

Research Article

Geopolitics of the Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for Myanmar

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for Myanmar. BRI is an economic and strategic agenda of China. Because of its strategic geographical location, Myanmar becomes an important area of China in implementing its BRI projects. Beijing has raised the multi-level engagement in Myanmar such as economic and infrastructure cooperation; provide assist for the government's peace process, and stand at Myanmar's side in the international community. Therefore, BRI could have implications for Myanmar. This research answers the following questions: what are the implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative for Myanmar; why Myanmar is important for China and how will Myanmar benefit from China's BRI.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China, Myanmar

I. Introduction

China's 21st Century grand strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) was adopted by President Xi Jinping in 2013. BRI is comprised of both a land component - the Silk Road Economic Belt - and a sea-component named the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The strategic logic supporting the BRI's geographical span can be interpreted through geopolitical theories of Halford J Mackinder (Heartland Theory) and Nicholas Spykman (Rimland Theory). In implementing its BRI

projects, Myanmar becomes an important area for China because of its strategic geographical location. In this context, this paper aims to highlight the implications of China's BRI for Myanmar. The main research question of this study is to examine how do China's BRI impact on Myanmar. According to the necessity of research flows, this paper is composed of four sections. Firstly, this paper will clarify President Xi's Belt and Road Initiative. Next, this study will examine China's approach to Mackinder and Spykman's Theories. Then, it will explore the geostrategic significance of Myanmar in China's BRI. Finally, this paper will analyze implications of China's BRI for Myanmar.

II. President Xi's Belt and Road Initiative

President Xi's one of the most ambitious foreign and economic policies is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a web of infrastructure development plans designed to increase Eurasian economic integration (Wuthnow, 2017, p. 3). During his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, President Xi proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt and then extended the initiative to include the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in October 2013 for promoting greater connectivity between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Mohan Malik, 2017, p. 3).

On 25 March 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China issued "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (Chin, et al., 2015, p. 2). The Visions and Actions state the intention to build all forms of industrial parks such as overseas economic and trade

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cooperation zones and cross-border economic cooperation zones and promote industrial cluster development (Tekdal, 2018).

BRI will link more than sixty-nine countries that are home to over sixty-three percentages of the world's population and accounting for over twenty-nine percentage of the world's GDP. BRI will include a series of ports, railways, and highways as well as facilities for telecommunications, healthcare, education, and energy (Lehman Brown Accountants, 2018). The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road will connect coastal ports of China with ports in Asia, East Africa, and Europe while the Silk Road Economic Belt will connect northwest China to Europe through Central Asia. As part of the overall "Go Global" strategy that was formulated and developed by the government of China in the late 1990s to promote Chinese investments abroad, the BRI aims to increase economic activities of China with Asia, Europe as well as Africa, resulted in helping Chinese companies to widen market access, improve global competitiveness and fulfill natural resources requirements (Taeying, 2019)

After the Visions and Actions of BRI had been issued by China in March 2015, Chinese delegations including diplomats and scholars were sent abroad to advertise the BRI (Callahan, 2016). Besides, President Xi's overseas visits and holding several international summits such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Uzbekistan in June 2016 and the China and Central and Eastern European Countries Summit in November 2016 intended to promote the BRI. Therefore, dozens of bilateral trade and investment agreements within the framework of the BRI were signed during President Xi's overseas visits (Tekdal, 2018).

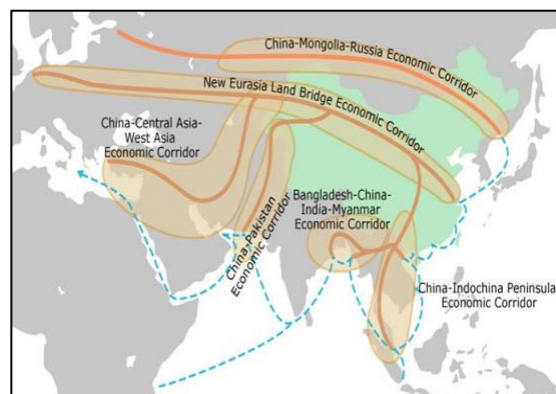


Fig. 1. Belt and Road Initiative: Six Economic Corridors Spanning Asia, Europe and Africa
Source: Lehman Brown Accountants (2018)

According to Fig.1., BRI comprises six international "corridors" that spanning Asia, Europe and Africa. They are Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM); China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC); China-Indochina Peninsular Economic Corridor (CICPEC); China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC); New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELB); and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Among Six Corridors of BRI, four corridors are land routes, including the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia, and China-Pakistan corridors. In contrast, the China-Indochina Peninsula corridor is an ocean route and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor is an amphibious route. Myanmar is involved in these two that together make up the "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" (Lehman Brown Accountants, 2018). To fund BRI projects, China has founded a US\$40 billion Silk Road Fund and a US\$100 billion Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Mohan Malik, 2017, p. 4). Moreover, China proposed a sub-regional initiative called the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) at the 17th ASEAN-China Summit in Myanmar in 2014 to manage BRI projects and enhance its political and economic objectives in mainland Southeast Asia (Vannarith, 2018).

III. China's Approach to Mackinder and Spykman's Theories

Geopolitics means the contest among countries to control geographic space to get security against potential enemies, expansion power, and influence over others, and ensure access to resources and markets (Arase, 2016, p. 1). Over the previous two centuries, many scholars put forth several theories to realize the dynamic of geopolitics occurred during certain eras of history. In 1904, the prominent geopolitical scholars Halford J Mackinder originated the Heartland Theory that highlighted land power strength. Mackinder supposed the world as a huge and uniform bloc including the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe and termed this bloc the World-Island, with a pivot area covering the landmasses of Asia, Europe, or Eurasia. Mackinder noted, 'who commands East Europe rules the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who commands the World-Island rules the World.' His core argument was control of the pivot area offers access to natural resources and that protection from any vulnerability from the maritime (Mudiyanselage & Wijesinghe, 2018, pp. 155-156).

In 1942, Nicholas Spykman proposed a theory that countered the Heartland Theory of Mackinder. Spykman argued that the Rimland of Eurasia, the buffer zone or coastal area, is the importance of controlling the World-Island, not the Heartland. According to Spykman, who rules the Rimland commands Eurasia, and who commands Eurasia rules the world (Mudiyanselage & Wijesinghe, 2018, p. 155).

These two theories highlighted that Eurasia is an important place for controlling world power. China's BRI revolves around the world's geostrategic centers and pursues the agenda of inter-regional connectivity through the Silk Road Economic Belt (land route) and the Maritime Silk Road (sea route) (Elahi, 2015,

p. 34). China's Silk Road Economic Belt designs to create a new Heartland, which will include a huge landmass of China, Central Asia, and Europe, a geographical place similar to the original landmass of Mackinder, but not involve Russia (Wey, 2019). Additionally, China is building several commercial and maritime facilities along the Rimland. The port development projects of China at Gwadar in Pakistan, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota and Colombo in Sri Lanka, and Kyaukphyu in Myanmar reveal China's maritime ability and its developing 'Blue Water Navy' ambition (Khan, 2018, p. 93). The BRI scheme highlights the outsized ambition of China in its neighboring countries. These projects will use masses of Chinese cement, financing, steel, expertise, technology, and workers to increase the geopolitical influence of Beijing and bind other countries more firmly into its fold (Hiebert, 2020, p. 37). If the BRI successful, it will create a new pivot of power that will have a strong influence over Eurasia. It will stipulate China with massive economic benefits and assured its strategic interests. It will support China to acquire new land trade roads that will operate as a key alternative to China's present dependence on maritime routes for its trade as well as strategic supplies, to develop its western regions, and to save its energy supplies (Wey, 2019).

IV. Geostrategic Significance of Myanmar in the Implementation of BRI

Southeast Asia is a significant strategic partner in China's BRI. The region serves as an important connection in the BRI's Maritime Silk Road that aims to connect China's coast to South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean (Vineles, 2019). In his speech at the People's Representative Council of Indonesia in 2013, President Xi also stated that Southeast Asia has

been an important hub along Asian Maritime Silk Road since ancient times (Xi, 2019).

Being one of the Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar becomes an important country for China in implementing its BRI project. Myanmar is involved in BRI's two corridors (the China-Indochina Peninsula corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor) that together make up the "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" (Lehman Brown Accountants, 2018). The major aim of China's BRI in Myanmar is to find a strategic route from Yunnan Province in Southwest China through Myanmar to the Indian Ocean that is an essential part of BRI for the development of Maritime Silk Road. Myanmar is China's best shortcut to the Indian Ocean because it is located between India, China, and other ASEAN countries (Chenyang & Shaojun, 2018, p. 319). With its maritime ambition of transforming into a 'Blue Water Navy' by 2030, the Indian Ocean Region remains Beijing's primary focus of interest. In the long-term, the region is significant as a 'land bridge' for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to reach the Indian Ocean through the Myanmar-controlled Coco Islands. The PLAN would be able to shorten the distance by 3000 km, reducing the voyage by five to six days by not passing across the Strait of Malacca to reach the Bay of Bengal. It has now arisen as a potential target of China's long-term strategic ambition, which includes transforming the whole region as part of a golden 'quadrangle' regional trade zone with Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and Yunnan (Singh, 2013).

Besides, Beijing is worried about preserving peace and security near its southern boundary with Myanmar and safety that fighting between the Myanmar military and armed ethnic groups does not drive migrants into China. Myanmar's political stability is vital for the security of China. Any armed clash on Myanmar-China border regions determined to border stability and

security of China (Myoe, 2015, p. 27). Furthermore, China has an important economic interest in Myanmar, particularly in the resource-rich northern areas. China has been investing in, obtaining, and importing natural resources for decades, containing lumber, jade, energy, and metals (United States Institute of Peace, 2018).

V. Implications of China's BRI for Myanmar

a. Opportunities for Myanmar

Politically, China's BRI could bring the development of the domestic peace process in Myanmar. To support Myanmar's effort for national reconciliation and peace process, Beijing initiated peace talks with the Myanmar government and the Northern Alliance, which did not sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). During the peace talks that took place in January 2019, the Northern Alliance has agreed to collaborate in government peace efforts. This is a significant landmark because it will reduce challenges for the CMEC projects in the Myanmar-China border region (Williams, 2019).

Concerning the Rakhine issues, China has provided diplomatic protection for the Myanmar government by using its veto power. For example, China did not support the November 2017 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution against the Myanmar government although it condemned violence in Rakhine state by adopting a statement. The Chinese government encouraged to negotiate between Myanmar and Bangladesh governments and offered a three-phase proposal for solving the problem between the two countries. The proposal includes such factors as a ceasefire by the Myanmar military, negotiations between the two governments to resolve refugees' repatriation problem, and the international community's assisting to reconstruct the war-

devastated Rakhine State (United States Institute of Peace, 2018).

In November 2019, China donated US\$ 900,000 for financing the Myanmar peace process during Special Envoy Mr. Sun's visit to Myanmar. Moreover, as part of humanitarian assistance, Beijing has contributed 1000 units of houses for refugees and 200 million kyats to Rakhine state. By allocation, its aids via government channels, Beijing has prioritized Kachin and Rakhine States due to both conflict-prone states are China's economic and strategic areas (The Global New Light of Myanmar, 2019).

Economically, China's BRI projects could make a significant contribution to the infrastructure and economic developments in Myanmar. In 2013, China agreed to provide Myanmar US\$12 million for upgrading the Beeluchaung hydropower project, US\$70 million to construct Hsedawgyi dam, US\$150 million for a new highway, which would connect Yangon to Mandalay, and US\$224 million for a telecommunication network project (Yue, 2015, p. 270). During Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Myanmar in 2014, the two governments signed many MoUs and Agreements including the Preferential Buyer Credit Loan Agreement on the Design, Supply, Installation, and Commissioning of Hydraulic Steel Structure and Electromechanical Works Projects for Upper Yeywa Hydropower Station (The Global New Light of Myanmar, 2019).

During the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to China in August 2016, the two countries signed for the implementation of two infrastructure development projects, including one for electrification in Myingyan Township of Mandalay Region and the other for a highway to run from Shwe Li-Mandalay-Nay Pyi Taw-Mon State, worth US\$20 billion that fall under the framework of the AIB (Sein, 2018). In September 2018, Myanmar and China signed MoU on the China-Myanmar

Economic Corridor (CMEC), the importance corridor for BRI in Myanmar (Gyi, 2019, p. 108).

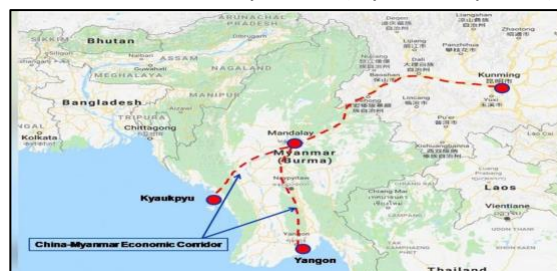


Fig. 2. China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)

Source: Myanmar Times (2019)

The CMEC is a Y-shape corridor as shown in Figure 2 that aims to connect Kunming to Mandalay and Yangon and a SEZ in Kyaukphyu, Rakhine. The CMEC estimates 1700-Kilometers-long and includes over twenty projects worth about US\$2 billion (Gyi, 2019, pp. 110-111). Although there are twenty-four proposed CMEC projects, Myanmar has agreed to speed up the process of such major projects such as the Kyaukphyu SEZ, the Kyaukpyu-Kunming high-speed railway, the Kyaukpyu deepwater port, and SEZs on the Myanmar-China border in Kachin and Shan states as well as the New Yangon City development in Yangon (Williams, 2019).

The CMEC, under BRI, becomes an opportunity for Myanmar in fostering Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP) and 2030 Agenda. The modernized and effective infrastructure is significant for Myanmar to develop a market economy. The construction of road and railway under the CMEC would connect important urban centers and people across Myanmar and with major markets and capitals in neighboring countries, especially China, India, and Bangladesh. For instance, the Muse-Mandalay railway line can play a significant role in improving connectivity between China and Myanmar and other countries of Southeast Asia. In addition, port development could enable Myanmar to become a regional center (Taidong, 2019).

Then, Chinese projects create job opportunities for Myanmar people. For example, more than 6,000 local people of Myanmar acquired job opportunities in the building of the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipeline project under CMEC, and over 220 Myanmar enterprises were included in the project with their workers being technologically trained (Consult-Myanmar, 2013).

Likewise, as the significant corporate social responsibility campaigns, Chinese companies donate to improve public relations. For example, the state-owned China National Petroleum Company has pledged US\$6 million to build clinics, a hospital, and schools in the areas of the Sino-Myanmar pipeline. Chinese state-owned company that carried out a feasibility study on part of BRI railway project in Myanmar and a local privately owned company has made a joint donation of US\$100,000 to a charity established by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Su Kyi that work on educating awareness of environmental preservation (Thant, 2019, p. 176). China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) founded its office in Myanmar in 2018 offered the scholarship to 600 university students in Myanmar as part of China's Paukphaw Scholarship Project (Thant, 2019, p. 177).

The "Belt and Road Brotherhood", a medical aid program that was initiated by Charity Federations of China and Yunnan and Fuwai Yunnan Cardiovascular Hospital, offered free medical treatment for congenital heart diseases affected children from lack sufficient healthcare system areas in Myanmar. The renovation of the former Bahan Women's Hospital was funded by China Foundation for Peace and Development and the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar. Later, this hospital was renamed as Daw Khin Kyi Women's Hospital (Thant, 2019).

b. Challenges for Myanmar

Politically, there are many concerns in Myanmar that the economic dependence would allow Beijing to gain serious influence within Myanmar's political affairs using the debt to pressure decisions. Under economic pressure, Myanmar has been looking for foreign investment to stimulate its weak and stagnant economy. The attracting overseas investments have proved difficult for Myanmar due to the crisis in Rakhine state. Therefore, Myanmar has recently relied upon diplomatic support from Beijing amidst the Western pressure and criticism. This has presumably informed the government's recent call to currently back the BRI infrastructure and investment opportunities (Williams, 2019). When collaborating with China under BRI, many Myanmar people worries about Myanmar's sovereignty, security, and influence of China in Myanmar. They concern that increased Chinese business existence throughout the world will finally lead to an increased military presence. For example, China founded its first external military center in Djibouti in 2017 (Gyi, 2019, pp. 106-113).

Economically, BRI spending in developing states has increased serious concerns about the debt crisis. Some BRI recipient countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Pakistan, and Mongolia are at a high risk of debt concern because of BRI loans (Gerstel, 2018). The external debt of Myanmar mainly comes from China. In 2018, more than half of Myanmar's foreign debt comes from China's debt with US\$ 3.8 billion that was followed by Japan's US\$ 2.1 billion. Due to the higher interest rates of China's debt (over 1.5%) than Japan's interest rate (about 0.01%), some media completely different views on Japan and China's debt (Tian, 2019, p. 159).

Some BRI projects have been criticized for creating employment problems in many host countries, including Myanmar. At the Port of Gwadar, one of the important BRI

projects, about half of the labors are Chinese. Also, in Laos, Laotians complaint regarding the fact that the majority of the Chinese labor on the railway line. Myanmar locals are unsatisfied because China-backed projects hire Chinese citizens for management positions, and that local people from Myanmar are only used for labor-intensive work (Mon, 2018).

Furthermore, there have been many complaints and reports concerned about human rights violations by accusing land grab and environmental degradation because of Chinese companies' land acquisition and industrial activities. Much of the land in Myanmar, particularly in the ethnically different areas, is often not legally recognized. Therefore, it is difficult for them to challenges concerning investment projects of China. For instance, although the farmers in Kyaukphyu Township have cultivated the lands for generations, it is extremely difficult for them to challenge the appropriation of land because much of the land chosen for Kyaukphyu SEZ is considered legally vacant. Nearly 20,000 residents of Kyaukphyu Township are at the probability of losing their land and livelihoods because of the land acquisition for developing a SEZ (Crowther, 2020).

Likewise, there are concerns that China's BRI projects in Myanmar could have negative environmental implications. The BRI corridors cross through the areas of the Ayeyarwady River basin and its surrounding areas that accommodate nearly 25 million people who rely on the natural capita not only to gain water supply but also to reduce risk from natural disasters. BRI projects could be undermined by considerable socio-economic and environmental costs that would happen if roads were built without taking into account the environment, wildlife, and its implications on communities (Helsingen, et al., 2017, p. 1).

VI. Conclusion

BRI is the important geostrategic agenda of China in the 21st Century. As part of the overall "Go Global" strategy, the BRI aims to increase economic activities of China with Asia (Central Asia and Southeast Asia), Europe as well as Africa, resulted in helping Chinese companies to widen market access, improve global competitiveness, and fulfill natural resource requirements. The partnership of the theories of Halford J Mackinder (Heartland) and Nicholas Spykman (Rimland Theory) can be found within China's BRI project. Myanmar is strategically located in China's BRI and it is involved in the "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road". Although China's BRI could not give a win-win situation for Myanmar, it could provide opportunities for Myanmar to implement its MSDP and 2030 Agenda. Therefore, Myanmar needs to adopt policies and apply the rights to be a respectful geopolitical pivot of Indo-Pacific geopolitical players while maximizing its national interests from its geostrategic strength.

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