

EXPANDING INFLUENCE OF CHINA AND REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

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Abstract

China is increasing its influence in the Sea of Southern China by asserting ownership over a significant portion of its islands and constructing man-made islands within the region. In addition, it is investing in projects under the Belt and Road measure (BRI) worldwide. China's economic and military influence have experienced a substantial increase in recent years. However, its actions in the region have elicited mixed responses. Certain nations have embraced Chinese investment and infrastructure initiatives, while others have raised apprehensions regarding China's territorial assertions in the Sea of Southern China and its assertive conduct towards nearby nations. This paper aims to analyze the effects of BRI on the economies of Southeast Asian (ASRAN) nations. Additionally, it will explore the potential implications of this initiative for regional security and stability. Furthermore, the paper will investigate how China may use the BRI as an alternative trade route in the event of a conflict in the Sea of Southern China. The study will also examine how other major powers, including the United States, have influenced the regional order. The paper's ultimate goal is to offer a detailed and subtle comprehension of China's involvement in Southeast Asia and how it could potentially affect the dynamics of the region.

Keywords: *Pakistan, China, OBOR, BRI, South China Sea, CPEC.*

Introduction

The Sea of Southern China has been a persistent site of discord and strain

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among the nations that share its borders. Experts express concern that the probability of conflict has increased due to China's increasing aggressiveness in the region. China has been devising an alternative trade route as a countermeasure to the aforementioned threat, which circumvents the Sea of Southern China in its entirety.¹ The BRI is a significant infrastructure undertaking aimed at interconnecting Euro-Asia and Africa through an extensive system of roadways, rail-roads and seaports. There are concerns among some individuals that this development may potentially escalate existing tensions between China and neighboring countries. China is committed to pursuing this ambitious initiative with the aim of safeguarding its economic prospects and diminishing its dependence on trade via the Sea of Southern China. The question of whether this will ultimately lead to peace or conflict in the region remains uncertain. The BRI encompasses plans for formation of a port in Gwadar, Pakistan, which has the potential to serve as an alternate pathway for China's importation of oil from the Middle East.² India and other nations in the vicinity have expressed apprehension regarding the possibility of China leveraging this port to augment its sway and military footprint in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, certain scholars contend that the move may result in "debt trap" for the countries involved, as China has often extended loans for infrastructure ventures with onerous repayment conditions and elevated interest rates. There is concern that a similar outcome to Sri Lanka's experience may befall many of the nations involved in the initiative, whereby the Sri Lankan government was forced to relinquish control of a port of great strategic importance to China, following its inability to fulfil its debt obligations.³

Chances of War in the Sea of Southern China

Given the escalating tensions, it is imperative for China to broaden its trade routes and diminish its dependence on susceptible chokepoints, such as the Sea of Southern China. The initiative represents a potential trade route alternative that could ensure a consistent supply of goods in the event of a disturbance in the Sea of Southern China. China is making substantial investments in infrastructure initiatives throughout Asia, Europe, and Africa under BRI, thereby creating novel trade pathways that bypass conventional maritime routes. While certain individuals have expressed disapproval of OBOR as a potential source of debt for developing countries, others perceive it as a mechanism for China to enhance its economic sway and safeguard its strategic interests over the long haul.⁴ Irrespective of individual perspectives on the initiative, it is apparent that China is actively endeavoring to establish alternative trade pathways and mitigate its vulnerability to potential disturbances in the Sea of Southern China. In the event of a conflict in the Sea of Southern China, China could potentially leverage the CPEC, a significant facet of BRI, to gain access to the Arabian Sea and subsequently, global markets. It is worth mentioning that China's intended use of this route is primarily for the development of

its less developed western region. The implementation of this strategy would potentially allow China to bypass the Sea of Southern China, thereby guaranteeing the uninterrupted circulation of its trade.

Historical Background of the Sea of Southern China Dispute

The Sea of Southern China has been a subject of prolonged contention among multiple nations, each asserting their sovereignty over distinct islands and territories within the region. China's territorial claims, which are substantiated by historical records and cartographic evidence, encompass a significant expanse that overlaps with the claims of other countries like Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia.⁵ During recent years, escalation of conflict has been attributed to China's increasing assertiveness in establishing military stations and artificial islands as evidence of its territorial claims. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration deemed China's claims of sovereignty over the Sea of Southern China as unlawful.⁶ Despite the decision made, China chose to overlook it and continued to assert its claims, resulting in heightened tension and concern among neighboring countries and significant global powers such as the United States. This exemplifies the intricate, delicate, and possible consequences for regional security and stability that arise from the Sea of Southern China conflict.

Over the last decade, the economic ties between China and various Southeast Asian countries have strengthened, resulting in China's emergence as a crucial economically in terms of trade and investment.⁷ Several countries are exercising prudence in their stance towards the Sea of Southern China conflict due to their economic interdependence with China, as they are reluctant to jeopardize their economic relations. There have been raised concerns regarding China's utilization of its economic influence to apply pressure on these nations to recognize its territorial assertions in the region. China has employed economic pressure to encourage nations such as the Philippines and Cambodia to adopt a more pro-China stance on the conflict. The economic collaboration, nevertheless, presents certain challenges as certain countries express apprehension regarding the possibility of excessive reliance on China or being left behind in its aftermath. China's military presence in Southeast Asia. China has expanded its military footprint in Southeast Asia, alongside its economic sway, through heightened naval patrols and exercises in the Sea of Southern China. Consequently, the escalation of tensions in the region has been observed as neighboring countries express concerns regarding China's aspirations. Additionally its engagement in the conflict, the United States has commenced providing military assistance to various Southeast Asian countries and executing operations to ensure freedom of passage.⁸ The militarization of the disputed islands in the Sea of Southern China by China has led to an escalation of tensions between China and Vietnam. Vietnam has taken measures to bolster its military capabilities in response to certain circumstances. The presence of the US military in the region has exacerbated the situation due to China's perception of it as a challenge to its interests and sovereignty.

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Contemporary Situation in the Sea of Southern China

China has asserted territorial claims and constructed military installations on islands that are subject to dispute. Disputes with other claimant governments, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, have led to strained relations and even instances of physical altercations.⁹ Furthermore, the U.S. has enhanced its military operations in the region, executed freedom of navigation, and enhanced diplomatic ties with key allies such as Japs and Koreans. It is anticipated that China and United States will persist in their rivalry for dominance in Southeast Asia, employing economic, political, and military tactics to gain a strategic edge over the other.

Economic Interests of China in ASEAN Region

China has an important and diverse monetary interests in the ASEAN region. The nation has undertaken substantial investments in infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, such as ports, railways, and highways. The aforementioned investments are a constituent element of BRI, which encompasses a series of infrastructure undertakings designed to establish connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa. China has expressed its desire to enhancing its trading ties with ASEAN nations, in addition to its focus on infrastructure development. China perceives this as an opportunity to enhance its export potential, given that the region houses a substantial and swiftly expanding consumer base.¹⁰ China has established Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as a regional economic alliance and has initiated negotiations for free trade agreements with ASEAN nations, as part of its efforts to attain this objective. In addition to trade and infrastructure, China has expressed a keen interest in acquiring access to the resources of region. In addition, the area under consideration possesses reserves of copper and nickel, alongside deposits of gas and oil. Lastly, China is eager to increase its influence in the Southeast Asian region. The proposed measures entail enhancing diplomatic relations, promoting the dissemination of Chinese language and education in the region, and broadening cross-cultural exchanges. China has demonstrated its aspirations to exert dominance in the ASEAN region through its investments and ambitions. China is motivated to enhance its physical presence in the region due to its economic interests.

Possibility of War in the Sea of Southern China

The present potential for conflict within the Sea of Southern China region remains a significant source of apprehension for members of ASEAN. The persistent territorial conflicts between China and other nations claiming the same territories have resulted in escalated tensions and a proliferation of military presence in the area. The development of artificial islands by China in the Sea of Southern China, which are equipped with military installations, has raised concerns among other claimant nations regarding the potential infringement upon their sovereignty.¹¹ In response to Chinese assertions, the U.S. has augmented its military deployment in the area and carried out collaborative drills with numerous ASEAN member states. There exists a

perspective positing that the purported likelihood of conflict in the Sea of Southern China is overstated and that diplomatic means remain viable avenues for resolving disputes. In the event of a potential conflict in the developing world, it is likely to originate in the Sea of Southern China region.¹²

Factors that Could Cause a War in the Sea of Southern China

There exist a multitude of intricate factors that may contribute to a potential conflict in the Sea of Southern China. The presence of territorial disputes, historical animosities, and geopolitical competition has given rise to tensions in region. The exacerbation of the issue is attributed to the militarization of contested islands, the deployment of extraterritorial military personnel, and the escalation of armaments competition among neighboring nations. Furthermore, the presence of limited resources and economic rivalry introduces an additional layer of intricacy to an already precarious setting. An example of the impact of territorial disputes on naval forces can be observed in the ongoing conflict among China and Vietnam over the islands of Parace, which has led to clashes between their respective naval forces.¹³ The development of human-made islands by China in the Southern China Sea has raised inquiries regarding its intentions and territorial assertions, resulting in heightened tensions with nations such as Japan and the Philippines, among other affected parties.

The Role of Other Countries in Escalation of Dispute

The contribution of other nations to the escalation of tensions in the Sea of Southern China cannot be disregarded. It is imperative for these nations to comprehend that their actions carry consequences for the stability of region. The Chinese government has perceived the involvement of the United States in military exercises and operations that ensure freedom of navigation in the area as a provocative action. Likewise, Japan has bolstered its military deployment in region and expressed apprehension regarding China's assertions of territorial sovereignty.¹⁴ These actions possess the capacity to intensify conflicts and escalate the likelihood of armed conflict. The contribution of other ASEAN nations to the escalation of the Sea of Southern China dispute cannot be disregarded. Some individuals have expressed stronger dissent towards China's territorial assertions, whereas others have taken a more conciliatory approach towards China. As an illustration, Vietnam and the Philippines have actively pursued support from other ASEAN states and the global community in their territorial disputes with China. The efficacy of these endeavors has been inconsistent, as certain ASEAN nations have exhibited hesitancy in adopting a resolute stance against China, owing to their economic interdependence or apprehension of retaliation. The potential for conflict may be heightened as a result of the division within ASEAN, which could bolster China's sense of assurance.

Possible Consequences of a War

Chinese economy is susceptible to disturbances in the Sea of Southern China as it heavily depends on this region for trade and the natural resources. The outbreak

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of a conflict would likely result in significant destruction of property and a substantial number of fatalities. The potential economic ramifications could be intensified in the event that China becomes subject to sanctions imposed by the global community. Similarly, to the impact observed in Russia subsequent to its military intervention in Ukraine.¹⁵ Conversely, given Singapore's status as a transit economy and the ASEAN States' heavy dependence on maritime trade and shipping, any armed conflict would inevitably impede these critical activities. The occurrence of a conflict in the Sea of Southern China would result in significant environmental consequences, including the release of oil and damage to marine ecosystems. Regrettably, there would also be a fatality and displacement of inhabitants. Furthermore, the occurrence of a conflict may incite an arms race among neighboring nations as they endeavor to fortify their security against potential future confrontations. The allocation of funds and resources towards this initiative could potentially divert resources from essential development and other critical projects. To avert the possible ramifications, it is in the paramount interest of ASEAN nations to collaborate towards a nonviolent settlement of any conflicts with China.

The potential consequences of such an event would have significant negative impacts on both the global economy and the nations directly involved. The Sea of Southern China is a crucial region for major shipping lanes, and any potential disruption to commerce could result in significant consequences. The Sea of Southern China functions as a significant global trade pathway, facilitating the transportation of commodities valued at over \$5 trillion on a yearly basis.¹⁶ A potential confrontation has the potential to impede shipping routes and result in an increase in oil prices, thereby exerting influence on the world economy. In the event of a conflict, economic ties may be disrupted, leading to a recession, as several countries rely heavily on China as a significant trade ally. A potential altercation in the Sea of Southern China could have significant geopolitical ramifications, as it has the potential to escalate existing tensions between China and U.S, and potentially incite a regional arms race.

China's One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR)

OBOR was introduced in 2013 with the objective of enhancing China's global connectivity. The initiative integrates both contemporary and traditional undertakings, encompasses a vast geographical expanse, and entails endeavors to enhance physical infrastructure, and cross-culture connections. In 2019, the aforementioned plan had reached a hundred and thirty eight countries, encompassing a collective GDP of 29 trillion USD and a population of approximately 4.6 billion individuals. Promoting a wide range of endeavors that improve connectivity across Eurasia and other regions could potentially reinforce China's economic and security objectives, as well as enhance international development. During the inaugural Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in May 2017, President Xi Jinping emphasized the

significance of prioritizing development as the fundamental objective of the step. He further emphasized the need to unlock growth potential of different nations, foster economic integration and interconnected development, and ensure equitable distribution of benefits. BRI is a comprehensive program comprising numerous projects aimed at facilitating the movement of commodities, capital, and individuals. The move has the potential to reshape geopolitical dynamics by facilitating novel connections, redirecting economic flows, and altering power dynamics both within and among nations. The BRI's particular policy objectives were elaborated upon in an action plan distributed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2015, which had been issued by the National Development and Reform Commission. These items were comprised of:

1. Enhancing intergovernmental communication to achieve greater coherence between top-level government policies, such as strategies for regional development and plans for regional cooperation.
2. Enhancing the synchronization of infrastructure blueprints to more effectively interlink robust infrastructure networks such as transportation-network and power programs.
3. Promoting the advancement of soft-infrastructure, including the establishment of many trade agreements, harmonization of regulatory frameworks, and enhancement of financial integration.
4. Strengthening interpersonal relationships through the promotion of academic and cultural exchanges among students, professionals, and tourists.

The provision of hard infrastructure is likely to be perceived as the most appealing aspect of BRI by beneficiary nations. Similarly, the initiative presents China with a prospect to utilize its substantial economic resources to fund global infrastructure ventures. According to the Asian Development Bank, the developing Asian states will necessitate a total of \$26 trillion in infrastructure investment to maintain their economic expansion. China could potentially achieve notable political advantages by utilizing its economic power in conjunction with these requirements. It is noteworthy that a considerable number of regions that are the focus of China's attention are afflicted by inadequate investment owing to internal economic challenges, and they frequently exhibit descending ranking on the Human Development Index of the UN. Myanmar and Pakistan, which have been extensively focused on by the initiative, are positioned at 148th and 150th spots respectively in the global Human Development Index rankings. In order to bolster BRI, the Chinese government has allocated substantial financial resources to Chinese governmental financial bodies, including the Chinese Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China. The banks in question benefit from reduced borrowing expenses due to their bonds being regarded as Chinese government debt, which results in lower

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interest rates.

Additionally, they have the privilege of obtaining loans from the People's Bank of China, which enables them to provide cost-effective lending options to Chinese enterprises involved in BRI initiatives. The availability of convenient financing options empowers China's governmental enterprises to present highly proposals for projects in comparison to foreign-firms that may face greater financial limitations. In the year 2015, Japan's construction companies were outcompeted by their Chin's in a tender for the construction of a high speed rail-road project in Indonesia. Indonesian government has stated that the rationale for their decision was based on the Chinese financing received from the CDB, which was accompanied by relatively fewer conditions. It is important to acknowledge that the project has encountered numerous challenges.

The contract terms have been subject to criticism by experts, who have deemed them unrealistic, especially considering the multiple revisions that have been made since its initial award. Moreover, the commencement of the railway construction by contractors has been impeded by challenges related to licensing and acquisition of land. Several projects under the initiative are currently in progress, including those pertaining to the CPEC, which spans a distance of 3000 kilometers from Kashgar, China to Gwadar, Pakistan. CPEC encompasses a diverse range of infrastructure initiatives, such as roads, rail-roads, pipelines, and fiber cables. However, a significant proportion of the overall proposed investment for CPEC is allocated towards energy ventures, specifically power plants, constituting more than fifty percent of the total. According to He Lifeng, the Chairman of China's National Development and Reform Commission, CPEC holds significance as a crucial component of BRI. It has the potential to facilitate the establishment of a new maritime route. The significance of CPEC is also acknowledged by leaders in Pakistan. Amidst the geopolitical tensions that have led to a deceleration of CPEC projects, PM Imran Khan of Pakistan implemented contentious measures in 2019 to propel advancement of corridor and grant tax leverage to the Chin's Port Holding Company, a state-owned entity that manages Pakistan's Gwadar Port. The Corridor aims to establish a linkage between the terrestrial Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, with the inclusion of Gwadar Port being a crucial component of this endeavor. The Pakistani government has leased the aforementioned property to the China's Ports Holding Company until 2059, and the expansion of the property is currently underway. The road infrastructure connecting Kashgar and Gwadar has undergone significant improvements. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) encompasses additional initiatives, such as the ongoing construction of the Gwadar Special Economic Zone adjacent to the port. This project is anticipated to be finalized by the conclusion of 2020. BRI possesses capacity to generate significant financial and strategic benefits for China. Several of these have been explicitly

recognized in official Chinese policy communications, including the enlargement of Chinese export-markets, the advancement of the Renminbi (RMB) as a global currency, and the mitigation of trade hindrances such as tariffs and transportation expenses.

Furthermore, the establishment and integration of robust physical infrastructure with adjacent nations would aid in mitigating transportation durations and expenses. The establishment of soft infrastructure with partner nations can facilitate a wider spectrum of traded commodities with reduced regulatory impediments. The issuance of RMB denominated bonds to raise capital for development projects is expected to promote the currency's adoption in international economic centers. The establishment of overland economic connectivity with Central-Asia is expected to enhance growth in China's lower-income western provinces, particularly.

Numerous advantages of the BRI remain unexpressed in the public domain. Certain governmental enterprises in China, including those in the cement, steel, and construction sectors, have developed substantial production capabilities by increasing their factory size and workforce to cater to the previously thriving domestic market. With the deceleration of China's economy, these enterprises are encountering difficulties in identifying efficient applications for their assets. Likewise, China possesses a substantial pool of savings that is not being utilized in a productive manner. The act of investing in extensive international infrastructure initiatives allows China to export its surplus savings and effectively utilize its governmental enterprises.

The successful discharge of the Initiative has the prospective to significantly shift a substantial percentage of the world economy towards China. The augmentation of trade, investment, and connectivity between China and Eurasian nations will result in heightened dependence of these nations on the China's economy, thereby amplifying economic influence of China on them. This could potentially enhance ability of China to influence the regulations and standards that oversee the economic activities within the region. The Initiative is having the prospective to produce political benefits for China. The financial resources available to Beijing may enable it to exert influence over the policies of its partner countries, with a particular focus on those in Central-Asia and South-Asia that exhibit deficiencies in governance and the supremacy of law. Several nations that are affiliated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exhibit unfavorable rankings on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) developed by Transparency International. The CPI is a metric that varies from 0 to 100, with lower score indicating higher level of corruption and higher score indicating lower altitude of corruption. Countries that receive funding from the BRI and exhibit notably low scores on the CPI are Turkmenistan (20), Pakistan (33), and

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Sri Lanka (38).

The acceptance of investment from China might entail certain prospects that enterprises of China will subsequently be engaged to oversee infrastructure management, thereby conferring upon them a degree of leverage over vital infrastructure. China aims to enhance its transportation for crucial natural resources such as oil and gas by investing in strategic locations like Gwadar, as it would help in diversifying its resources. This move could potentially reduce dependence of China on trade routes like the Strait of Malacca, which presently serves as a primary source of oil and gas for it.

It is imperative that partner nations also derive tangible advantages. Meeting the infrastructure requirements of these nations has the potential to accelerate their progress by facilitating their ability to export goods to international markets, thereby potentially generating fresh employment opportunities and promoting sustainable economic expansion. Alternative means of infrastructure financing, such as those offered by the World Bank, may be accompanied by conditions that some recipient governments perceive as impinging on their sovereignty. These conditions may include directives for governments to restrict expenditures to a predetermined threshold or implement measures to combat corruption. In contrast, Chinese investment has traditionally exhibited a lower propensity to mandate that recipient nations comply with such stipulations.

The success of BRI in China will require overcoming of various obstacles. It is plausible that partner nations, harboring suspicions towards Chinese intentions, may exhibit tepid reactions towards investment proposals. This phenomenon has been observed in previous instances of foreign investment made by Chinese state-owned enterprises that are not associated with the BRI. Australia has exhibited hesitancy in permitting specific investments by Chinese state-owned enterprises. Additionally, it has declined to conform its state infrastructure fund to the BRI despite requests to do so. In 2016, the Australian government prevented two investment proposals from Chinese governmental enterprises in the energy and agriculture industries, citing reasons of national interest and security. Myanmar has exhibited a degree of reluctance in embracing Chinese investment, which marks a departure from its previous eagerness. The suspension of the Myitsone dam construction in 2011 by the Myanmar government was attributed to apprehensions regarding the escalating Chinese sway and probable ecological harm, given that it was amongst China's major investment ventures in Myanmar. Despite the project's current state of uncertainty, it is noteworthy that China maintained its position as the primary investor in Myanmar, having allocated over \$15 billion towards various business ventures within the nation during the year 2018.

India has exhibited notable reluctance towards the initiative. The leadership in New Delhi made the decision to abstain from participation in the BRI

Forums of 2017 and 2019. Apart from harboring a general sense of skepticism towards the initiative, a significant apprehension pertains to the construction of CPEC infrastructure via the contested region of Kashmir. The aforementioned concerns are further complicated by economic considerations. The infrastructure projects initiated by BRI in Central-Asia, Pakistan, and Myanmar are anticipated to incur financial damages owing to their underutilization. Furthermore, these projects may have adverse effects, potentially outweighing their benefits. The Kara-Balta oil refinery, which happens to be the most substantial Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan, has encountered notable challenges concerning overcapacity in recent times. Thai officials are currently facing challenges related to funding and negotiating the Thai-Chinese high speed railway project in Thailand that has been significantly halted.

Several Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects are anticipated to yield advantages solely in the distant future, while concurrently immobilizing substantial amounts of capital that could be utilized more efficiently in other areas. The underutilization of Qinzhou port in southern China, despite being designed as a vital trade hub for Southeast Asia, has been demonstrated over the course of five years since its construction. In spite of these hindrances, it is crucial to acknowledge that the BRI constitutes a strategic vision with a prolonged trajectory. A significant number of the organization's initiatives are presently in the planning stages and are anticipated to require several years to reach fruition. The response to Chinese investment offers has been varied. However, if China is able to successfully execute key projects, the reception towards such offers may become more favorable. The significance of the initial wave of projects' triumph is thereby amplified. The efficacy of the BRI may not be fully assessed for a considerable period of time. Nevertheless, it possesses the capacity to establish more robust economic and political connections across the area. The enhanced level of integration may potentially confer upon China a greater degree of sway over other nations and a more robust ability to steer the evolution of the global economic framework.

China's Intentions for the BRI

The present discourse outlines the objectives of the initiative. China is constructing BRI with the aim of advancing south-south cooperation and assuming a leadership role in the third world.¹⁷ China has long aspired to assume a leadership role in the global south by offering infrastructure and development initiatives aimed at enhancing the welfare of individuals in these nations. An instance of this phenomenon is the establishment of CPEC, which entails the development of transportation infrastructure such as roads and railways, as well as energy projects, with the aim of linking Pakistan's Gwadar port to China's western region.¹⁸ The objective of this project is to enhance economic activity in Pakistan and establish novel trade pathways connecting China and Mideast.

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The Role of the BRI in China's Strategy

In contemporary times, China has been making noteworthy progress towards attaining economic advancement while concurrently placing emphasis on ecological sustainability. BRI exemplifies the aforementioned strategy by aiming to establish interconnectivity among nations across Eurasia and Africa via a system of infrastructure undertakings that facilitate commercial and financial activities. Nevertheless, the objectives of China for BRI extend beyond mere financial benefit. The initiative is perceived by the nation as a means to assert its leadership in the emerging world, particularly in areas where the Western sphere of influence has traditionally held sway. China is in quest of establishing its supremacy in the Sea of Southern China as a component of its comprehensive approach to BRI.¹⁹ Disputed area has been a longstanding point of contention between China and neighboring nations, with multiple states asserting conflicting claims to territorial sovereignty. Although the initiative does not possess any immediate ramifications for the ongoing conflict, certain scholars posit that China could potentially exploit its economic influence to secure political benefits in the area. China could potentially influence the political affiliations of countries with territorial disputes in the Sea of Southern China by allocating significant resources towards infrastructure projects.

It is noteworthy that China has consistently affirmed that the BRI is not employed as a geopolitical instrument and that it is dedicated to the peaceful resolution of conflicts in the Sea of Southern China. China's assertions that the initiative is not utilized as a means to achieve geopolitical advantages may not accurately reflect its underlying motives and conduct. Notwithstanding its assertions, China's conduct in the Sea of Southern China implies a different perspective. The assertive territorial assertions and the deployment of military assets on man-made islands in the area have resulted in strained relationships with adjacent nations and elicited apprehension among the global populace. Furthermore, the BRI's emphasis on enhancing infrastructure in geographically significant areas has resulted in allegations of debt trap diplomacy and heightened Chinese sway in beneficiary nations. China maintains that the initiative is a mutually beneficial endeavor, however, detractors contend that its functions as a vehicle for China to augment its economic and political influence. Therefore, it is imperative for nations to meticulously evaluate the probable hazards and advantages of engaging in the BRI and to guarantee the safeguarding of their autonomy and welfare. In the final analysis, the veracity of China's affirmations regarding the BRI can only be determined over time, as it remains to be seen whether they are authentic or just a veneer for its wider strategic objectives.

Implications of the BRI for the Sea of Southern China Dispute

The initiative carries noteworthy ramifications for the disputes in the Sea of Southern China. It also offers China an opportunity to bolster its economic and

political sway in the area.²⁰ China can bolster its territorial claims in the contested regions by augmenting its presence in the Sea of Southern China through the allocation of resources towards infrastructure initiatives. Conversely, BRI also offers prospects for mutual assistance and partnership among nations within the vicinity. Collaborative development initiatives can facilitate international cooperation in tackling shared issues, such as the pressing concerns of climate change and maritime security. Nonetheless, there are apprehensions regarding the possibility of BRI intensifying tensions in the Sea of Southern China through the stimulation of rivalry for resources and sway.

The Impact of the BRI as an Alternative Trade Route

The utilization of the initiative as a potential trade pathway presents an opportunity to access markets and resources that are not reliant on the maritime route. The potential outcome of this action may result in a reduction of the Sea of Southern China's strategic importance as a waterway and a potential alleviation of tensions in the region. Nonetheless, it is yet to be determined whether the initiative will effectively establish substitute trade pathways and diminish dependence on the Sea of Southern China. The success of the BRI in creating alternative trade routes and decreasing dependence on the Sea of Southern China is uncertain due to the substantial investment and infrastructure development required in landlocked nations that may lack the essential resources or political stability. Furthermore, it is improbable that the resolution of China's territorial assertions and actions in the Sea of Southern China will be achieved exclusively through economic collaboration, despite the establishment of alternative trade routes. However, this presents China with an opportunity to ensure the uninterrupted flow of its trade, even in the event of a conflict in the Sea of Southern China.

China's Use of the BRI to Gain Geopolitical Influence

Detractors contend that the infrastructure initiatives implemented by China through the initiative frequently result in financial obligations that render nations subservient to China and susceptible to its political sway. Hence, although the BRI may present prospective advantages in mitigating tensions in the Sea of Southern China, there exist legitimate apprehensions regarding its ramifications on geopolitical sway and the creation of debt entrapments. The efficacy of the initiative in creating substitute trade pathways and mitigating dependence on the Sea of Southern China is yet to be determined. The potential ramifications of the BRI on regional tensions will hinge on China's utilization of its sway and assets in executing the program.

The Potential for the BRI to Mitigate Tensions in the Sea of Southern China

However, it can serve as a means to alleviate tensions between China and the ASEAN states regarding the Sea of Southern China dispute.²¹ This is due to the potential for monetary collaboration and regional growth that the initiative presents. The initiative has the potential to enhance the economic conditions of nations in the

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area and mitigate territorial disputes by means of investing in infrastructure projects and fostering trade. It is imperative to acknowledge that the efficacy of BRI in mitigating tensions will hinge upon its execution and whether it is perceived as a bona fide endeavor to foster collaboration or as a mechanism for Chinese expansionism.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it can be posited that BRI represents a noteworthy endeavor with the capacity to reconfigure worldwide trade and investment trends. The efficacy of the endeavor will be contingent upon China's capacity to adeptly manage intricate geopolitical obstacles while simultaneously reconciling its own interests with those of its collaborators and the worldwide populace. In order to attain this objective, it is imperative for China to uphold responsible development methodologies and foster open communication with all relevant parties. BRI has the capacity to generate financial advantages for nations spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa. However, its successful implementation hinges on its ability to foster sustainable development and equitable prosperity for all stakeholders. The escalation of tensions in the Sea of Southern China signifies a significant transformation in the distribution of global economic power and influence. The project has been subject to criticism due to its perceived capacity to generate debt traps and intensify environmental problems. However, these apprehensions can be mitigated through meticulous planning and cooperation. One potential consequence of BRI is that it may confer a strategic advantage to China in the Sea of Southern China. This is due to the possibility that trade among ASEAN member states could be disrupted in happening of an encounter in the region, whereas China could potentially maintain its trade through the BRI. In summary, it can be posited that the BRI presents both hurdles and opportunities for the international community. However, the manner in which players utilize or interpret it remains within their discretion.



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