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Analysis of the Implementation Factors of China's Belt and Road Initiative Project in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT
The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's foreign policy program launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013. Sri Lanka has become one of the significant BRI partner countries due to its strategic location, particularly the Colombo Port and the Hambantota region, which are important points along international maritime trade routes. This research aims to analyze the factors influencing the implementation of China's BRI program in Sri Lanka and examine its implications for Sri Lanka's national development. The study employs a qualitative approach using secondary data analysis through library research. The theoretical framework applied in this research is dependency theory. The findings reveal two interrelated dimensions of interests: (1) China's interests in Sri Lanka, including transportation infrastructure development, energy cooperation, and soft power projection; and (2) Sri Lanka's interests in China, including foreign direct investment, infrastructure development, connectivity enhancement, and technology transfer. The implementation of the BRI in Sri Lanka demonstrates the relevance of dependency theory in explaining the dynamics of bilateral relations between developed and developing countries in the contemporary era.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of China's foreign policy underwent a significant shift after Xi Jinping was elected as the 7th President of the People's Republic of China in 2012. One of the most ambitious manifestations of Xi Jinping's foreign policy vision was the One Belt One Road initiative, which was later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The initiative was officially introduced to the international community by Premier Li Keqiang in 2013 (Bērzina-Čerenkova, 2016).

In general terms, the BRI is an initiative designed to support partner countries in addressing economic challenges through infrastructure development, investment cooperation, and connectivity enhancement. The initiative has expanded geographically, involving more than 70 countries and attracting estimated investments exceeding USD 1 trillion (Asian Development Bank, as cited in Dayaratna-Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019). Morgan Stanley estimated that China's total investment under the BRI would reach approximately USD 1.2–1.3 trillion by 2027 (Shabbir, 2017).

Zeng Lingliang (2016), in his study of the BRI, concluded that the initiative cannot be fully categorized as a new form of global governance because it primarily operates through mechanisms of regional economic integration. The BRI represents a new cooperation initiative that utilizes the geographical advantages of partner countries and strengthens cooperation mechanisms at multiple levels (Azizi, 2024; Bharti & Kumari, 2024). However, Lingliang acknowledged that the BRI also establishes certain terms and arrangements applicable to participating countries, creating elements of asymmetry within these relationships (Lingliang, 2016). Werner Fasslabend (2015) explained that the BRI follows the historical Silk Road routes, extending from Xi'an to the Mediterranean Sea. Fasslabend further argued that China seeks to strengthen its influence in the Indian Ocean through the BRI and that countries located along these routes may benefit from reduced transportation costs for maritime trade. However, Fasslabend did not provide detailed analysis of the specific characteristics of each country involved in the BRI route, including Sri Lanka's cooperation with China (Fasslabend, 2015). Dayaratna-Banda and Dharmadasa (2019) explained that China's BRI engagement in Sri Lanka has expanded significantly since 2005 through various development projects financed through loans, grants, and foreign direct investment (FDI). Sri Lanka faces challenges associated with the middle-income trap (MIT) and requires substantial investment in advanced technology industries and service sectors. With significant foreign exchange reserves, China has provided investment support in various BRI partner countries to expand trade and investment opportunities within partner markets (Dayaratna-Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019).

Sri Lanka is one of the countries with a strategic location within the BRI maritime network. This island nation in the Indian Ocean is situated along one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes, commonly referred to as the Maritime Silk Road. In addition to the Port of Colombo as a major maritime hub, Sri Lanka's Hambantota region holds strategic importance for international shipping routes. China's interest in developing and improving Port of Colombo facilities received a cooperative response from the Sri Lankan government (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018).

The Sri Lankan government allocated USD 361 billion for the development of facilities and service improvements at Malampura Port, Hambantota Regency (Gunasinghe, 2012). Limited human resource capacity and fiscal constraints in achieving infrastructure development objectives have made Sri Lanka receptive to investment opportunities offered through the BRI. In 2007, China and Sri Lanka signed their first major agreement concerning military equipment procurement, which contributed to strengthening bilateral cooperation in subsequent years (Shabbir, 2017). According to Chhibber (2020), the implementation of the BRI is not solely oriented toward infrastructure development but also serves to strengthen China's economic and political influence in South Asia.

Several previous studies have examined the BRI from various perspectives. Lingliang (2016) argued that the BRI represents a new model of regional economic cooperation that promotes connectivity and integration while maintaining asymmetric relationships between China and participating countries. Fasslabend (2015) emphasized the geopolitical significance of the BRI as an instrument for expanding China's influence along historical Silk Road routes and strengthening its strategic position in the Indian Ocean. Dayaratna-Banda and Dharmadasa (2019) analyzed the economic opportunities and challenges associated with Chinese investment in Sri Lanka, highlighting its contribution to infrastructure development and economic growth. Similarly, Chhibber (2020) found that the BRI functions as a mechanism for increasing China's economic and political influence in South Asia through large-scale infrastructure financing and investment programs.

Despite the growing body of literature, several limitations remain. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the economic impacts of Chinese investment, the geopolitical dimensions of the BRI, or the broader implications of China's foreign policy. Relatively few studies have comprehensively examined the reciprocal interests of both China and Sri Lanka within the BRI framework while simultaneously analyzing these interests through the perspective of dependency theory. Furthermore, existing research often emphasizes either China's strategic objectives or Sri Lanka's development needs separately, resulting in limited understanding of how mutual interests shape BRI implementation and influence bilateral relations between the two countries.

This study addresses this research gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing the implementation of the BRI in Sri Lanka from both Chinese and Sri Lankan perspectives. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize economic outcomes or geopolitical competition, this research integrates transportation, energy, soft power, foreign direct investment, connectivity, and technology transfer dimensions within a dependency theory framework. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its examination of the interdependent relationship between China and Sri Lanka, demonstrating how the BRI creates opportunities for national development while simultaneously producing patterns of dependency and cooperation between a major economic power and a developing country.

This study examines two main research questions: first, why China selected Sri Lanka as a BRI partner country; and second, how the BRI program influences Sri Lanka's national development. This study applies dependency theory as an analytical framework due to its relevance in explaining bilateral relations between developed countries (China) and developing countries (Sri Lanka) within the context of the BRI. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study enriches discussions on dependency theory and international political economy by providing empirical evidence from the China–Sri Lanka case. Practically, the research provides insights for policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders regarding the opportunities and challenges associated with large-scale infrastructure cooperation under the BRI, particularly for developing countries seeking external investment to support national development.

METHOD

Types and Approaches to Research

This research employed a qualitative research method to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the issues examined. The qualitative approach was selected because the study focused on exploring underlying reasons, perceptions, motivations, and ideas that could not be adequately represented through numerical measurements (Basuki, 2006).

The data used in this study consisted primarily of secondary data obtained through literature reviews and analysis of relevant documents. Supporting data sources were also considered to strengthen the analysis and provide a broader understanding of the research topic (Moleong, 2005). The collected data were analyzed to develop conclusions related to the research objectives.

Data Collection Sources and Techniques

Data collection is carried out using library research techniques that refer to books, scientific journals, articles, newspapers, as well as freely available news and official websites.

Researchers collect data from data that has been done by other researchers or data from other sources referred to as secondary data. This approach makes it easier for researchers to reuse the original findings of other researchers (Harrison & Callan, 2013).

To meet data needs, collection and search are carried out by accessing the internet or web pages. Data search through the internet is carried out only to collect information that is based on facts and contains the truth about the topic or information on the event being researched as supporting data (Bakry, 2016).

Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative data analysis is carried out based on the data that has been obtained in the form of a series of words so that it cannot be arranged in a classification structure. In the research process, analysis is carried out through two stages, namely data validation and conclusion making.

In conducting data analysis, especially secondary data, there are aspects that must be considered, namely the data obtained does not have intellectual property rights, the data is in accordance with and relevant to the purpose and concept of the research and is required to make major or small changes to the formulation of the problem. From this step, data is produced which is then classified and compiled systematically (Moleong, 2005).

Theoretical framework

The theory used as the basis of the analysis is dependency *theory*. According to David G. Hays (1964), dependency theory is a grammatical theory with an initial mechanism for characterizing a set of utterances and for assigning researchers and practitioners to describe a particular order. From the perspective of researchers, this theory becomes relevant when referring to the field of international trade in the political economic system between countries that cooperate or become partners, especially in terms of the interests of dependence from countries to partner countries, the dynamics of trade conflicts that occur, and coordination between the bureaucratic structures of the governments of these countries in accordance with their roles (Pevehouse, 2004).

Sri Lanka is a middle-income country and has a common feature of liberal economic policies (Priyantha, Dickwella, & Samarakoon, 2016). Liberal-based economic development policies in Sri Lanka have paid attention to infrastructure development and initiated micro and macro livelihood programs. In the theory of dependency, developing countries such as Sri Lanka need economic assistance, especially in loans, investments, and grants from developed countries such as China through various processes and procedures according to agreements between these partner countries (Blaney, 1996).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Belt and Road Initiative

President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, announced the launch of *the "the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road"* program in 2013, precisely when President Xi announced the initiative program during an official state visit to Kazakhstan and Indonesia. The BRI is the foreign policy and economic strategy of the People's Republic of China during the administration of President Xi which is one of the most ambitious infrastructure development programs ever prepared by the Chinese Government.

Officially, the BRI program emphasizes five points in establishing cooperation, namely: coordination of development policies; gradual and connected infrastructure development and updating network facilities; strengthening investment and trade relations more freely; improving and integrating financial cooperation; and increase social and cultural exchanges to strengthen citizens' relations between countries (European Bank, n.d.).

BRI's historical background is closely related to the Silk Road, which used to be an international trade route connecting Europe to Asia from several centuries ago. The Silk Road on the mainland was created during the westward expansion during the Han Dynasty which is thought to have occurred between 206 BC and 220 AD. Today, it forms a nationwide trade route that is a network of Central Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as well as the territory of modern India and Pakistan on the southern route (COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS, 2019).

Implementation of BRI in Sri Lanka

Official diplomatic relations between China and Sri Lanka were established in 1957, beginning with the signing of the Sino-Bangladesh Rubber-Rice Pact in 1952. In 1950, although Sri Lanka recognized China and signed the pact, the long-standing bonds of friendship between the two countries to cooperate are not very visible in economic and social cooperation even today (Shabbir, 2017).

During former President Rajapaksa's leadership and counter-insurgency by Tamil groups, a series of human rights violations occurred during the uprising. This created a diplomatic vacuum and the vacuum was immediately taken up by the Chinese Government to take advantage of the opportunity. China has provided its investment funds for the high-value Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, about USD 1.1 billion just for the construction and improvement of port facilities (Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019). In 2014, it is estimated that approximately 70% of all infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka were funded by Chinese banks associated with the BRI.

In 2016, China lent Sri Lanka soft loans of USD 3.3 billion (three billion three hundred million US dollars), about 13% of Sri Lanka's total foreign debt stock. FDI from China to Sri Lanka amounted to more than USD 800 million in 2016, while bilateral trade volume has reached USD 4.5 billion (Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018). The Chinese government has acquired a 70% stake in Hambantota, undertook a comprehensive management process and a 99-year lease, as well as a special economic zone of 15,000 ha as part of the agreement within the wider BRI (Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019).

China's Interests in Sri Lanka

1. Transport Sector

BRI contributes to the Sri Lankan government to get out of the income trap which is classified as average due to the lack of investment funds to support the increase in the amount of income or *minimum wage*. In 2017, the Government of Sri Lanka and *China Merchants Port Holdings* (CMPH) entered into a *Public Private Partnership* agreement with an investment amount of USD 1.12 billion for the construction and upgrading of facilities at Hambantota Port (Dayaratna-Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019).

In addition to the project at the Port of Colombo, China is also funding the construction of an airport in Sri Lanka. *Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport* (MRIA) located in Hambantota, precisely 241 kilometers from the center of Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, is Sri

Lanka's second international airport. MRIA is under construction with a soft loan of USD 190 million financed by China and is planned to accommodate 60% capacity of air cargo services and 40% of passenger services (Priyantha, Dickwella, & Samarakoon, 2014).

An agreement was also signed between the Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lanka Urban Development Authority, and *China Harbour Engineering Corporation* (CHEC) to develop a strategic location for the BRI route, namely Colombo Port or *Colombo Port City*. The project was later renamed *Colombo International Financial City* (CIFC). The implementation of these development projects has helped Sri Lanka to increase the number of FDI and reduce Sri Lanka's external debt costs due to almost even debt exchange with equity (Dayaratna-Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019). Hearn (2019) explained that China's infrastructure investment in South Asia has a strategic impact on the regional balance of power.

2. Energy Sector

The Chinese government has provided investment funds of around USD 15 billion to the Government of Sri Lanka in the form of grants, loans, and direct investments for several sectors. As a result, China seeks to be present as a major source for Sri Lanka in Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Most of the fifteen billion costs received by Sri Lanka are ODA in the form of loans and grants and are aimed at upgrading key parts of infrastructure development such as energy, services, and telecommunications services (Dayaratna-Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019).

China as the owner of the BRI program has become the world's leading producer of green energy or the use of solar technology. Sri Lanka as a partner country in the BRI program will benefit from the use of environmentally friendly technology if Sri Lanka is able to make appropriate use of the direct investment funds received from China in the ongoing environmental issues. The strategic location advantage of the port in Hambantota is able to connect well and widely to the global maritime network and maximize sea transportation services in the Sri Lankan region and China's needs in reaching the global market through the sea route that it passes through Sri Lankan territory (DailyMirror, 2018).

3. Soft Power Deployment

BRI is one of the means in the proposed development that shows the existence of China's *soft power* in the world and aims to create harmony with world countries. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Sri Lanka's 6th President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, held a meeting in Sri Lanka on September 16, 2014 to inaugurate the *China Cultural Center* during President Xi's state visit to Sri Lanka. The Chinese cultural center is not only the first Chinese cultural center to be built in the South Asian region, but it is also the first overseas Chinese cultural center to be inaugurated directly by the President of China and the President of Sri Lanka himself (China Cultural Center, 2015).

An international cultural conference was held at the Sri Lankan Parliament Building on August 28, 2019 in memory of Master Fa Xian, a Buddhist monk who lived more than 1,600 years ago. The conference was to commemorate Master Fa Xian's contribution to China's efforts to spread *soft power* in the form of culture in Sri Lanka during the use of *the Maritime Silk Road*. The substantial growth in the Chinese tourism market in Sri Lanka and the preference for both local and foreign tourists on their travels has now greatly changed aspects of the tourism industry in Sri Lanka (CHINA CULTURE, 2019).

Sri Lanka's Interests in China

1. Foreign Direct Investment and Infrastructure

Most of the investment in the BRI program for the Government of Sri Lanka serves as a facilitator support in the maritime trade route sector and has an impact on the quality of a number of key infrastructure projects that have started the development process. Investment from China for Sri Lanka is mostly included from the total BRI program, which is USD 8 billion. Meanwhile, China has offered triple in the range of USD 24 billion as other additional costs (DailyMirror, 2018).

Colombo International Financial City (CIFC), formerly known as *Colombo Port City* , is an important part of the draft agenda within China's BRI route and aims to create more modern cities and establish financial centres along Colombo's coastline as well as serve as Sri Lanka's financial and business district by 2030. The Sri Lankan government, which considers not interfering in the affairs of other countries because it is considered not to provide changes in its domestic economic growth, has plans to enter into agreements and agree on more profitable economic partnerships with the private sector without any political considerations (Dayaratna-Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019).

2. Connectivity

BRI is a complex and comprehensive network of bilateral relations with countries in the South Asian region as its partner countries. Sri Lanka is connected to the *Maritime Silk Road* or *Blue Economic Passage* route which is part of the international trade route with a busy network in the world through the Indian Ocean. With the benefits that Sri Lanka gets, it is hoped that it will be able to use opportunities or opportunities in other BRI international trade corridors (Dayaratna-Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019). Reyes and Santos (2021) stated that infrastructure cooperation in the Belt and Road Initiative can improve international trade connectivity between participating countries.

The Port of Colombo was ranked 5th in Lloyds Top 10 World Port Operators in 2018, with sea traffic at 34 ports stretching around the world from Houston, USA to Newcastle, Australia. Therefore, the Government of Sri Lanka will benefit by joining a transnational port network that will have the opportunity to expand external links and improve and strengthen connectivity between countries that use the global sea network (Belt & Road News, 2019).

3. Science and Technology Transfer

China's investment in the ports of the Hambantota region not only funds the infrastructure development and improvement of the standards of the port facilities that Sri Lanka needs, but also prepares for the development and application of technology for the operation of the operating system in Sri Lanka's ports so that it will be able to compete in regional markets that compete with each other.

Another example is ferry services with RORO (roll-on/roll-off). Twelve months after the agreement between Sri Lanka and China on the Hambantota Port in 2017, the use of ferries with the RORO system increased by 20 percent. In 2019 precisely in March, ports in the Hambantota area, especially at the Port of Colombo, reached 20% of the total generated from the use of the RORO system alone (Belt & Road News, 2019).

China handed over a number of grants to Sri Lankan institutions under government supervision. The USD 200 million grant used to build a water testing laboratory for kidney disease at Peradeniya University in Sri Lanka is an opportunity provided by China to provide higher education opportunities similar to China's (Dayaratna-Banda & Dharmadasa, 2019).

Relevance of Dependency Theory

The application of dependency theory for support in obtaining arguments from the author's point of view on the Sri Lankan infrastructure development process from Chinese financing through the BRI program has relevance. In short, China wants to contribute to the management of ports in Hambantota such as the Port of Colombo because of BRI's route for its maritime trade routes while reducing the cost of accommodation for freight forwarding services.

Sri Lanka which is greatly helped in terms of materials for infrastructure development and ultimately has an impact on economic growth in Sri Lanka. In addition, it is inseparable from the network or connectivity that Sri Lanka is able to get because of its role as a BRI program partner country that is able to make a Chinese response if it has supported the realization of China's foreign policy vision. Santos (2021) assesses that the Belt and Road Initiative provides development opportunities for developing countries, although it still has the risk of debt dependence.

From the perspective of dependency theory, Sri Lanka as a developing country with a middle income needs an injection of foreign capital to overcome the middle income trap. Dependence on foreign direct investment from China reflects a structural pattern described by dependency theory, in which developing countries tend to rely on developed countries to fill the financing gap for infrastructure development. However, in the context of BRI, this dependence is mutual because China also needs Sri Lanka to realize its strategic agenda (Blaney, 1996).

CONCLUSION

China’s foreign policy vision can be observed through the implementation of the BRI across several partner countries. China’s role as a major source of investment for national development, combined with Sri Lanka’s efforts to promote economic growth, demonstrates how BRI cooperation has gradually contributed to the development objectives of both the Sri Lankan and Chinese governments. The revitalization of land-based Silk Road routes and the development of maritime Silk Road networks support China’s efforts to expand access to global markets. With its strategic location and ownership of the Hambantota port area, Sri Lanka has become an important partner country within the BRI framework and provides opportunities for China to advance its strategic objectives. The transfer of knowledge and technology from Chinese experts has also become one of the factors influencing Sri Lanka’s continued participation in the BRI agenda.

From the perspective of China’s interests in Sri Lanka, three main factors can be identified: (1) transportation interests, particularly the development of port and airport infrastructure that supports BRI logistics networks and supply chains; (2) energy interests, including ensuring energy security and promoting the development of green technologies; and (3) soft power expansion through cultural diplomacy and the increasing number of Chinese tourists visiting Sri Lanka. From the perspective of Sri Lanka’s interests in China, three primary factors can also be identified: (1) foreign direct investment and infrastructure development exceeding USD 8 billion that contribute to economic growth; (2) enhanced connectivity with global maritime trade networks; and (3) knowledge and technology transfer that strengthens Sri Lanka's human resource capacity. The application of dependency theory demonstrates its relevance in analyzing the dynamics of China–Sri Lanka bilateral relations within the BRI framework. The dependency patterns identified are asymmetrical yet reciprocal: Sri Lanka depends on Chinese capital, investment, and technology, while China benefits from Sri Lanka's strategic geographical position in supporting the operation of its global maritime trade networks.

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