of authority

Power in the contemporary landscape functions not solely through overt coercion; it is also integrated within frameworks that individuals are required to navigate. Strange (1994) and Barnett and Duvall (2005) assert that individuals in positions of power do not need to give direct orders if they can create an environment that limits others to adhere to the rules established by the powerful. The BRI illustrates the impact of structural power via the establishment of technical standards and digital logistics systems, institutional interconnections, and the integration of global supply chains that China can oversee. Examples encompass the management of internet infrastructure, investment in data centers, and the development of alternative financial systems via the digital yuan, all of which demonstrate the evolution of "infrastructure" into "power through standards governance" (Braun, 2018; Gill & Law, 1989; Culpepper, 2015).

BRI networks operate as a significant "arena of power" rather than simply serving as an economic "background." The arrangement of infrastructure, roads, railways, ports, or internet networks, serves not merely to improve logistical capacity; it establishes "structural rules" that partner countries are required to adhere to, thus facilitating the systematic reproduction of China's influence (Fawcett, 2012; Gwynn, 2019).

In conclusion, the theoretical analysis presented in this article illustrates that the BRI transcends a simple economic development initiative; it represents the formulation of a "power architecture" integrated within the infrastructures of the twenty-first century, interconnected through digital, financial, logistics, and institutional networks that China can manage or significantly impact. The integration of conceptual frameworks such as world- systems theory, new imperialism, and structural power elucidates that the BRI serves as a mechanism for converting "connectivity" into "power." This transformation not only influences development pathways but also establishes rules and state- to- state relationships that create asymmetric dependence within a China- centered framework. This article introduces the idea of "Connectivity Imperialism" to illustrate the operational essence of the BRI as a novel power mechanism that operates without military force, embedding influence through networks and standards that seem neutral but are significantly impactful. The concept of "infrastructural structural power" is not merely a minor aspect of the BRI; rather, it serves as a crucial analytical tool for comprehending how China is shaping the future of a New World Order through frameworks that are apparent yet challenging to regulate. This underscores the BRI's genuine influence as a manifestation of new imperialism along the twenty-first-century Silk Road.

This article proposes " Connectivity Imperialism" as a conceptual framework for understanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

This article introduces a novel conceptual framework called "Connectivity Imperialism," which serves as an analytical tool for examining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a strategic power maneuver by China in the twenty-first century. In this context, this article aims to analyze the process by which "infrastructure" evolves into "structural power" through various connectivity mechanisms spanning physical, digital, financial, and institutional dimensions. This can be articulated in a structured manner through three essential points, as outlined below.

The importance of "connectivity imperialism" in BRI research

This framework demonstrates that connectivity under the BRI encompasses more than merely facilitating economic activity or establishing transport routes between states. It operates as a "mechanism of power" through which China establishes its role and influence within the frameworks of development and international relations, primarily by regulating trade routes, technical standards, digital platforms, and institutional connections. The significance of this initiative is in expanding the understanding of BRI studies. It moves beyond viewing the initiative solely as a foreign economic policy or an infrastructure investment program. Instead, the framework highlights the underlying "politics of connectivity" that influence modern power dynamics, functioning subtly through networks of cooperation, dialogue, and intentionally crafted structural dependence.

The uniqueness of Connectivity Imperialism is characterized by the treatment of connectivity as the primary medium of imperial power, setting it apart from related methodologies. Connectivity Imperialism integrates these dimensions by illustrating how routes, standards, finance, data systems, and institutional agreements converge to form a lasting framework of dependence. In this process, it further develops the three foundational traditions upon which it is based: it enhances world-systems theory by detailing the infrastructural mechanisms involved in semi-peripheral upgrading; it complements new imperialism theory by recognizing connectivity as a non-territorial means of domination; and it enriches structural power theory by demonstrating how seemingly technical networks serve as tools of rule-making authority.

To provide additional clarity on the uniqueness of Connectivity Imperialism, Table 1 presents a comparison of this concept with related approaches that are frequently utilized in BRI studies. The comparison illustrates that Connectivity Imperialism does not merely supplant existing concepts; instead, it incorporates and expands upon them by detailing how connectivity systems transform development interdependence into lasting structural influence.

Table 1 Distinguishing connectivity imperialism from related concepts

Concept	Main emphasis	Constraints for BRI analysis	Added value of Connectivity Imperialism
Geoeconomics	Utilization of economic tools for achieving strategic goals.	Frequently overly generalized; may consider infrastructure, trade, sanctions, and finance as interchangeable instruments.	Describes the process by which connectivity systems transform development interdependence into lasting regulatory authority.
Infrastructure diplomacy	Utilization of infrastructure projects and financing in a diplomatic context.	Concentrates on policy practice and statecraft, yet may not clarify structural dependence across time.	Associates projects with centrality, standards, financing, and established expectations.
Network power	Power generated by control over or centrality within networks.	May not sufficiently address capitalism, imperial hierarchy, or development discourse.	Links network centrality to the hierarchy of the world-system

Concept	Main emphasis	Constraints for BRI analysis	Added value of Connectivity Imperialism
			and the implications of non-territorial imperialism.
Neo-imperialism	Control exerted via markets, finance, discourse, and institutions, absent of formal colonial structures.	Can become overly expansive and lack sufficient attention to connectivity as a specific medium.	Identifies connectivity as the specific mechanism through which non-territorial domination may function.
Structural power	Capacity to influence the structures that guide the actions of others.	It outlines the process of establishing rules but does not address the historical relationship between BRI power and the hierarchy of development.	Integrates regulatory frameworks with development finance, infrastructure initiatives, and core-periphery realignment.

Source: Author

Implementing the framework in the context of international collaboration and various regional settings

The "Connectivity Imperialism" framework can be utilized to analyze cooperation frameworks in various regions, particularly in contexts where China is influential in developing infrastructure. Examples encompass cooperation projects in the Mekong sub-region (GMS), the BIMSTEC cooperation framework, ACMECS, and the LIMEC economic corridor, which is associated with the BRI in both direct and indirect ways. This conceptual framework elucidates the mechanisms by which China integrates influence through initiatives that may seem like "development projects," yet effectively serve to restructure regional dynamics, positioning China at the core and enhancing its bargaining power.

This framework can also be utilized in comparison with the strategies of other significant powers, including the European Union's Global Gateway and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy, both of which employ infrastructure and connectivity as tools for enhancing geopolitical influence. It can be posited that "Connectivity Imperialism" is a concept applicable to the examination of various regions globally that are increasingly facing structural competition through inter-state and inter-regional connectivity.

Constraints of the connectivity imperialism framework

The conceptual framework of connectivity imperialism provides a valuable explanation of the structural power inherent in the BRI; however, this article acknowledges certain limitations that may emerge from its application. This framework may overemphasize the role of the primary actor, China, potentially overlooking the dynamics of target states, which may adapt, negotiate, or leverage the BRI in various ways and may not always become subordinated. Secondly, the framework may lead analysts to neglect spatial and cultural differences that significantly influence BRI outcomes in various countries. This includes the ability of local governments to manage debt, oversee projects, or regulate environmental governance in particular contexts. Ultimately, in the absence of empirical data at the local level, the framework may encounter challenges in delivering a comprehensive analysis of the actual effects of connectivity within communities, an aspect frequently overlooked in policy-level evaluations.

Nonetheless, this article contends that these limitations can be mitigated by employing the connectivity imperialism framework in conjunction with fieldwork and literature review, cross-site comparison, and discourse analysis. This approach aims to more thoroughly capture the power dynamics inherent in connective structures while remaining

mindful of the complexities of the BRI strategy, which subtly converts infrastructure into power.

Conclusion

This article presents a structural- theoretical analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative as China's primary strategy for establishing a twenty-first-century "power architecture." It posits that infrastructure, in its modern context, transcends mere physical structures; it serves as a "power mechanism" through which China reconfigures global geopolitics and geoeconomics. This is achieved by connecting actors at the state, regional, and global levels, with the fundamental objective of creating conditions of structural dependence that enable it to dictate the rules, standards, and direction of development.

Utilizing three foundational frameworks, world-systems theory, new imperialism theory, and structural power theory, this analysis demonstrates how the BRI transforms connectivity into power intricately integrated into the global economy, finance, and technology. Through world- systems theory, the BRI seems to advance China's position from the "semi-periphery" to a "new core" within the global capitalist system by directing investment and supply chains toward China. Through the lens of new imperialism theory, China is perceived to expand its structural influence through economic strategies and a development narrative, rather than relying on military force, thereby establishing dominance without resorting to armed conflict. Through structural power theory, China is positioned as a significant power that establishes the rules, standards, and technical networks that partner states are required to adhere to.

Consequently, the article has developed the conceptual framework of "Connectivity Imperialism" as a means to analyze the power dynamics of the BRI and to comprehend inter- state relations at a time when infrastructure has transformed into a "political arena" rather than simply a development tool. The framework defines the BRI as a tool that creates influence via physical and digital connectivity, resulting in asymmetric interdependence between China and its partners, thereby enabling China to steer the direction and pace of development on both regional and global levels.

A comprehensive understanding of the BRI necessitates transcending solely economic interpretations to view it as a framework of power through which China aims to establish a new world order by managing networks, formulating regulations, and embedding influence at the structural level. In this context, Connectivity Imperialism provides a novel viewpoint on Chinese influence in a post-imperial age, where authority stems not from territorial possession but from dominance over the " routes of connectivity," which are among the most subtle yet powerful elements in modern globalization. The BRI signifies a transition from a "Silk Road of trade" to a "Silk Road of power," poised to influence the direction of global order in the twenty-first century.

The broader theoretical implication is that contemporary imperial power should be examined more in terms of its ability to organize the infrastructures that facilitate the movement, trade, borrowing, communication, and governance of other actors, rather than merely as direct occupation. Future research has the potential to enhance and validate the framework by conducting comparative studies across various BRI corridors, undertaking sectoral analyses of ports, railways, energy, and digital platforms, and engaging in field- based research to understand how local actors negotiate, resist, or appropriate connectivity projects. Such work would enhance the empirical foundation of the concept while maintaining its core insight: in the twenty- first century, connectivity has emerged as a strategic domain of power.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

The author used generative AI tools, including ChatGPT and Could, solely to support language editing, clarity improvement, formatting refinement, and consistency checking during manuscript preparation. The intellectual content, theoretical framework, analysis, interpretation, conclusions, and final scholarly decisions remain entirely the responsibility of the author. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed, revised, and verified by the author. No generative AI tool was used as an author or as a substitute for academic judgment.

CRediT author statement

Wasan Pounpunwong: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

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