

COUNTERING CONNECTIVITY: US RESPONSE TO CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is reshaping geopolitical arrangements in South Asia and critically analyses the strategic countermeasures undertaken by the US in response to China's presence in the region. The paper takes a qualitative case-based approach to comparative analysis of the China-US interactions in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. The sources of data are official policy documents, think-tank reports, and local media, which are interpreted in terms of document and discourse analysis. The BRI has enabled China to become a strategic powerhouse through its extensive infrastructure, IT corridors, and maritime presence. Counter-initiatives by the US, including B3W, PGII, and the Quad, are poorly disseminated and funded. Nevertheless, they also pointed to a changing strategic stance that involves turning to digital infrastructures, climate-aware investments, and partnerships to enhance sovereignty. The current research contributes to the discourse on connectivity geopolitics by offering a modern review of the US-China rivalry in South Asia. It provides a policy-relevant background for US efforts to enhance the region's influence by offering multilateral, region-specific, and sustainable options to the BRI.

KEYWORDS: *BRI, China, US, South Asia, Strategic Competition.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has already become a key principle of the global interaction of Beijing and the key element of its foreign policy (Kenderdine, 2018). The BRI promises to bring Asia, Africa, and other continents together through its grandiose vision of intercontinental connectivity (infrastructure, energy, digital, and maritime), but the initiative is not only set to open up the global marketplace but also to bring China into the political and economic dimensions of other continents. South Asia, in particular, is experiencing a strong desire that is increasingly being challenged. BRI has had impressive impacts on South Asia, such as the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan, the Hambantota Port lease in Sri Lanka, and investment in digital infrastructure in Bangladesh. The projects do not only influence the national development

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agendas of these countries but also give Beijing increased strategic leverage and regional interests (Hillman, 2020).

This emerging Chinese influence has significant strategic implications for the interests of the United States (US). US policymakers are beginning to view the BRI as a full-scale geopolitical dilemma, one that threatens to re-equip the liberal international order and reduce US influence over key hubs of the Global South (Hillman, 2020). The US, in turn, has rolled out a host of counter-initiatives based on connectivity. They are Build Back a Better World (B3W), the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), and regional alliances like the Quad. Although these initiatives indicate the growing US awareness of the geopolitics of connectivity, they are not as large, rapid, or strategically clear as the BRI. In contrast to the centrally organised state-owned enterprises and state financing instruments in Beijing, US approaches have been frequently disarmed by inter-agency fragmentation, dependency on the principles of delivery through the private sector, and patchy regional priorities (Brautigam, 2020). Additionally, the local agency is central. Motivated by a pressing national necessity to develop, South Asian countries, especially Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, have tended to accept Chinese initiatives, despite the long-term risks of dependency on debt and loss of sovereignty. When we view connectivity as a geopolitical rivalry, it becomes clear that US activities are incompatible with regional interests (Hurley, 2018).

Moreover, this study is concerned with the capabilities of Washington to recalibrate its policy in order to be a convincing and believable actor in the region, where its policies would be compatible with the several changes in the South Asian geopolitics. This paper contends that BRI has solidified Chinese strategic power in South Asia; the US has still not successfully responded to this strategy in an integrated and adequately resourced manner. The qualitative, case-based comparative methodology used in the study is based on the primary sources, such as official policy statements, think tank analysis, and regional media coverage. This paper supports the thesis that, although the BRI has entrenched Chinese strategic presence in South Asia very quickly, US responses are still disjointed and underinvested, and a reassessment based on multilateralism, sustainability, and local alignment is necessary. In conceptual terms, the article interacts with issues concerning connectivity geopolitics (Kenderdine, 2018).

The application of infrastructure and digital integration as instruments of power, along with the concept of geo-economics, involves using economic tools to achieve strategic outcomes and long-term political, financial, or security objectives through measures such as infrastructure and digital connectivity. The concept of connectivity is rather technical but is quite political, as it provides a platform to rearrange the regional formation in order to reach the goal of either political influence, economic dependence, or security benefits. Connectivity is, therefore, not only technical but also highly political in the sense that it has been used as a medium of restructuring regional loyalties (Brautigam, 2020).

BRI – A GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOECONOMIC TOOL

Introduced in 2013, China's BRI has evolved into one of the most ambitious international connectivity plans of the 21st century, since it involved both infrastructure investment and geopolitical ambition. BRI has started to be perceived among the scholars

not as an easy development programme but as an instrument of power to integrate China into regional political economies and enhance its normative power. Rolland describes the BRI as a model of a China-centred regional design through which the combination of economic co-optation and influence-peddling creates unequal reliance (Kenderdine, 2018). BRI has a twofold role: to serve the industrial overcapacity of China by offering supply-side solutions, but it also serves the Global South infrastructure gaps by offering demand-side investments (Albana, 2021).

STRATEGIC COMPETITION AND THE ROLE OF CONNECTIVITY IN GEOPOLITICS

Several international relations theories have been used to analyse the BRI and the US response. According to the neo-realist approach, BRI is a revisionist threat to the regional power balance, whereas China is establishing strategic posts on maritime bottlenecks such as the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean (IO). Through this representation, the US attempted to develop the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) may be seen as a behavioural balancing move to counter the 'expansionism of China' (Albana, 2021). The US, India, Japan and Australia established Quad, which is a strategic axis where regional security is discussed as well as the need to have a free and open Indo-Pacific. PGII, on the other hand, seeks to provide a challenge to the BRI of China through investment in sustainable infrastructural projects in the Global South with a focus on democratic governance and transparency (Bowen, 2009). Academics, through soft-balancing theories, explained how states increasingly have turned to non-military tools, such as multilateral alliances, economic incentives, and institutional structures, as a response to a possibly threatening global power.

In the given case, the programmes such as the B3W and the PGII could be seen as instances of soft balancing (Pape, 2005). The US leads such programmes. Unlike the BRI that operates by China, B3W and PGII are not only economic countermeasures, but they are also geopolitical responses to the growing power of China (Sanz-Sánchez, 2020). An emerging concept of connectivity geopolitics offers a more nuanced perspective. Infrastructure and digital networks, in this case, are developmental resources but also strategic resources that influence the movement of goods, data, and power. The BRI and the US-led activities vary in the way they view the region. Through the infrastructure projects, they establish varied patterns of influence and interdependence. The extensive infrastructure of transport routes, ports, and digital networks developed by the BRI facilitates economic integration in the state-driven model developed by China.

SOUTH ASIA'S STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

The region has major maritime resources (e.g., Gwadar, Hambantota), is a geopolitical outpost to the IO, and is predisposed to dynamism, including Indo-Pakistan tensions, ethno-nationalism, and foreign realignment. India declined to be a part of the BRI. As per the official statement at SCO, "India does not support the BRI of China: Why New Delhi is still against it" and its position as a strategic balancer (Strategy, 2025). In the meantime, other South Asian countries, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, are pursuing hedging policies, linking their economies to China and at the same time

maintaining their strategic relationships with the US and other players. These transnational alliances make binary geopolitical interpretations difficult and require an interventionist policy in response (Lim, 2019).

US POLICY RESPONSES TO THE BRI

The US has defined its strategy using multiple official statements and efforts in the Indo-Pacific Strategy (in February 2022), How the US Responds to China's Belt and Road (March 2021): Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI): US State Department Bill on Indo-Pacific Strategy Fact Sheet (February 2024): Statement by NSC Spokesperson Adrienne Watson (February 2024). The US at first was cautious in responding, but later, the country started to formulate counter-initiatives to the strengthening impact of China through the BRI. The most notable of them is the B3W and its follow-up, the PGII, both of which facilitate transparent, sustainable, and value-based infrastructure (White House, 2022). However, sceptics believe that these programmes are underfunded and overly dependent on the contributions of private funds and are thus less appealing to developing economies that are in dire need of real outcomes (Rivalry and Response, 2021). The digital competition has also become a front. The US efforts to prevent Chinese technology companies (including Huawei) from installing 5G networks coincide with general approaches to preserve cyber sovereignty and secure strategic infrastructure (Kenderdine, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study is based on a qualitative approach, in which document analysis and a case study comparison were utilised to analyse the strategic interaction between one of the initiatives of China, BRI, and the US policy responses in South Asia. The way means to demonstrate the manner in which physical and digital infrastructure has been expressed, built and challenged in the field of national spaces and allow marking the larger geopolitical lines of orientation and patterns of influence. The core of the current analysis is the Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA), the approach that is highly appropriate to the analysis of strategic discourses, organisational priorities, and discursive constructions in official sources (Bowen, 2009). Documents are not merely objects of information; they are perceived as political objects that reflect geopolitical calculations and ideological designs. Through QDA, it explores ways in which BRI accounts are written into development plans, bilateral agreements and official speeches and how counter-narratives in the US are based on transparency, sustainability, and democratic governance.

COMPARISON CASE-BASED APPROACH.

In the case of empirical variance, the global comparative discourse can be summarised in a comparative case design, as it discussed three South Asian countries of strategic interest, which include Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. A purposive sampling technique was used to select these cases so as to represent the different degrees of their involvement in the BRI and US counter-participation. The comparative viewpoint offers the opportunity to analyse the implementation of Chinese and US strategies in different political

and institutional environments with references to the differences in the degree of strategic alignment, resistance, and local agency.

- Pakistan is analysed in terms of CPEC, which is one of the most geopolitically significant corridors of BRI, the convergence of the infrastructure, military logistics, and integration of the economy.
- Sri Lanka offers an example of the maritime and debt diplomacy aspect of BRI, and specifically the Hambantota Port lease that sought to raise concerns about sovereignty and strategic weakness.
- The case of Bangladesh is more complex, as it involves simultaneous interaction with the Chinese digital infrastructure and the US-funded development efforts as one of the signs of the hedging strategy.

DATA SOURCES AND SELECTION CRITERIA

The study drew from a diverse range of primary and secondary sources, selected for their strategic relevance and analytical depth:

- **Official Policy Documents:** The US sources comprised the White House, Department of Defence (DoD), Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and PGII reports. Published materials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) can be found as Chinese sources.
- **Think Tank Reports:** The analytical products of institutions like the CSIS, Brookings, Carnegie Endowment and the Council on Foreign Relations provide professional insights on the geopolitics of the region, infrastructure finance, and connectivity rivalry.
- **Regional Media and Government Statements:** Local interpretations and elite narratives are given in communications by ministries and regulatory agencies in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (e.g., the Planning Commission, Board of Investment, and ICT Division).
- **Academic Literature:** The theoretical background and interpretive triangulation are supported by the use of peer-reviewed studies on strategic connectivity, geo-economics, and foreign policy in South Asia.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

All textual materials are subjected to thematic coding, using a deductive-inductive approach. Codes include the following key categories:

CODE CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Strategic Alignment	Nature and direction of alignment with either China or the US
Sovereignty	Concerns related to political autonomy, foreign control, or elite capture
Debt Exposure	Financial risks arising from Chinese loans or US funding conditions
Digital Infrastructure	Expansion of telecommunications, cloud systems, or surveillance networks
Developmental Priorities	Alignment of projects with domestic socio-economic needs
Infrastructure Diplomacy	Use of infrastructure to gain political leverage and regional influence

The thematic codes organise the comparative analysis of the cases presented in the next section of the paper into categories that facilitate a consistent examination of how connectivity projects demonstrate strategic influence and local agency in South Asia.

CASE ANALYSIS

The following section provides a comparative case study of three strategically important countries of South Asia, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, each of which illustrates various trends of interaction with the BRI, as well as its response to the US strategies. These examples provide a view of diversified shapes of influence, local agency, and geopolitical redrawing, which characterise contemporary connectivity competition. The following table presents a rough comparison of the large BRI projects happening in the respective countries, the respective US counter-projects, and the strategic consequences of these initiatives to put the subsequent analysis in context. The imbalance in relations between China and the US is expressed in this summary, and it sets the framework for a more comprehensive study of the geopolitical orientations of such states in the general connectivity race.

COUNTRY	MAJOR BRI PROJECTS	US COUNTER-INITIATIVES	STRATEGIC OUTCOME
Pakistan	CPEC (Gwadar Port, energy corridors, fiber)	USAID programs, energy reform, PGII	Strategic realignment toward China
Sri Lanka	Hambantota Port, Mattala Airport	MCC (shelved), sovereignty advocacy	Sovereignty concerns and elite capture
Bangladesh	Huawei-led digital backbone, surveillance	Cyber diplomacy, Indo-Pacific digital tools	Hedging and strategic dual alignment

As the table indicates, the response of every nation to BRI and the response of the US had various strategic ramifications, which were prompted by local interests, the type of

regime, and the posture. The differences in these patterns underscore the significance of the context and the way connectivity diplomacy is performed at the ground level.

PAKISTAN, CPEC AND THE RE-ALIGNMENT STRATEGY

CPEC has been regarded as the flagship corridor of BRI. The CPEC, which opened in 2015, is a possible \$62 billion infrastructure project in the transportation sector, energy, and digital (Hillman, 2020). Geographically, it links the Xinjiang region of western China to the Gwadar Port of Pakistan bordering the Arabian Sea, giving Beijing close access to the sea lanes. The latest expansions of CPEC involve CPEC-led digital infrastructure plans and CPEC-led surveillance plans, which prompt more questions about data governance and dual-use features. The US has reacted with some minimal involvement, including energy reform initiatives, governance training and USAID programmes. These US initiatives have, however, not been strategic or competitive in scale (Atique, 2024).

Moreover, the US has also expressed its concern about the strategic implications of Chinese investment in Gwadar Port, especially the possibility of this being used militarily. As noted by the analysts, the main motive of the port is commercial, but it is possible to use it for dual purposes, which creates doubts regarding the possibility of its military use. However, both Pakistan and China have constantly refused to acknowledge the possibility of using Gwadar to serve the military purpose. Despite these promises, the US has been keen to ensure that it engages with regional alliances and other infrastructure projects in the quest to counter the influence of China.

SRI LANKA, HAMBANTOTA AND SOVEREIGNTY CONCERNS

The sovereignty-related controversies have become symbolic of BRI in global discussion, particularly in the so-called debt-trap diplomacy. Sri Lanka has been a major emblem of the sovereignty-associated implications of BRI, especially regarding the Hambantota Port lease and its effects on national sovereignty and strategic liberty. Although the BRI has offered funding for important infrastructures, it has also elicited controversies regarding the ramifications of foreign investments in the long run and how they may affect sovereignty. In 2017, the failure of Colombo to pay the debt obligations saw the construction and 99-year lease of Hambantota Port to China Merchants Port Holdings. But a lot of the total debt in Sri Lanka was of a commercial nature (Hurley, 2018). Hambantota has commercial and strategic purposes for China. The port is close to major maritime chokepoints, which improves the long-term logistical and energy security positioning of Beijing in the IOR (Hillman, 2020). To the US, Hambantota endorses the anxieties of strategic encircling and elite capture. Washington has positioned its response around the principles of sovereignty, transparency, and democratic governance. As an example, the suggested Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) was worth 480 million US dollars but was put on the back burner in Sri Lanka due to political differences (Hillman, 2020).

BANGLADESH-DIGITAL SILK ROAD AND ECONOMIC BALANCING

Bangladesh is a more complex situation of strategic hedging in South Asia. Bangladesh has had a balanced foreign policy, as it maintains an interest with China and the US at the same time. Chinese investment, especially via the Digital Silk Road, has expanded to a large scale where companies such as Huawei and ZTE have participated in the construction of national fibre-optic backbones, surveillance systems, and cloud infrastructure (Stromseth, 2021). Through this digital entrenchment, the US has been concerned about data sovereignty, cyber governance, and the long-term strategic consequences of tech dependencies. The US has in turn reacted with increased digital diplomacy and governance programmes, such as cybersecurity support and capacity-building efforts as part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy to promote resilient digital ecosystems (Strategy, 2025). Nevertheless, there has been a delicate balancing between these forces whereby Dhaka has received the backing of China in terms of infrastructural assistance as well as keeping the Western allies on track in terms of governance and strategic orientation.

US STRATEGIC RESPONSES

With the growing Chinese influence via the BRI, the US has engaged in a sequence of strategic actions employing to recover its geopolitical influence, mainly over the connectivity battlefields of South Asia. These actions include global infrastructure projects, multilateral security forums, digital decoupling efforts, and soft-power initiatives. Their proposals imply that US realisation of connectivity geopolitics is growing, but US responses have been sporadic, poorly funded, and not coordinated with local development goals, which makes them less effective than the unifying form of the state-driven model of China.

B3W AND PGII: AMBITION WITH NO EXECUTION

The first attempt by the US to propose an alternative to the BRI was a programme called B3W that was announced at the summit of the G7 in 2021. The B3W was founded on transparency, environmental sustainability, and democratisation with the purpose of mobilising the capital of the private sector and unifying G7 countries to build infrastructure in the Global South (House, 2022). In 2021, B3W was renamed Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), which proposed a restructured way to realise the same goal, and their thematic priorities are climate resilience, digital connectivity, health systems, and gender equity. Nevertheless, PGII continues to fail in several key areas. Indicatively, it is not able to fund projects in politically unstable or economically weak regions since its bank-like, privately based limit its lending ability to the cold calculus of profit. Furthermore, its decentralised execution is not nearly as swift or unified as the state-run Chinese BRI (Brautigam, 2020).

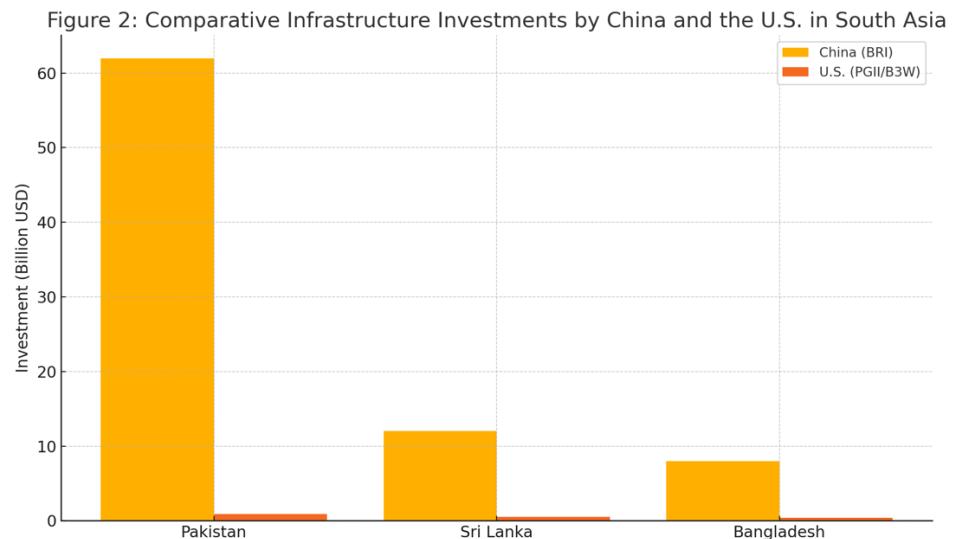


Figure 2: Data from CSIS, 2022, China's Belt and Road Initiative and US Infrastructure Investment in South Asia.

Upon analysis of Figure 2, the infrastructure investments in China, particularly the kind of infrastructure under the BRI, are much greater in terms of magnitude and country-related depth than those of the US. This gap does not only indicate the strategic respect given by Beijing to South Asia but also shows the limited success of the US alternatives, such as PGII, which are still at the aspirational level and without the financial capability to compete with the China-led model of delivery.

QUAD AND INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY: STRATEGY ALIGNMENT WITHOUT DOMESTICATION

In September 2024, the Quad Leaders' Summit took place in Wilmington, Delaware, marking a significant shift in the Quad between the US, India, Japan, and Australia. Even though the Quad originally concentrated on the issue of maritime security, its agenda has since been extended to infrastructure development, technology, and digital governance. The leaders declared projects like the Quad Ports of the Future Partnership to enable the sustainable port infrastructure and the Quad Cancer Moonshot to combat cervical cancer in the Indo-Pacific (Investment, 2024). The updated US Indo-Pacific Strategy proposes a free, open and inclusive regional order and South Asia is a central ingredient in the vision. But these attempts have not been easily accomplished. Countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are cautious and do not want to offend China, as they fear becoming entangled in conflicts between great powers. The US has often been unable to reconcile multilateral commitments to domestic development delivery with the end result, which makes their echo confined to the sound of diplomatic words.

DIGITAL DECOUPLING AND TECHNOLOGICAL SOVEREIGNTY

The US has intensified its policy of digital decoupling, whereby the South Asian nations have been requested to prohibit Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE from accessing strategic telecommunications infrastructure. The appeal is driven by the concerns of cybersecurity, surveillance and data sovereignty. In 2025, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced plans to further ban telecommunication devices from Chinese companies that are listed as posing a threat to national security. The new policies would prohibit the importation and sale of the equipment of Huawei and ZTE Company and allow the FCC to block the previously approved equipment that endangers national security. FCC Chair Brendan Carr emphasised the need to stop the efforts of Chinese firms to evade the existing bans by using personal or unregulated business channels (BNC, 2024).

Moreover, US giant online retailers have taken down millions of listings of Chinese electronics, including those of Huawei and ZTE, due to increased scrutiny by the FCC. The action is in line with the larger campaign of mitigating national security threats posed by Chinese electronics, as stipulated by the FCC, which cautions that they can be used in spy operations or to interfere with communications (BNC, 2024). But the reaction of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka has been both positive and negative. Pakistan has been open to Chinese digital infrastructure as a CPEC addition to its growing technology portfolio, and Bangladesh has been open to selective Chinese participation despite increasing US overtures. The major challenge is the unavailability of cheap and prompt US substitutes. In the absence of scalable funding and other viable alternatives, US advocacy can only be seen as normative posturing and not practical development support.

US STRATEGIC AWARENESS IN THE ABSENCE OF STRATEGIC LEVERAGE

US soft power tools, such as development aid, education initiatives, and governance support, are still the key to its involvement in the region. The USAID and Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) are some of the agencies that have financed the projects in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Meanwhile, compacts proposed in Sri Lanka had been derailed because of domestic politics. These projects, though operating effectively at the local level, are not always strategic (Kenderdine, 2018). Although the geopolitical aspects of connectivity are given more focus, the US reactions are reactive, disjointed, and not in line with local demands. Whereas the BRI possesses the advantage of political commitment over time, central planning, and the use of state-owned enterprises, the initiatives of the US are coalition-based, rely on the private sector, and are diffused (Brautigam, 2020). Besides, the values-based framing of PGII, although ethically compelling, has not been successful in appealing to the governments that are under immediate developmental demands. The US needs to build a more coordinated, locally based, and strategy-fleshed-out response to speed, financing, and alignment of elites in South Asia (Stromseth, 2021).

DISCUSSION

As shown in the comparative analysis of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, strategic competition in South Asia is evolving to be an infrastructural entanglement, a geopolitical alliance and a normative contest competition. Beijing has been determined to

work along an integrated and long-term vision of regional connectedness. US actions, despite recent tonal changes concerning PGII and digital diplomacy, are disjointed, under-invested, and inconsistent with the developmental requirements of most of the South Asian world (Strategy, 2025).

INFRASTRUCTURE AS STATECRAFT AND STRATEGIC ASYMMETRY

With the coordination of SOEs, subsidised finance, elite-elite relations and embedded computerisation, Beijing has developed a vertically coordinated form of infrastructural statecraft, which is highly sensitive to the immediate interests of recipient countries in development. Contrary to that, the US has depended on a normative model of interaction which is based on privately invested capital, regulatory transparency and multilateral collaborations. As much as these principles emphasise the democratic values and development sustainability, they have not been able to yield competitive results where states value speed, funding, and political orientation in high stakes (Khoo N., 2022). Moreover, the structural coherence of the BRI, which connects physical, digital and maritime routes with each other in an integrated regional framework, enhances the influence of China. The efforts of the US in turn are still spread out in fragmented efforts (PGII, Quad, USAID, and cybersecurity partnerships) that lack strategic alignment. This disunity reinforces the perception of US policy as focused on response rather than change (Doshi, 2023).

CONTESTATION OF NORMS

The issue facing the US is exacerbated because it cares more about maintaining its sovereignty and the threats of Chinese coercion, but it lacks viable options (Khoo N., 2022). Examples of BRI-based dependence frequently include the lease of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka and the use of digital surveillance in Pakistan. To illustrate the strategic importance of Chinese investments in the region, Sri Lanka signed a 3.7 billion dollar agreement with the Sinopec oil refinery in Hambantota in the year 2025. This loss of credibility is most apparent in two alignment situations, such as in Bangladesh, when governments hedge actively between great powers in search of material interests and strategic independence (Aslam, 2023). When US efforts do not come to pass or look conditional, they become derailed as instruments of soft balancing and become instead ideologically inflexible.

TOWARDS A RECALIBRATED US STRATEGY: SUSTAINABILITY, OWNERSHIP AND STRATEGIC DEPTH

The infrastructure demands of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, which are urgent due to cities growing in number, fragility of weather and digital change, offer an opportunity for US-supported models of development that are inclusive, institutional growth and sustainable. Besides, the US ought to leverage its comparative advantages, which include transparency, environmental governance, people-to-people ties and multilateral trust. They are not to be rhetoric appendages; on the contrary, they must be fundamental pillars of project design and diplomacy. With these embedded in a design of flexible, scalable and locally led infrastructure projects, the US will be able to enjoy the

strategic leverage without copying the Chinese autocratic and finance-driven approach. Finally, a reformulated US connectivity approach should view infrastructure not just as strategic pieces, but also as a tool for levelling access to regions and distributing stability and prosperity more fairly among local people.

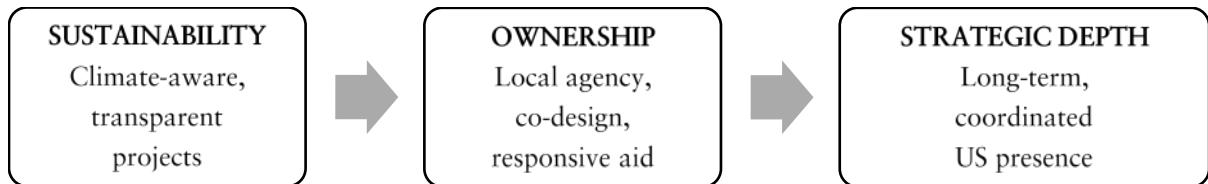


Figure 3: Strategic Recalibration Model for U.S. Connectivity Policy in South Asia

Source: Image Generated by Author(s).

This new strategic recalibration framework makes the case that the US needs to put behind BRI bashing and embrace a more future-oriented, situational perspective of connectivity. US policy can achieve greater congruence with the regional development goals and strategic ambitions of South Asian states by focusing on sustainability, local ownership, and a long-term commitment to the region.

CONCLUSION

BRI has radically changed the geopolitical landscape of South Asia, which is now anchored on infrastructures, digital highways, and maritime nodes. Similar to the example of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the BRI has not only established China as a lead developmental partner but also as a principal architect of the emerging connectivity ecosystem of the region. To do so, it has generated crippling strategic dilemmas for the US (undermining its influence, weakening its normative attractions, and suffusing its alliances) in a place that is growing into a stage of infrastructural diplomacy. Though the US is trying to change it with options such as B3W, PGII, digital decoupling campaigns, and multilateralism at forums, including the Quad, these initiatives are both tactically partial and operationally limited. This inability to be strategic is, however, not a final decision. With the increasing pressures of urbanisation, climate insecurity, and technological addiction, the region is at an intersection. The US leadership can assist in the revival of action with the help of environmentally friendly, transparent, and locally grounded infrastructure frames. The way forward to US success in the future will not be the Chinese model, but rather the creation of contextually relevant, mutually owned development partnerships that uphold the agency of local actors and yield outcomes that will suit the economic and political desires of the member states.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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