

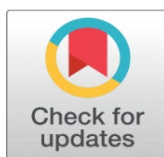
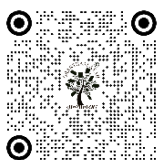
STAGING THE OCEAN: BELT AND ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE PERFORMANCE OF CHINESE MARITIME SOVEREIGNTY

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ABSTRACT

Growing maritime competition in 21st century has shifted the global power dynamics towards Asia. Indian Ocean remains the crucial part of influence for powers beyond regions. The current power game does not only concentrate on building the real power which gets showcased only in times of need. There is a need of constant portrayal and performance of that power in the creative and influential performative visuals. This paper investigates how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) transcends economic and infrastructural dimensions to influence perceptions of maritime power and sovereignty in the Indian Ocean region. It positions that ports and maritime corridors should not be viewed merely as strategic or commercial endeavors, but as visual and political performances through which states convey influence, authority and enduring presence. By analysing the case of Hambantota Port, the paper illustrates how architecture, spatial design, official ceremonies, and developmental imagery collectively construct a visible narrative of Chinese maritime expansion. The study employs concepts from critical security studies to assert that infrastructure in the maritime sphere also serves a symbolic function. Ports, reclaimed coastal areas, and connectivity initiatives emerge as platforms for geopolitical aspirations. In this context, the BRI can be understood not only as a strategy of trade and connectivity, but also as an effort to visually establish legitimacy and influence across the region and beyond. The paper also highlights how narratives of modernization and cooperation often conceal deeper tensions relating to sovereignty, debt, and strategic dependence. By bringing together maritime security and visual-performance analysis, the study contributes to broader discussions on how power in contemporary international relations is communicated.

Keywords: BRI, China, Visual, Sovereignty, Port



1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean has always been and will remain on the strategic radar of great powers. Given its strategic location, with abundant oil, mineral resources and fisheries, and being a hub of vast seaborne global trade and oil routes, it has become an arena of geopolitical rivalry among world powers and regional states. China has already made a grand entry not only in South Asia or Indo Pacific but also in the global governance through Belt and Road Initiative. Since its launch in 2013, the BRI has taken up the centre of foreign policy of China by creating a network of Infrastructure, Trade, and

Investment projects. While most of the focus of the policy analysis in these years remained focused around its capabilities to fetch economic developments for the country or strategic imperatives for security purposes (specially in case of India) but little research was conducted on how Chinese visual soft power projection through theatrical measures with the help of BRI policy will get it the benefits unknown to the traditional power politics.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study is to identify the patterns of performative measures used to project sovereignty in maritime domain and establish it that in current geopolitical scenario the use of visual representative dimension is quite impactful in situating the countries in their hegemonic positions. To contribute to emerging geopolitical perspectives keeping visual politics in centre for the maritime domain.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a lot of work related to the use of visual and performative art in the security field and international relations. Yet there is little specific discourse on Chinese expansion in the sea through BRI is also complimented by these soft power agendas to build global narratives. The studies have mostly focused on visual interpretation of security and border area issues leaving economic and maritime power projection completely untouched. Lousie Amoore and Alexander Hall argues, in "Border Theater: on the art of security and resistance" that theatrical rituals at border often fail to bring the certain and real political intentions of nations. Alan Ingram, in "Rethinking Art and Geopolitics through Aesthetics: Artist Responses to the Iraq War" has described two cases in which the artistic war responses were analysed. Rahael Hughes, "Through the Looking Blast: Geopolitics and Visual Culture", focuses on popular visual cultures of geopolitics portrayed by Leaders, Media and other agents in the global space. The articles studies beyond this and traces the long, term visions of the nations through visual practices.

4. BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

China's Belt and Road Initiative, also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) and New Silk Road, was first announced by President Xi Jinping in September 2013¹. This is compared to the old Silk Route, which has fostered economic and political relations between the Eastern, Central and Western world. "The original Silk Road arose during the westward expansion of China's Han Dynasty, which forged trade networks throughout central Asian countries also extended to Europe."² Xi Jinping's focus is to build a road and rail network through Central Asia and onto Europe along with maritime routes. "This initiative has two aspects; one being the Silk Road Economic Belt and other 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and together referred as 'One Belt One Road'."³ The primary aim of this initiative is to forge regional economic connectivity for the development of the underdeveloped areas of China. "The lack of confidence in internal matters means you have to appear very assertive abroad to unite the country around nationalism- but I cannot say that openly, says one of China's leading thinkers on international relations."⁴ The vision included a vast network of Railways, Highways, Energy Pipelines and airports. China, under this framework, China is aiming to build infrastructure in its regional neighbourhood. By building the 21st century maritime Silk Road, China will connect its southern provinces to South Asia and South-East Asia through railways and ports. "Despite Xi's claims that 'BRI is an open and inclusive process, and not about creating an exclusive China Club' the initiative is viewed by many as the centrepiece of China's foreign policy aspirations."⁵

¹ Peter Cai, "Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," Lowy Institute, March 22, 2017, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/understanding-belt-and-road-initiative>.

² Andrew Chatzky & James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, January 28, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

³ The Belt and Road Initiative: A Modern Day Silk Road," Norton Rose Fulbright, May, 2016, <https://www.nortonrosefulbright.com/en/knowledge/publications/d2e05e9f/the-belt-road-initiative---a-modern-day-silk-road>.

⁴ Tom Miller, "China's Asian Dream: Empire Building Along the new Silk Road," Bloomsbury Publishing, UK: 2017.

⁵ Anu Anwar, "Belt and Road Initiative: What is in it for China," Report, East West Centre, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25013>.



Figure 2: Map of the Belt and Road

Source: <https://isdpeu/content/uploads/2016/10/2016-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf> 6

In 2013 Beijing convened an important foreign policy work conference, and for the first time, the policy of ‘Peripheral Diplomacy’ basically a neighbourhood policy, came into common parlance.⁷ Jinping, while announcing the initiative said that, China’s neighbours are of high significance and strategic value to the country, and Beijing wants to improve its relations with its neighbors through strengthening economic ties and security cooperation. This meant, “Chinese foreign policy to extend its focus beyond its traditional focus on the East Asia region and pay equal, if not more, attention to its “non-traditional” periphery and western geographies such as Central and South Asia.”⁸ Analysts regard this peripheral diplomacy conference as a turning point in China’s foreign policy approach. This initiative involves around 60 countries of the world in its developmental approach. This approach is also considered to be of strategic significance due to various investments across the region. The potential impact of the BRI has generated global interest and goodwill due to its influence as a powerful platform for economic growth and regional cooperation. To fulfil its geo-economic interests China has proposed to set up seven economic corridors along the BRI, and they are growing as the numbers of countries are joining.

5. MARITIME SOVEREIGNTY AND CRITICAL SECURITY

National security has always featured prominently in the realm of international politics. In his classic, *People state and fear* Barry Buzan explains ‘the concept of security itself, a more versatile, penetrating and a useful way to approach the study in International Relations.’⁹ Nation-states, one of the largest international system units, strive to achieve a feasible security framework for themselves. Guarding national frontiers has become an uphill task in an ever-increasing inter-connected world, where power contestations occur across the globe. Such has been the prominence of national security that it has given birth to numerous regional and global organizations. For instance, several militaries and economic groupings, such as NAFTA, SCO, E.U., SAARC, ARF, ASEAN, are floating in the international political arena to achieve lasting economic and military stability for the nations involved. The traditional security threats and the measures to manage them have become less relevant in the nuclear age. Non-traditional threats came into existence which poses existential risks for a nation. Globalization influences traditional security concerns in three principal ways.¹⁰

⁶ Backgrounder, “The Belt and Road Initiative,” Institute for Security & Development Policy, October 2016, <https://isdpeu/content/uploads/2016/10/2016-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf>.

⁷ See, Special Report by, Jacob Stokes, “China’s Periphery Diplomacy: Implications for Peace and Security in Asia,” United States Institute of Peace, No, 467, May 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/20200520-sr_467-chinas_periphery_diplomacy_implications_for_peace_and_security_in_asia-sr.pdf.

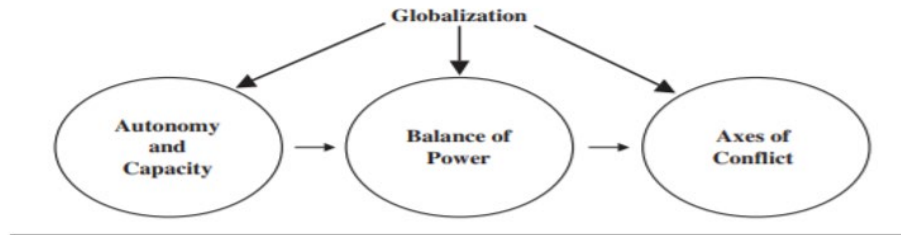
⁸ Hoo Tiang Boon, “Periphery Diplomacy: Moving to the Centre of China’s Foreign Policy,” Beijing Foreign Language Press, 2014, file:///C:/Users/lavanya/Downloads/PeripheryDiplomacy_MovingtotheCenterofChinasForeignPolicy.pdf.

⁹ Gigi Gokcek, Lui Hebron, Michel Gueldry, “Understanding New Security Threats,” Taylor & Francis, 2019.

¹⁰ Jonathan Krishner, “Globalization and National Security,” Routledge, New York, 2006

Figure 1

6 • Jonathan Kirshner

**Figure 1** How Globalization Affects National Security

The place of arms conflicts has been taken by the new cultural, social, economic, and environmental insecurities in nature. The growing interdependence of the world has placed the sea in the centre through which the world gets connected. Though giving a clear definition of maritime security is unattainable, every state has given specific meaning to its maritime security. Some define it in a narrower sense to sabotage against any defence aggression and protect it militarily. Others include the whole of the activities at sea, keeping their national interest in the minds. Yet, most of the policymakers agree that it is an inclusive concept that deals explicitly with the security from the threat perceptions in the maritime domain of a nation. These threats include illegal fishing, maritime disputes, disobeying the United Nations Sea Law, military presence at marine borders, piracy, maritime disasters, etc. A distinction is drawn between maritime safety and maritime security; Maritime Safety refers to preventing or minimizing the occurrence of accidents at sea caused by sub-standard ships, unqualified crew or operator error, whereas maritime security is related to protection against unlawful and deliberate acts.¹¹

We have remained ignorant for decades about our ancient maritime security and its gradual decline. In India, the awareness of maritime security can be seen mainly after the independence and specifically after the liberalization of the economy in the 1990s, a fast growth rate after liberalizing the economy placed India into a position of a central economic and political player. The protection of sea lanes of communication for energy export became an essential task giving greater importance to maritime security. It became crucial for economic development, national stability and integrity of India. India considers the Indian Ocean as a unique sphere of influence to secure its interests. While seeing the historical development of maritime security, we find it started from the Pre Greek times. Greek and Roman literary records of Alexander's campaign and contemporary events give abundant information of maritime intercourse and oceanic enterprise during the days of Nanda and Mauryan Empires.¹² Still, due to lack of serious documentation, we have to rely on the western historians' sources who give little heed to the Indian Ocean. However, bookmarks of cultural, religious and linguistic exchanges find a mention.

6. COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMANCE

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, visual communication has become increasingly central to the exercise of international influence. Power is articulated through images, narratives, symbolic performances, and digitally mediated visibility. Maritime infrastructure within the Indian Ocean Region therefore functions not only as a material site of trade and strategy, but also as a carefully curated visual expression of modernity, stability, and transnational cooperation. Ports, coastal developments, and maritime corridors increasingly operate as symbolic spaces through which states project legitimacy, influence, and long-term geopolitical presence.

The significance of these visual practices lies in their ability to shape geopolitical perception beyond the physical boundaries of infrastructure itself. Through cinematic drone imagery, official documentaries, ceremonial inaugurations, diplomatic media broadcasts, and the strategic circulation of digital content across global platforms, maritime spaces are transformed into symbolic landscapes of progress and connectivity. Such representations contribute to what may be

¹¹ Natalie Klein, Joanna Mossop and Donald R. Rothwell, "Maritime Security: International Law and Policy Perspective from Australia and New Zealand," Routledge, London and New York, 2010 (pg no.6)

¹² Commandar K. Shridharan, "A Maritime History of India," Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, 1995 (pg no.25)

described as the anesthetization of power, wherein geopolitical authority is communicated through carefully staged visual narratives rather than explicit political assertion. The repeated visibility of technologically advanced ports, illuminated coastal developments, and narratives of international cooperation gradually normalizes strategic presence within the global political imagination.

From the perspective of Mass Communication and visual politics, these processes operate as forms of soft power and perception management. Media narratives surrounding maritime infrastructure frequently foreground themes of shared prosperity, development, and regional integration, while more sensitive concerns relating to sovereignty, strategic dependence, and geopolitical competition often remain subdued within dominant visual discourse. In this sense, visual communication does not merely accompany geopolitical strategy; it actively participates in the production of geopolitical meaning. The circulation of images, symbols, and mediated narratives shapes how international audiences emotionally and intellectually interpret global power, demonstrating that contemporary influence increasingly operates through visibility, representation, and the subtle management of perception.

7. CASE STUDY OF HAMBANTOTA PORT

Economic relations between China and Sri Lanka have grown significantly in recent years. The Belt and Road Initiative of China has a close connection with the country's deeper engagement. Sri Lanka was officially declared a major country under BRI in 2014, when "Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Sri Lanka and signed the 'action plan for the people's republic of China and the democratic socialist republic of Sri Lanka on deepening cooperative and strategic partnership'."¹³ On the one hand, Chinese investment provides opportunities for growth in Sri Lanka with key infrastructure and skill development, allowing it to participate in the global economic value chain; on the other, it put many challenges before it such as the crisis of debt taken for the projects, environmental effects of the infrastructural development and the major concern of nations independence and maintenance of sovereignty. For many centuries Sri Lanka has been at the centre of the silk route connecting China with Europe. Initially, the silk routes were on land, but China gradually started to include maritime trade in this. "In the year 2016, China surpassed India to become the largest source of imports to Sri Lanka."¹⁴ Under BRI, multiple areas of cooperation were decided but much of the heed is only paid to infrastructure development and other areas are slightly ignored by Beijing, which has caused suspicion in the minds of the Sri Lankans.

China regards Sri Lanka as a trustworthy friend, and the relationship has been mutually beneficial. However, China's strategic interests are fulfilled by making its presence in the Island, and Sri Lanka also is grateful to China for providing it with the long term assistance to compete in the international order.

Figure 2

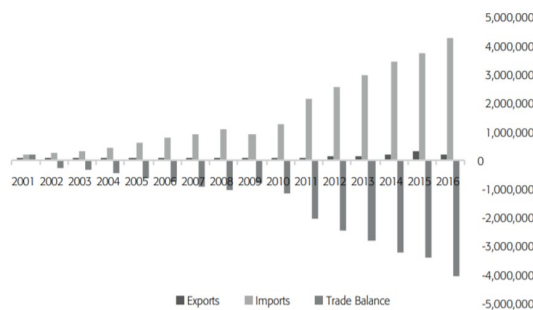


Figure 2 Trade Between China and Sri Lanka Over the Period 2001-2016 (thousand)

Source: <https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/12/5550/19.pdf>

¹³ Deepal Jayasekera, "Chinese President Visits Sri Lanka to Strengthen Strategic Ties," World Socialist Website, September 20, 2014, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/09/20/jing-s20.html>.

¹⁴ Constantino Xavier, "How India Should Deal with Gotabaya's Sri Lanka," Hindustan Times, November 19, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/how-india-should-deal-with-gotabaya-s-sri-lanka/story-GkOyglsgitytFjvF3QKaj.html>.

Sri Lanka's ambition of being a regional maritime hub in the Indian Ocean could only become a reality with the vast Chinese investment in the country. Given the critical financial condition and the financial gap in the country's infrastructural development, Sri Lanka remained in the back foot to become a competitor in the region. Sri Lankan projects now being connected to the Global Initiative of China's BRI would give leverage to the island in the international marine network and improve the country's relevance in South Asian maritime trade. "The new government is certain to repeat its previously successful strategy of using fears about China's growing political – and possible military – role in Sri Lanka to encourage increased financial support from India, Japan and Western governments."¹⁵ After the port was taken into the authority of CPorts holdings, the Hambantota port had transformed vitally from 2010, when it was initiated. There are three main ways in which Chinese investment has changed the significance of the port, Introduction of an industrial zone related to the port, improved global connectivity of the port and having access to other technical Chinese practices.

8. CHINESE PORTRAYAL OF POWER NARRATIVES THROUGH VISUAL ARTS

Visual arts are critical in communicating political meanings without direct references. For examples, images of Sri Lankan modern ports, Kenyan rail networks, or Maldivian bridges are shown repeatedly in posters, documentaries, or international discourse digitally or otherwise, to represent development and progress with Chinese partnerships. These representations associate China's progress and Beijing's advancements in global order. Scholars have pointed out China's strategic use of 'Silk Road Narrative to bring present day realities to the memory of peaceful trade and cultural connections. The China- Maldives friendship bridge and the Hambantota port are good examples of such arguments. These projects are more than just building connections they are representations of friendship, development and integration of the region. Official images, Public speeches made for the same focus of modern skylines, workers, and inter connectivity fostering people to people contact. Cultural silk road festivals, art exhibitions and other collaborations, film festivals, and other soft power tools aim to communicate narratives to portray harmony rather discord. It allows China to shape perceptions without direct military use. The use of visual arts in international relations can be politically motivated to build credibility and influence perceptions globally. An example of this is the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative where China uses its infrastructure, media, and cultural integration to narrate its interpretation of power. China's economic initiatives at the Belt and Road also convey geo-strategic means, illustrating connectivity and prosperity which results in redefining the interpretation of power in the current international order.

This performative aspect corresponds to post-structuralist perspectives in International Relations, especially concerning the areas of discourse and strategic narrative. Strategic narratives are stories used by nation-states to build their identities in the global order. China's articulation of its BRI portrays Beijing as the protagonist of globalization in an era where Western liberal powers are fragmented and increasingly inward-looking. Through visuals, China communicates efficiency, connectivity, stability, and futuristic modernity. The use of images of sleek bridges, luminescent ports, high-speed rail, and digitally rendered trade routes creates an association between Chinese leadership and global modernity.

However, in doing so, such visual stories also mask the power relations between the parties. According to critics, such visual representations of "win-win cooperation" are often used to gloss over dependency on economics, vulnerabilities related to debt, and strategic advantages that one party might have. The case of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka is an example. Although presented as an illustration of successful development projects, the lease of the Hambantota Port to a Chinese firm for a period of 99 years caused concerns related to debt diplomacy and encirclement in the Indian Ocean region. Nevertheless, visual diplomacy of China is quite strong due to its appeal to developing nations. Moreover, the cultural diplomacy that China conducts within the BRI framework transcends physical infrastructures and involves museums, artistic events, Confucius Institutes, films, and exhibits about the Silk Road. These activities construct an "imaginative discourse" wherein China appears to be an inherently connected civilization. This approach is crucial since it converts geopolitical aspirations into cultural affinity. Power becomes more affective than coercive, relying on attraction and imagery.

¹⁵ Alan Keenan, "Sri Lanka: Landslide Win for the Rajapaksa Puts Democracy and Pluralism at Risk," International Crisis Group, August 12, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-landslide-win-rajapaksa-puts-democracy-and-pluralism-risk>.

9. CONCLUSION

The paper dives into different conceptual details of the Chinese expansionist policy through BRI in South Asia and maritime domain. It situates that general and common diplomatic ceremonies and portrayals of official interaction often leads to specific motives and agendas in foreign and maritime policies. It also has both positive as well as negative upshots such as in the case of Hambantota, China did get the economic and strategic leverage there but exposition of 'Debt Trap Policy' came into being. The narrative now has a much more strong appeal than the development it has brought out. In conclusion the paper analyses that performative measures have an impactful relevance in maritime domain, which influences long term policy plans in international relations.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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