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Malaysian and German Governments (2013-2022)

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Viktoriia Ivanova

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Mag. Dr. Alfred Gerstl Privatdoz. MIR

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Abstract

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) (until 2016), is one of the most ambitious projects in infrastructure ever to be conceived, with potential implications for global connectivity, building on and extending from the principles of the Great Western Development (GWD) strategy. The project, announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, spans from East Asia to Europe, Africa, and Latin America, intending to expand China's political and economic influence. While different analysts believe that the project will be a controversial expansion to China's influence and the costs of the project have skyrocketed, some nations have embraced the BRI and further actions from Beijing to improve development in a more appealing economic vision. In this thesis, the research intends to compare and contrast official political perspectives on the BRI with scholarly viewpoints in the states of interest, i.e., Malaysia and Germany. To complete this task, a crucial for this research document, "The Vision and Proposed Actions Outlined the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road and the Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt," published by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in 2015, together with official interviews and statements absorbed from speeches by Chinese leaders and experts' opinions, and, on the other hand, an ample number of speeches given by members of the ruling political elites in their respective nations, interviews with official decision-makers published in local media sources in Malaysia and Germany, will be analyzed to track to which degree the official BRI aims stated by China had been adopted in these two countries. This approach will help answer the main research question (RQ): *How and why has the perception of the BRI by the governments of Malaysia and Germany changed and developed since 2013?* Consequently, the results section will feature perceptions of the BRI project in Malaysia and Germany. For Malaysia, the results will trace the distinct dynamics of asymmetrical power relations between China and the Malaysian government, unravel different sources of authority for the political elites, showcase how these sources help in shaping external and domestic policies, and apply an asymmetrical authority model to help explain why Malaysia has been persistent and pragmatic in embracing the BRI despite being affiliated with a periodic perception change. On the other hand, the results section for Germany documents the partisan foundation of the foreign policy in Germany after the country was established and how the Chinese-German collaboration was instituted, depicting the economic partnership between China and Germany when the BRI was implemented, the resultant challenges and fears that have faced Germany's economy as a result of the BRI project, and proposals made in parliament by members to help in regulating the same.

Keywords: China, the Malaysian government, the German government, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), One Belt One Road (OBOR), Critical Discourse Analysis, and political elites.

Kurzfassung

Chinas Neue Seidenstraße (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) oder Ein Gürtel, eine Straße (One Belt, One Road, OBOR) (bis 2016) ist eines der ehrgeizigsten Infrastrukturprojekte, die je konzipiert wurden, mit potenziellen Auswirkungen auf die globale Konnektivität, die auf den Grundsätzen der Förderung der Entwicklung Westchinas (Great Western Development, GWD) aufbaut und diese erweitert. Das von Präsident Xi Jinping im Jahr 2013 angekündigte Projekt erstreckt sich von Ostasien bis nach Europa, Afrika und Lateinamerika und soll Chinas politischen und wirtschaftlichen Einfluss ausweiten. Während verschiedene Analysten der Meinung sind, dass das Projekt eine umstrittene Ausweitung des chinesischen Einflusses darstellt und die Kosten des Projekts in die Höhe geschossen sind, haben einige Länder die BRI und weitere Maßnahmen Pekings zur Verbesserung der Entwicklung im Rahmen einer attraktiveren wirtschaftlichen Vision begrüßt. In dieser Arbeit soll die offizielle politische Sichtweise auf die BRI mit der wissenschaftlichen Sichtweise in den untersuchten Staaten, d. h. Malaysia und Deutschland, verglichen und gegenübergestellt werden. Um diese Aufgabe zu erfüllen, wird ein für diese Forschung entscheidendes Dokument, „The Vision and Proposed Actions Outlined the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road and the Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt“, das 2015 von der Staatliche Kommission für Entwicklung und Reform (National Development and Reform Commission, NDRC) veröffentlicht wurde, zusammen mit offiziellen Interviews und Aussagen, die aus den Reden chinesischer Spitzenpolitiker und Expertenmeinungen übernommen wurden, analysiert. Zudem wird eine große Anzahl von Reden, die von Mitgliedern der herrschenden politischen Eliten in ihren jeweiligen Ländern gehalten wurden, sowie Interviews mit offiziellen Entscheidungsträgern, die in lokalen Medien in Malaysia und Deutschland veröffentlicht wurden, untersucht, um zu verfolgen, inwieweit die offiziellen chinesischen BRI-Ziele positiv rezipiert wurden. Dieser Ansatz wird zur Beantwortung der Hauptforschungsfrage beitragen: *Wie und warum hat sich die Wahrnehmung der BRI durch die Regierungen in Malaysia und Deutschland seit 2013 verändert und entwickelt?* Folglich werden im Ergebnisteil die Wahrnehmungen des BRI-Projekts in Malaysia und Deutschland dargestellt. Für Malaysia werden die Ergebnisse die unterschiedliche Dynamik der asymmetrischen Machtbeziehungen zwischen China und der malaysischen Regierung nachzeichnen, verschiedene Quellen der Autorität für die politischen Eliten entschlüsseln, aufzeigen, wie diese Quellen bei der Gestaltung der Außen- und Innenpolitik helfen, und ein Modell der asymmetrischen Autorität anwenden, um zu erklären, warum Malaysia bei der Annahme der BRI hartnäckig und pragmatisch war, obwohl dies mit einem periodischen Wahrnehmungswechsel verbunden war. Andererseits dokumentiert der Ergebnisteil für Deutschland die parteipolitische Grundlage der Außenpolitik in Deutschland nach der Gründung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, sowie wie die chinesisch-deutsche Zusammenarbeit eingeleitet wurde. Er zeigt die wirtschaftliche Partnerschaft zwischen China und Deutschland bei der Umsetzung der BRI, die daraus resultierenden Herausforderungen und Befürchtungen, mit denen die deutsche Wirtschaft infolge des BRI-

Projekts konfrontiert wurde, und die Vorschläge, die von Abgeordneten im Parlament gemacht wurden, um bei der Regulierung desselben zu helfen.

Schlagworte: China, die malaysische Regierung, die deutsche Regierung, Neue Seidenstraße (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI), Ein Gürtel, eine Straße (One Belt One Road, OBOR), Kritische Diskursanalyse und politische Eliten.

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List of Abbreviations

1MDB	1Malaysia Development Berhad
ACMP	ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APT	ASEAN Plus Three
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BN	Barisan Nasional
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRF	Belt and Road Forum
CCCC	Communication Construction Company Ltd
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CDB	China Development Bank
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRRC	China Railway Rolling Stock Corporation
DFTZ	Digital Free Trade Zone
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ECRL	East Coast Rail Link
EDTP	Electrified Double Tracking Project
EU	European Union
EV	Electric Vehicle

EXIM	Export-Import Bank of China
FDI	Foreign Direct Investments
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GWD	Great Western Development
HSR	High-Speed Rail
ICBC	Industrial and Commercial Bank of China
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	International Relations
JB	Johor Bahru
KL	Kuala Lumpur
KPE	Kuantan Port Expansion
KW(s)	Keyword(s)
MCKIP	Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MERICS	Mercator Institute for China Studies
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OBOR	One Belt One Road

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ODI	Overseas Direct Investment
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PBoC	People's Bank of China
PH	Pakatan Harapan
PN	Perikatan Nasional
RQ(s)	Research Question(s)
SCS	South China Sea
SKRL	Singapore-Kunming Rail Link
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SOEs	State-Owned Enterprises
VW	Volkswagen
UAE	United Arab Emirates
US(A)	United States (of America)

1. Introduction

Amid a shifting global landscape defined by renewed competition between Western and Eastern powers, China is leveraging geopolitical shifts—like Brexit and the 'America First' doctrine—to solidify its influence both within East Asia and across Europe. To analyze this complex reality, Garlick (2020) proposes the concept of 'complex eclecticism,' which merges multiple International Relations (IR) theories to capture the multifaceted nature of the Belt and Road's (BRI) influence. These disruptions in the established order present China with a strategic opening to assert a new vision for IR (USC Portland, 2017). Since the BRI was launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in the autumn of 2013, a rising number of investment and infrastructure projects have been added to the list. Although Europe is on the periphery of China's vast BRI map, the New Silk Road, which follows the ancient Silk Road route, strengthens ties between China and European countries (Miao, 2021).

During official visits made by Xi to Indonesia and Kazakhstan in 2013, the plan for the New Silk Road was to be prolonged into two phases, i.e., the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the overland Silk Road Economic Belt. These two would form a single belt, the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR), which would eventually create the Belt and Road Initiative. The vision possessed by Xi encompasses the creation of a massive network of streamlined border crossings, highways, energy pipelines, and railways through the northern mountainous regions of former Soviet regions and south through the entire region of Southeast Asia (Dollar, 2015). According to information provided by the Asian Development Bank, the entire region has had an \$80 billion infrastructure financial shortfall (Asian Development Bank, 2017, p. 46).

In a report written for the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) by Andrew Chatzky and James McBride (2020), it is apparent that China's BRI is one of the most determined projects in infrastructure that has ever been conceived. According to the Chinese government, the initiative benefits all partners from Europe to East Asia. Several scholarly analysts, however, have often referred to the project as one of the few unsettling extensions of the nation's rise in power and might be a Trojan horse in the nation's rise to old power.

China's Belt and Road Initiative, as official discourses in Asia indicate, has grown into an attractive opportunity for East Asian administrations. They see it as in line with the urgent need for social and economic progress and the necessity to retain international collaboration options. The BRI agenda has been interwoven into the language of growth by political elites, who deliberately push the notion of the BRI's 'conjugation' with local development objectives (Danilovich, 2020, p. 295).

In addition to the tangible infrastructure, the CFR also notes that China intends to expand globally by building about 50 special economic zones in other countries, which will have models

similar to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone that was initiated in the 1980s during the economic reforms presided over by Deng Xiaoping.

Furthermore, Xi also announced plans to ensure that the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road continued to expand. To ensure that the expansions in the maritime traffic in trade were accommodated, China also already invested in developing the ports along the Indian Ocean from different parts of Europe to East Africa and to Southeast Asia. More specifically, Figure 1 below details crucial sea and land corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative. It is a simplified version, excluding Latin America and Oceania which are also officially part of the BRI.



Figure 1. China's simplified map of Belt and Road Initiative. (Source: Chinese Government, 2020, as cited in Fox News Channel, 2020).

For this research, the first East Asian actor was defined as Malaysia. Examining the Malaysian position on the BRI and how its relationship with China develops is an important research task. Malaysia is regarded as a major commerce and investment hub in Southeast Asia today. Notably, Malaysia, alongside other regional nations, played a leading role in establishing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which took effect on January 1, 2022, further cementing its influence in the region (Kamal, 2022). Moreover, it uses a 'hedging' strategy toward the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), reaping benefits from both powers (Gerstl, 2020, p. 120). Being, therefore, one of the vital Chinese partners, as well as one of the key European Union (EU) trading partners, Malaysia could obtain additional options to develop its infrastructure and create new trade opportunities

via the BRI. Still, diplomatic relations and export-friendly policies are also vital in improving Malaysia's trade balance with China and its partners (Woan-Lin et al., 2018, p. 267).

The second actor, Germany, was selected primarily due to its centrality and significant voice in the EU. For instance, in 1994, the European Commission published an Asia strategy similar to Germany's 1993 plan, in which it concentrated on strengthening economic ties and focusing intensely on China (Hemminga, 2020). In terms of "shaping the international order," it not only seeks peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific via ensuring the global rules-based order but also concentrates its interest on the economic ties primarily with China, aiming to make them more transparent and strengthening the respect for the international trade order (Federal Government of Germany, 2020). The nation also focuses on the "expansion of German and European connections with China" in areas that benefit both parties, such as trade, investment, connectivity, and climate policy (Stelzenmüller et al., 2021, p. 5). For instance, the China-Europe Railway Express is currently among the most productive projects in China-German BRI cooperation. Since the successful launch of the first China-Europe train in March 2011, Germany has been the China-Europe Railway Express' most significant destination.

This Master's Thesis aims to compare and contrast the official political stance on the BRI and the political discourses in Malaysia and Germany. For this purpose, an analysis of the primary document, "The Vision and Proposed Actions on the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road and the jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt," released by China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in 2015, is required. This analysis is going to be complemented with the help of other official statements from the Chinese government, as well as speeches of and media interviews with Chinese leaders. Furthermore, media interviews with decision-makers in Malaysia and Germany will be analyzed to determine the extent to which the primary objectives of China's BRI have been achieved and to answer the main Research Question (RQ): *How and why has the perception of the BRI by the governments of Malaysia and Germany changed and developed since 2013?* and additional RQs listed below.

1.1 Research Questions

Different nations have often viewed the project as one of the most unsettling extensions of the rising power of the government of China in IR. As the costs of the projects skyrocketed between 2013 and 2022, opposition to the BRI grew in some nations. Some of them, such as the US, view the BRI project as a Trojan horse for China's military expansion and regional development. Notably, under the Trump 1.0 administration, the CFR notes that alarm was raised over the BRI. Still, the US government struggled to offer an alternative economic or infrastructure vision that could be made more appealing to other state governments. Academically, since first mentioned by Xi Jinping, the idea of the BRI has piqued scholarly interest worldwide. Building on the vast secondary literature and through the

prism of official statements, such as interviews and publications – means of discourse on the BRI – this Master’s Thesis seeks to compare Germany’s and Malaysia’s perceptions of the BRI, as well as the degree to which China’s official statements and aims of the BRI correspond with these perceptions.

The main RQ is:

How and why has the perception of the BRI by the governments of Malaysia and Germany changed and developed since 2013?

Additional follow-up questions are:

1. Which narratives dominate in each discourse?
2. How have these narratives evolved since the launch of the BRI in 2013?
3. To what extent does China’s vision, reflected in the official five key priorities described in the National Development and Reform Commission (2015), correspond with the perceptions of Malaysia and Germany?

1.2 Structure

The thesis is divided into eight main chapters that sequentially guide the reader through the chosen research topic, relevant theoretical foundation, methodological approach and design, empirical findings and conclusions regarding the perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative from the perspectives of the Malaysian and German governments between 2013 and 2022.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter presents the research topic and contextualises it as the BRI to be a geopolitical and economic project launched by China since 2013. The opening chapter situates the research within the larger geopolitical transformations in play with the Belt and Road Initiative. It establishes the research focus, formulates the main and subsidiary research questions, and identifies the academic relevance of the thesis.

Chapter 2: China’s Belt and Road Initiative

This chapter highlights the current state of academic debates on the BRI, assessing its geopolitical, economic and diplomatic implications. It then provides an extensive background on the BRI, including its development history, motives, and official Chinese policy goals. In addition, it elaborates on the geopolitical and economic implications of the BRI and analyzes China’s officially stated aims through strategic framing, with a special focus on the key terminology used within Chinese government discourse.

Chapter 3: *Analytical Framework*

This chapter serves as the theoretical framework of the study. It introduces *Constructivism* as the theoretical framework, focusing on the significance of discourse in constructing notions of the nation. The chapter also examines *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) as the main methodological tool to understand governmental narratives on the BRI in Malaysia and Germany. This analytical framework ultimately establishes the foundation for understanding the processes through which governments create, legitimize, and reshape their views on the BRI over time.

Chapter 4: *Research Methodology*

This chapter describes the research design, approaches to data collection, and data analysis. It describes the selecting process of the speeches, official statements, and policy documents for the analysis. It includes the outline of the keyword analysis strategy comparing the discourse of Malaysian and German authorities with the Chinese government's vision of the BRI.

Chapter 5: *Perspectives of the Malaysian and German governments*

The empirical findings are presented and discussed in this chapter, investigating the changing understandings of BRI among Malaysian and German governments representatives. It consists of two major parts:

- Malaysia: This section examines Malaysia's approach to the BRI over multiple administrations, from early enthusiasm to recalibrations under successive governments. It traces how Malaysia's domestic political landscape and economic interests shaped its stance on the BRI.
- Germany: This section examines Germany's approach towards the BRI over the course of Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz's Chancellorships. It analyzes how Germany navigates between the perceived benefits of economic cooperation with China and concerns about geopolitical risk, European strategic autonomy, and security-related issues.

Chapter 6: *Discussion*

The discussion combines the empirical findings, reconnecting them to the theoretical framework. It juxtaposes Malaysian and German narratives on BRI, identifying salient similarities and divergences in their perceptions. Moreover, it assesses the extent to which these perceptions correspond with, or differ from, the official discourse of China as articulated in the NDRC-2015 document.

Chapter 7: *Conclusion*

The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the study and reflects on their broader implications for international relations and economic diplomacy. This chapter turns to the research questions, discusses the study's contribution to the literature on perceptions of BRI, and outlines the areas for future research.

Chapter 8: *Bibliography and Appendices*

This chapter contains all references cited throughout the research, as well as some supplementary materials like the data on investments in China and construction contracts in relation to the BRI.

2. China's Belt and Road Initiative

2.1 State of the Art

There is little unanimity about China's rise. East Asia is at the heart of China's emergence since it is home to both China's most extensive socio-political and economic contacts as well as its most significant power confrontations. China's behavior in this region serves as a barometer for how it will behave in other parts of the globe. The East Asian countries provide an important proving ground and variable layout for Beijing's foreign policy strategy. As a result, it is figuring out its aspirations as a regional power (Gerstl & Wallenböck, 2021). Simultaneously, China realizes that it needs to gain more strength by finding partners in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), with investment being the primary way to achieve political goals via economic means (Yan, 2019, p. 22). This region is a beachhead for China's economic diplomacy, since infrastructure construction is the key to building up its own power (Garlick, 2020). Both East Asia and CEE reflect broader changes in the global balance of power, with clashing narratives of economic cooperation, security, and political sway shaping their paths.

From the initial enthusiastic welcome of China's Belt and Road Initiative, Malaysia's reevaluation has shifted to a more cautious recalibration. Malaysia under the guidance of Prime Minister Najib Razak pursued BRI projects like the East Cost Rail Link (ECRL) and Malacca Gateway, illustrating a strong economic bond with China (Gerstl, 2023). However later, the administration of Mahathir Mohamad expressed concerns over financial sustainability and geopolitical risks, calling several agreements as "neo-colonialism" and renegotiating key contracts to lower the debt exposure (Garlick, 2020). Although Malaysia continues to hedge — the competing economic benefits and concerns of strategic autonomy, especially as a result of China's assertive move over the South China Sea (Razalli et al., 2020) — this is not without a strike to get some benefits.

Beyond Asia, part of China's success can be attributed to the sheer scale of its coordinated public diplomacy operations and the absence of a coherent European viewpoint during the investigation phase (Turcsanyi and Kachlikova, 2020, p. 65). When China launched a "charm offensive" with easy-to-understand punchlines, European politicians were caught off guard by the initiative's magnitude (Kurlantzick, 2018, p. 221). Germany initially embraced Chinese investments as mutually advantageous, especially in logistics hubs such as Hamburg and Duisburg (Ciesielska-Klikowska, 2018). Nevertheless, rising concerns about economic asymmetry, national security and Chinese acquisitions of critical German high-tech firms like Kuka Robotics prompted Berlin to expand investment screening and call for a more concerted European response to China's economic windfall (Cai & Efstathopoulos, 2023).

The ramifications of the BRI and China's rise in international affairs are causing substantial division among European countries and even a "shift from a rather positive to a cautious attitude among the European Union's leaders" (Miao, 2021, p. 162). Germany's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific is meant to support the liberal order's values, as well as the political and territorial status quo, in collaboration with regional nations that it has recognized as vital allies (Ulatowski, 2022, p. 389). For decades, the expression "Wandel durch Handel," or "change through trade," has characterized Berlin's approach to Beijing (Barkin, 2020). Given that the primary goal of Chinese investment in Germany is to gain access to technology and know-how, the German government's response to the BRI is shaped by this focus (Družbacká and Kittová, 2021, p. 6).

The modern-day world is often presented via a prism of two facets, which are mutually exclusive and concurrent, i.e., globalization and regionalization. These two elements have a tendency to permeate continually, which highlights that the multipolar global domain is seemingly a simultaneous collection of units that are interpenetrating, cooperating, and integrating, whose symbiosis is based on the modern world's IR and foreign policies, but other non-state actors, such as non-governmental organizations (representing citizens) and multinational companies, often influence foreign policies and IR. At the time of writing, Sundelius (2019, p. 156) and Neack (2018, p. 17) laid the basis for the liberal paradigm relating to the IR theory. The world centered on the state where countries operate as critical stakeholders is often retired by the multi-centric domain, which seems to contain different non-state and state actors.

It is also arguable that the relationship between society and the state is essential for the activities conducted by the state within the international arena. In every state, there are different institutions, interests, and views that are shared by different professional or particular social groups and the public that influence how states behave towards shaping preferences. On the other hand, these state preferences can be defined as fundamental social goals that underlie any state activity in the internal scene undertaken by different national governments. In particular, IR is founded on how these preferences are configured. According to sentiments shared by Brummer et al. (2019, p. 54), the liberal examination of foreign policies involves different vigorous intermediary institutions, such as business associations, NGOs, and universities, being employed as instruments to help distribute social interests and social values and ensure that they are transferred to the political system, which when done in line with institutional opportunities provides to participate in the national government.

Having said so, it is justified to perceive today's world system as a battle between competing notions of how the international order should develop and what place countries take in the new global order. For example, the visions in the US, Europe, and China differ significantly, as they are influenced by their respective history and culture, as well as political, economic, security, and regional factors (Garlick, 2020, p. 15). Rousseau (2006) defined

realism and liberalism as the two poles toward which individuals can orientate themselves when perceiving the international system. Many liberals perceive China's rising engagement in international organizations as evidence of the global order's growing integration. China's rise is seen by realists as a risk to the international order. For example, according to Mearsheimer (2010, p. 385), China will strive to dominate the Asian region to secure resources and, thus, security; as China advances, it will seek to prevent other powerful governments from interfering with its strength and resource acquisition.

In that case, Nye (2004, p. 45) adheres to 'liberal realism.' Such a move is made because pure realism is not enough. Since China's entry into the international arena in the early twenty-first century, the Anglophone IR literature has debated whether China is a "revisionist" or "status quo" power concerning the existing "liberal international order" (see Buzan 2010, Stephen and Skidmore 2019, p. 77). According to Callahan (2016), Beijing is constructing a 'new regional order' with the BRI's new rules and institutions, therefore tying individual countries into a Sino-centric 'community of shared destiny' via "revisionist" means. However, to achieve this aim, as suggested by Deborah Larson (2020, p. 177), a state should achieve the so-called 'humane authority.' Such a position should not only be completed by the economic enrichment of its allies, creating a win-win atmosphere, but also by maintaining 'mutual credibility,' or a mutual thrust, adopting International norms, and adhering to the "status quo" (Li et al., 2012, p. 101). Li et al. (2009, p. 19) and Nye (2021) recommend China provide more leeway to its civil society skills and possibly prevent territorial conflicts with its neighbors, which hampered its "soft power" (Nye, 2021, p. 200).

According to Thomas Cieslik (2011, p. 101), China's current soft power strategy lacks a contemporary moral appeal, making it unsustainable in the struggle with the US to inspire the vision of a free and prosperous world. In this critique, the author identifies the urge to be more attentive to the narratives and discourses that underpin the strategies of IR and foreign policies. Post-structuralists have argued that there was a need for an IR perspective that theorized foreign policy as a discursive practice and used those theories to produce a critical analysis of how states and international institutions construct their foreign policies, as well as their own and others' identities. Thereby, language is construed as a political power by post-structuralists since it is via discourse that subjects, objects, actors, and identities are formed. To put it differently, discourse analysis aims to offer a "road map" that depicts the major foreign policy viewpoints and the representations that support them as accurately as feasible (Hansen, 2012, p. 100).

In her *Understanding the soft power of China's Belt and Road Initiative through a discourse analysis in Europe*, Julie Miao (2021) did not contemplate to investigate and compare the changing discourse on China's rise within a particular country in great depth but provides a useful comparative analysis. Similarly, Sebastian Harnisch's (2018) interesting work on Germany's position towards China's BRI does not extend beyond Germany's BRI

discourse up to 2018. It also misses later shifts in Germany's approach to China, suggesting a need for new analysis on changing geopolitical strategies. On the other hand, Cheng-Chwee Kuik's (2021) analysis of Malaysia's BRI engagement covers the dynamics of power asymmetry and political legitimacy. However, even though it includes highlights from high-level state representatives, it does not, in fact, capture the entirety of Malaysia's discussion around the BRI and indicates a gap in the literature regarding Malaysia's paradigm of engagement with China beyond 2020.

Consequently, this study aims to bridge these gaps by examining individual narratives and policy shifts in East Asia, particularly Malaysia, and Europe, Germany, towards the BRI's and Chinese 'soft capacity' strategic accomplishment.

2.2 History and Development of the Idea

There is a considerable gap in global infrastructure on future prosperity, openness, and trade (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] Business and Finance Outlook, 2018). As such, different multilateral development banks (MDBs) are in partnership to help close such a gap. The investments in the BRI are expected to contribute about \$1 billion to global economies and infrastructure over the next decade from 2017 (OECD Business and Finance Outlook, 2018). According to Xi: "China will actively promote international cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so, we hope to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development" (Xinhua, 2017). With this statement from the president, it is apparent that the BRI project focuses officially on people-to-people connectivity, financial, trade, infrastructural, and political connections expected to help in linking scientific, cultural, and educational exchanges between nations and learn lessons from China's journey in self-development.

The BRI can be seen as an extension and deepening of China's earlier Great Western Development (GWD) strategy, which the country launched in 1999/2000. The GWD sought to mitigate economic disparities between China's prosperous coastal regions and its underdeveloped western provinces through infrastructure enhancement, resource extraction, and economic corridors connecting the west with countries-neighbours (Lai, 2002, pp. 433-435). This policy was based on the larger economic logic of inserting western China into national and global markets while at the same time alleviating regional imbalances (Lai, 2002: 436). This underpins the BRI designed to take the logic of GWD beyond the borders of China, repackaging and scaling many existing projects within a new global framework (Jones & Zeng 2019: 6-7; Olinga-Shannon et al. 2019: 4). As such, this effort is a spatial fix for China to draw in surplus capital and channel industrial capacity to investment in large-scale infrastructure across Eurasia and beyond (Olinga-Shannon et al., 2019, p. 5). Thereby, instead of being purely a new

geopolitical vision, the BRI is at most a part of China's long-term domestic development and economy restructuring plans (Jones & Zeng, 2019, pp. 7-8).

The entire idea of instituting the Silk Road Economic Belt was then introduced by Xi during a speech on 7th September 2013 in Kazakhstan. A month later, the president stated the motives of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road at the October Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Indonesia. Kazakhstan was the only nation of the "belt," and Indonesia was a symbolic state on the "road." These two were hand-picked before China announced its ambitious plan to develop the route. Again, after a month, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt became written down and crafted as part of the crucial tenets that defined the Decision of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Party Congress (He, 2020, p. 6). The blueprint laid down for economic growth by Xi after assuming leadership of the Chinese state became the national and official policy of the party. As such, the initial idea of the BRI being a Chinese strategy to create close connections with its neighbors through tight economic connections became the point of origin for the institution of the road's plan and its evolution as Xi signed it into foreign policies within the following years (He, 2020, p. 6).

Geographically, the BRI route includes the Southeast route in Asia–Indian Ocean and the southern route of China–South Asia, the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf, the Middle way of China–Central Asia–West Asia (Middle East), and the northern route of China–Central Asia–Russia–Europe (the Baltic Sea) (Brown, 2019, p. 12). Figure 2 illustrates these routes. From the infrastructural developments made within the first half-decade within which the BRI project was constructed, the priority regions of the entire project seem to be located in only six cooperative corridors in Southeast, South, and Central Asia (He, 2020, p. 7). These regions include the China-Indochina Peninsula, -Central Asia-West Asia, China-Mongolia-Russia, the Eurasian Land Bridge, Bangladesh-China India-Myanmar, and the China-Pakistan economic corridor (Li & Wang, 2018, p. 35). These regions are highlighted in Figure 3. Appendix 1 illustrates the investments made by China and the contracts in construction for each of the BRI countries by sectors between 2014 and 2018.



Figure 2. BRI routes (Source: He, 2020, p. 7).

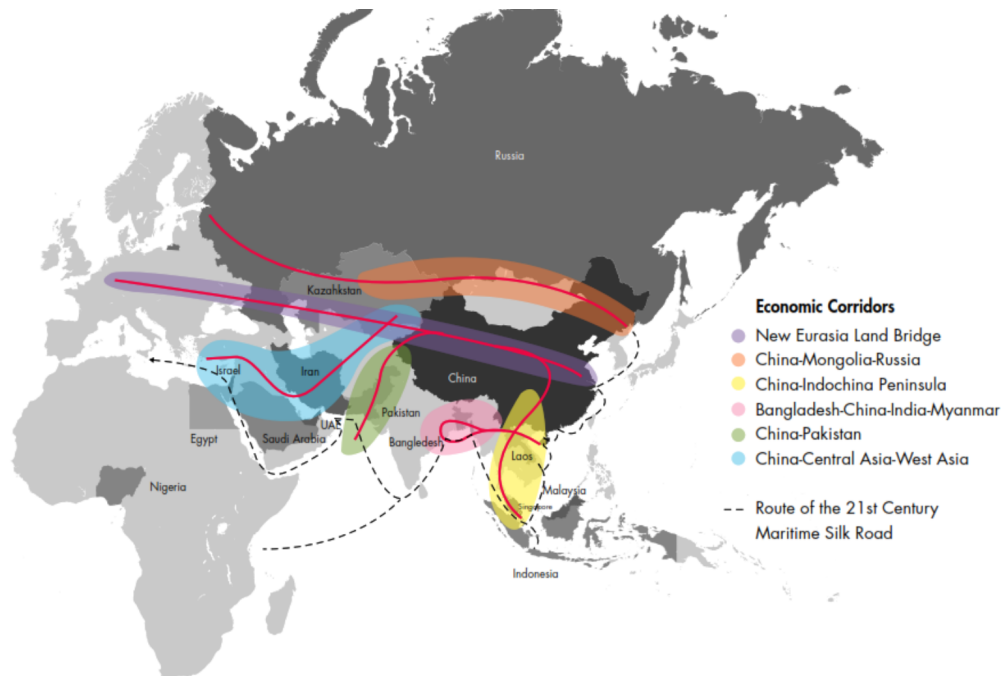


Figure 3. The 14 priority countries and the six economic corridors of the BRI (Source: He, 2020, p. 9).

The BRI is often referred to as the plan of investment heavily capitalized on by China in building a complicated network of globalized infrastructure. He (2020, p. 3) notes that the BRI network has attracted significant political, academic, and economic attention in the past years since it was suggested in 2013. So far, there have been multiple investments dominated by capital from Chinese investors in efforts to build the network in Africa, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia together and ensure, according to China's official aims, that the region enjoyed economic growth and job creation in the recipient nations. However, the project and also a bundle of domestic, economic, and foreign policy motives have received heavy criticism, such as being referred to as a "debt trap" by Western governments. In any case, in listing the nations that have agreed to cooperate with China in the development of the initiative, the Belt and Road Portal (2019) notes that a total of 131 countries have decided to commit to the entire undertaking.

2.2.1 Motivations for the BRI

The origins of the BRI can be traced down to 2012, when overcapacity in China became a huge problem for the advancement of the nation's economic and industrial structures (Xinhua, 2012). Seemingly, the nation's stimulus package that was taken in 2008 during the global financial crisis only seemed to have exacerbated the stream of concerns over excessive capacity despite also helping to maintain the nation's economic growth through the financial crisis that decimated global systems (National Business Daily, 2009). During the period between 2008 and 2012, a plan was developed, which was an investment plan for the entire globe that was expected to help boost world economies and take a leading front in the investment of infrastructure in developing nations while offering viable solutions to the Chinese overcapacity experienced domestically (He, 2020, p. 3). Leading Chinese politicians ended up listing overcapacity as a priority for restructuring different economic and strategic models during the initial Central Economic Work Conference held in December 2012 (Brødsgaard, 2017, p. 156).

In this case, the belief in forming a Chinese version of the Marshall Plan started gaining momentum after combination with different strategic alterations in the country's opening-up and foreign investment policies alongside other current domestic projects to develop the nation at the time (He, 2020, p. 3). All concerns over domestic growth and national security were combined into one document, the Western Development Strategy, and suggested that the country needed to match the West to ensure that both concerns were addressed in the present and the future (Feng and Liang, 2019, p. 14). Reforms and development were as crucial in China since 1978 as it opened itself up to other advanced economies to help gain access to other export markets, investment platforms, and technologies (He, 2020, p. 4). Notably, when the country opened up economically and strategically towards its borders in the West, such a revolutionary strategy helped in altering the nation's economic policy and strategy globally, helping it to become the second largest economy globally in 2010, having intense capital and capacity.

Such an opening-up policy helped the country in accessing other regions located in Southeast, South, and Central Asia, which aligned with the nation's goals captured in the Western Development Strategy, i.e., "the good neighbor" foreign policies and making outward investments (Feng and Liang, 2019, p. 14). Announced in 1999, the Western Development Strategy's performance only started being witnessed after the top leaders in the nation began pushing its capacity to ensure that even the remotest regions also caught up economically with the coastal areas that were substantially more developed compared to their counterparts. The advancement in the other rural areas had not been so impressive (Feng and Liang, 2019, p. 14). Under such altered situations, the programs fostering Western development were resurrected to help advance an all-around policy and help in becoming the domestic component in promoting the new Silk Road plans that were intended for China's Western region, which had lagged behind the rest of the nation (Feng and Liang, 2019, p. 14). Such a solution would correct the imbalance in the region's economic development.

The Chinese BRI also accounts for all efforts laid in place to foster national and energy-supplying security in the country (He, 2020, p. 4). Besides, the government has looked forward to maintaining and guaranteeing gas and oil supply security in the Xinjiang region from Central Asia, which have been two of the most crucial policies (Dunford and Liu, 2019, p. 152). Since 2009, the security of the Xinjiang region has often deteriorated, and there has been growing radicalization and national divisions between the population in the area. Human rights violations such as freedom of religion and freedom of expression are highly contested issues in the Xinjiang region, where the Uighur people, having their own culture, language, and religion, have suffered serious suppression from the Chinese government which involved forced assimilation policies, religious restriction, and large-scale human rights abuse and contributed to the instability of the region as a whole (Human Rights Watch, 2009). As such, upholding national unity and suppressing separatist movements became key components needed to ensure the success of the economic policies in Xinjiang. Between April and June 2013, there were a series of violent attacks in the region (Xinjiang) before the new Silk Road was proposed by Xi three months later in Kazakhstan in September 2013.

The planning of the BRI was anticipated to help integrate different elements of energy, trade, and investments into one project that met the goals of security and stability in the area. The Western Development Strategy encompasses features that can help address stability and security in the Xinjiang region via economic growth and investments made in infrastructure (Rolland, 2017). Also, the planning of the Silk Road overlaps several vital energy pipelines and routes that will help in guaranteeing the energy supply from China to Central Asia, i.e., Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (Clarke, 2017, p. 75). Since the Xinjiang region seems to share its geographical borders with other countries in Central Asia, it has become a crucial avenue to help guarantee smooth operations of the energy transport and pipeline routes that could be used to help ship gas and oil into the nation of China. Slowly, the Chinese version of the Marshall Plan on an international scale was not built in a vacuum nor lacked a foundation (Huang, 2020, pp. 472-

473). However, it was based on the rapidly increased investments in energy in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. It was founded on a "going-out" strategy based on a solid foundation since the inception of the twenty-first century (Syed & Ying, 2019). This could be referred to as the second version of the outward strategy in investments.

Comparison of China's Belt and Road Initiative to the Marshall Plan is essential for understanding intentions and meanings. The Marshall Plan was developed to restore the war-destroyed economies in Europe after World War II and contain the spread of communism (Syed & Ying, 2019, p. 14), while China's BRI is a global infrastructure initiative in contemporary times that will span over 150 countries in the world (Nedopil, 2023). While the Marshall Plan was a project aimed at instilling democratic principles and market-based reforms, the BRI revolves around infrastructure networks for transport and trade corridors. Unlike the Marshall Plan, which primarily used US government funding, the BRI essentially uses financing from Chinese state-owned enterprises, banks, and financial institutions. Despite this, both initiatives reflect the geopolitical aspirations of their respective eras and place massive emphasis on economic development to foster global stability (Fallon 2015, p. 17).

Accordingly, the ideology of having a new Silk Road is thought of as having been an adjustment made to the grand approach made by China in foreign policies to respond to the US "pivot to Asia" policy (Swaine, 2015, p. 8). In that case, the US had initially made propositions to have a Silk Road for Central Asia in the fall of 2011, and Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State at the time, had entirely made proposals and advocated actively for the US version of the plan of the Silk Road initiative (Clinton, 2011). Given the pressure from different policy-makers in the US pivotal program to China and the ambition to ensure partnership between Trans-Pacific nations, policy-makers in the Chinese region were forced to figure out ways to immediately and strategically respond. That said, different scholars were invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help discuss how China would react to the previous American-based 2012 Silk Road plans (He, 2020, p. 5).

In the end, there was a substantial adjustment to the foreign policy in China regarding how more attention could be devoted to its peripheral diplomacies and ensure they were able to construct the vision put forward by Xi as a diplomacy effort in the community with its neighbors across Southeast, South, and Central Asia (Zeng, 2017, p. 66). Such diplomacy efforts were cited as having motivated and inspired proposals to construct the new Silk Road (Huang, 2020, pp. 466-470). As such, it should not be taken as a surprise that Xi made proposals for the new Silk Road plan between September and October of 2013 and firmly ensured the convention of the Chinese Communist Party's initial meeting on peripheral diplomacy towards the late phase of October 2013 (Swaine, 2015, p. 2). In return, such adjustments showcased the president's strategy for cooperation amongst China's neighbors in Asia, which was taken as a step that would help forge a community in Asia based on connections to cultural exchanges, policy coordination, currency, trade, and infrastructure. Such a pivot in the policy was intended to help

ease or smoothen worries and fears from neighboring communities about the rise of China and, in return, foster integration with other neighbors at the regional level.

With all factors delicately and carefully considered, proposing the new Silk Road plan highlighted a substantial increase in fostering peripheral diplomacy in the nation's foreign policies and encompassed a vital aspect of its growth strategy in domestic economies (Summers, 2016, p. 1631, 1635). Eventually, the plan to institute the new Silk Road in the country evolved to become a notable policy in foreign economics and a grand strategy that helped connect the region. In the years following 2015, multiple other elements were included in the visions initially proposed in the Silk Road planning (Callahan, 2016, p. 44). Between 2013 and 2015, there was considerable evolution in the initial version presented by the Chinese as a mimic of the Marshall Plan vastly changed into Xi's grand plan for outward investments to help in addressing national security and economic growth in the country (Swaine, 2015, p. 6).

2.2.2 Policy-Making Process for the BRI

On 6th November 2014, there was a meeting set up by the Central Leading Group on Financial and Economic Affairs on the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt. Establishing the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was a vital part of the plans to be implemented that were set up at the meeting (Gong, 2018, p. 19). Officially, this meeting was not called the 'Silk Road' but rather the 'One Belt, One Road,' signaling that the BRI had evolved into an ambitious national strategy encompassing foreign policy goals and economic cooperation among countries along the Belt and Road routes (Rolland, 2017, p. 32). At the meeting, the AIIB was defined by Xi as the most stable multilateral banking institution that will help in financing the nations which the BRI will pass through and provide direct financial support for China to ensure the construction of the BRI (Zhu, 2016, p. 22). Later, it was realized that establishing the two institutions was more suitable for financing the BRI project (Gong, 2018, p. 22). However, these two institutions would only account for a small segment of other financial resources that would be channeled towards the support of the BRI project. However, they were the most symbolic forms of finances available for the project (He, 2020, p. 7). Later on, the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM) and the China Development Bank (CDB) turned into the most substantial sources of financing for the BRI projects (Yu, 2017, p. 356). Still, they also received tremendous support from other state-owned big commercial banking institutions, such as the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and the Bank of China (Clarke, 2017, p. 45).

The following year, the party's executive agency was established, and the BRI road map was officially adopted. More specifically, on 1st February 2015, the institution of the BRI's Central Leading Group for Advancing the Development was formally declared (Swaine, 2015, p. 6, 18). It was led by Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli and other executive members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) group charged with helping in the implementation of the BRI

through offering aid as the mechanisms that coordinated the entire construction process (Summers, 2016, p. 1639). At the NDRC, the leading group's office was instituted alongside four other working institutions. On 28th March 2015, through the authorization of the State Council, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the NDRC made an announcement that saw the installation of the authorized road map of the official BRI road map: the vision and actions proposed to be outlined in line with the specifications made for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt (Summers, 2016, p. 1631, 1633).

More importantly, the top priorities for conducting such an undertaking in capacity cooperation and infrastructure connectivity are also aligned with directions made for outward-based investment options as clearly defined by the Guiding Opinions on Further Directing and Regulating the Direction of Overseas Investment that was issued jointly in August 2017 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Bank of China (PBoC), the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), and the NDRC (Rizzi, 2020, p. 100). In this case, infrastructure connectivity encompasses air, sea-based, land-based passages, grand projects in the pipeline, port and rail-based networks, and information highways. Together, these components have often been treated as a fundamental and core aspect of the BRI undertaking.

Later, 2016 saw the continued integration of the BRI plan into the national blueprint of economic development in China. Notably, the BRI plan was denoted as the leading program in China's new vision operational opening-up policy for the region as outlined in its five-year plan between 2016 and 2020 (Summers, 2016, pp. 1637-1638). One of the chapters in the project exclusively focused on the BRI. In May 2017, the BRI plan was officially penned down in the Communist Party's constitution at its nineteenth congress (He, 2017, p. 7). Such an action showcased that the BRI plan became one of the most vital policies in the long-term plan for the party, and this showed that politically, the plan would be implemented even after Xi exited power. As the government was reshuffled in March 2018, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (a ministerial-level agency) was instituted, and the implementation of the BRI plan was coined as one of the grand plans for global governance and a crucial component in the nation's efforts to augment international development (Yu, 2017, p. 354).

2.2.3 Financing the BRI

The initial financing for the BRI was received from different state-owned banks in China (He, 2020, p. 7). In that case, He (2017, p. 8) opines that commercial and policy banking institutions owned by the state are the most outstanding investors financing the BRI project and account for close to 81% of the total funding needed to ascertain the productive completion of the BRI project in the country. Besides, they provide the most substantial capital for the project and issue the most bonds alongside other sponsored bilateral funds. A breakdown of this financing supplied by different institutions is provided in Figure 3. In that case, the two state-

owned policy banks that provide the most outstanding funding include the Exim Bank of China and the CDB, which account for about 45% of the total value of the project (He, 2020, p. 7). CDB provides the most significant funding of the two, accounting for about 26% of the total BRI financing. On the other hand, the Exim Bank of China only accounts for about 19% of the financing value for The BRI in the country (He, 2020, p. 7). Figure 5 depicts a closer breakdown of these figures. The other state-owned commercial banks that have also largely contributed to the construction of the BRI project include the Agricultural Bank of China, China Construction Bank (CCB), the Bank of China, and the ICBC. The ICBC and the Bank of China are responsible for providing the most significant credit lines. (He, 2020, p. 7)

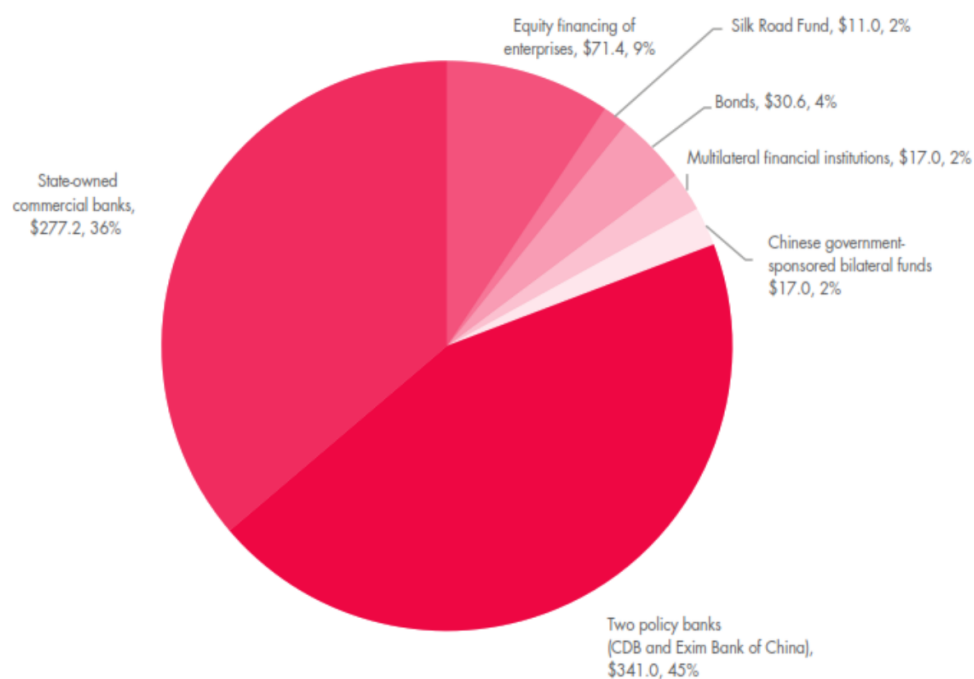


Figure 4. Financing for the BRI project provided by different stakeholders (source: He, 2020, p. 16).

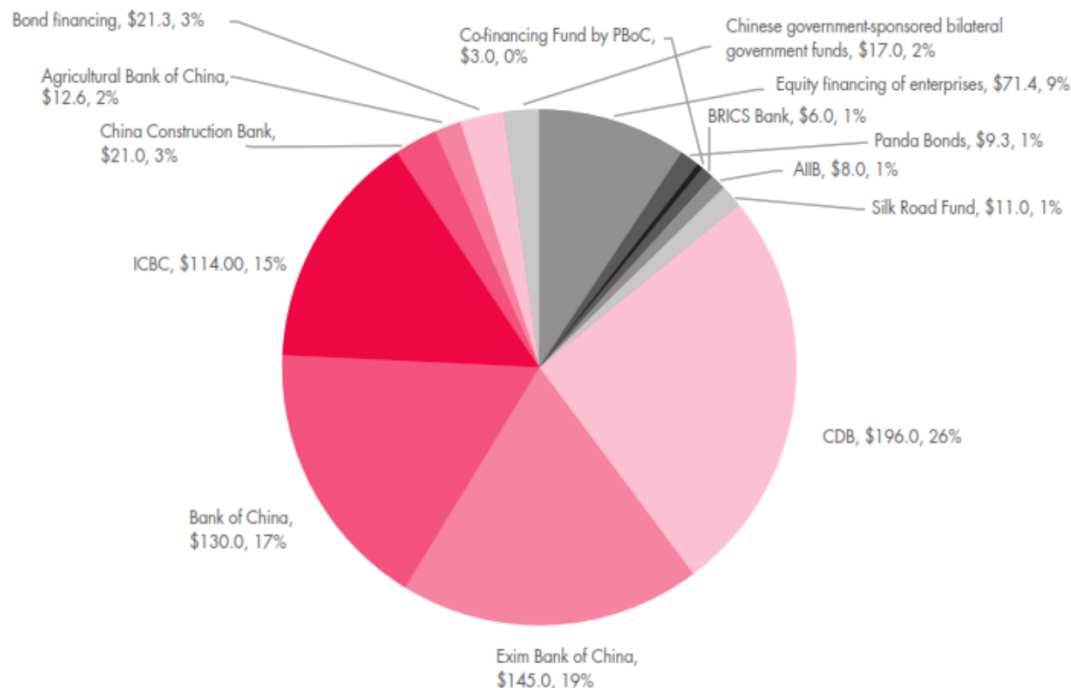


Figure 5. BRI funding by different sources (Source: He, 2020, p. 17).

The second source of funding for the BRI project includes government-owned investment funding. In that case, the Silk Road Fund was instituted by the government in China in 2014 as a fund owned by the state and would exclusively focus on investing in the BRI. The total assets were worth \$40 billion, and the Chinese foreign reserve was crucial for providing about 65% of the required amount (He, 2020, p. 17; Rolland, 2017, pp. 45-46). China's State Administration of Foreign Exchange owned Buttonwood Investment Holding Co. Ltd., a vital player in supplying the 65% value (He, 2020, p. 18). The nation's sovereign wealth fund, through the China Investment Corporation, has an ownership stake of about 15% of the Silk Road Fund via a subsidiary. On the other hand, the Exim Bank of China is responsible for about 15% of such ownership, and the additional 5% of ownership is accounted for by the CDB (He, 2020, p. 17). The Chinese and other governments also sponsor various multilateral and bilateral funds in a coordinated fashion. However, they are only jointly funded on paper, but the state-owned banks in China are the substantial funders or sponsors behind them (Rolland, 2017, pp. 48-50). Besides, some were instituted before the BRI was conceived or initiated but have played a crucial role in the initiative since the BRI was conceived. Local Silk Roads have also been sponsored by provincial governments in China. However, compared to other investments, the amount provided by these governments is not significant. It does not account for much, and only a portion has helped in the construction so far.

The third source of funding for the project includes multilateral financial institutions. For instance, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) Development Bank (today referred to as the New Development Bank or the NDB) and the AIIB are two of the most crucial

multilateral development banks initiated by China (He, 2020, p. 17). These institutions were exclusively created to offer financial support for constructing the BRI network. Therefore, they provide loans for regions and countries along the Belt and Road. The existing geographical overlapping can be used to justify the inclusion of such multilateral banking institutions in financing the BRI project. AIIB (2019) notes that it has provided funding for the BRI project in amounts close to \$7.5 billion by the end of 2019, which includes the loans and lending to finance different projects outside the scope of Asia. In addition, there has been cooperation between the members of the World Bank Group (such as the International Finance Corporation), the Inter-American Development Bank, the African Development Bank, and the PBoC. By 2024, AIIB's funding initiatives have grown, reaffirming its role in global infrastructure development. Together with the Islamic Development Bank, it has pledged as much as \$1.5 billion for Mission 300, Africa's electrification initiative (Miriri, 2025). It also approved \$400 million for the Hubei Global Air Cargo Logistics Project in China, which is focused on trade connectivity (AIIB, 2024a). The bank also updated its Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the World Bank to enhance cooperation on infrastructure, climate change, and biodiversity (AIIB, 2024b).

The final form of financing provided to the BRI is bond financing. Notably, since 2015, multiple financial enterprises and institutions have provided bonds to help fund BRI projects. However, He (2017) still notes that the amount of money supplied through bond financing is insignificant to the loan amounts offered by financial cooperatives and banking institutions, such as the CBD (He, 2020, p. 10). The Bank of China has issued bonds worth \$15 billion, and the Agriculture Bank of China issued a loan of \$1 billion, termed the green bill (He, 2020, p. 20). However, the number of banks that have issued other bonds is not considerable. Altogether, the bonds issued by different state-owned banks in China totaled about \$21 billion (He, 2020, p. 20). However, if other bonds issued by the CDB and the Exim bank are also calculated, the total is \$50 billion (He, 2020, p. 20).

As for investments in the BRI countries, the Chinese government and its related agencies often offer high levels of communication regarding policies with governments in countries receiving the aid to smoothen the investment process altogether. Such a model has been inherited and borrowed from the nation's long-standing domestic practices in investments driven by the state. Basically, this approach denotes an upper-level route in contrast to one functioning at the grass root level, a way of investment that is oriented on the market, which might often result in different risks and problems, such as lacking participation by international investors and private sectors, a low degree of localization, low efficiency in the economy, corruption, and lack of transparency (Belt and Road Forum, 2023, p. 16).

2.2.4 ODI and Investments in BRI Construction Contracts

The two significant investments made by China in the BRI countries include construction and outward direct investments (ODI). Appendix 2 illustrates the contracts in construction and

ODI for the top ten countries in the BRI project between 2014 and 2018. According to statistics provided by He (2020, p. 10), the value of investments made by China in the BRI countries between 2013 and 2018 is close to \$574 billion. Both construction contracts and ODI had increased within the first five years of the BRI establishment compared to the previous years. China's ODI stock between 2014 and 2018 accounted for more than 50% of its total ODI in these countries by 2017, which indicated that the nation's ODI in these BRI nations since 2014 has been quite humongous in the rate of growth and the amount (He, 2020, p. 10).

Most of the ODI from China was directed to its priority nations, such as Singapore, Russia, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Zhang (2017, p. 10) notes that Southeast Asia received the most funding and China's ODI compared to Central and South Asia. Singapore has obtained the most significant number of ODI among BRI states. The business and leasing industry attracted more BRI investments in Singapore, likely due to its role as a transfer station for investments to other regions. Excluding transferred investments, Singapore attracted considerable Chinese ODI between 2014 and 2018, primarily in real estate, finance, technology, online shopping, and logistics (AEI and Heritage Foundation, 2024).

China's official narrative suggests significant achievements within the BRI's first five years, with a notable increase in accomplished turnover, value, and number of contracts. The total value of construction contracts provided by China in all BRI countries amounted to about \$488 billion between 2015 and 2018 (Zhang, Alon & Lattemann 2018, pp. 291-292). Liu (2020) notes that Nigeria, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Israel, Laos, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Russia, and Pakistan are among the top ten nations where China's investment values and construction contracts increased between 2014 and 2018 compared to 2005 to 2013, prior to the BRI implementation (Liu, 2020, p. 8). Nine of these ten nations have been allocated to the six economic corridors cooperating with the BRI project. Pakistan, in particular, received the most significant investment, which tripled within the BRI's first five years compared to the previous eight years (He, 2020, p. 21; Jamali, Westcott & Verma, 2024, p. 30). In Israel and Bangladesh, investments in construction contracts and Chinese investments increased by almost six times compared to 2005 to 2013 (Liu, 2020, p. 18). In Malaysia, a focus of this thesis, the total number of investments in construction contracts and other investments doubled (Swaine, 2015, p. 27). Similarly, in the UAE, Singapore, and Laos, the number of investments doubled. In Indonesia, investments increased by close to 57% within the first five years compared to the previous eight years (He, 2020, p. 18). Despite China regarding Kazakhstan and Russia as priority states, investments and construction contracts in these nations did not increase significantly compared to the previous eight years, possibly due to significant investments already made before the BRI initiation in 2013. Appendix 3 shows the investments in China and the contracts in construction before (2005-2013) and after (2014-2018) the BRI project in the top 15 nations.

This marks a significant turn in the Chinese BRI lending policy as explained by Xi in November 2021. Placing an emphasis on risk control and supporting smaller, more sustainable

projects, China implemented new regulations that restricted Chinese banks, lending to foreigners, among which reduced large loans for subjecting physical infrastructure (Lui, 2024). During 2013-2017, Chinese banks lent an average of US\$85.4 billion worth loans each year, and the average loan size stood at US\$328 million, while OECD countries averaged at only US\$12.4 million per loan. Still, future project scales are likely to keep shrinking, following global financial shifts and increasing debt sustainability issues in developing countries (Lui, 2024).

Another side of these achievements is evident in the aspect of trade (He, 2020, p. 21). More specifically, the new volume of added goods being traded between BRI countries and China from 2014 to 2018 exceeded \$5 trillion, and the annual rate of growth exceeded 1%. In addition, the number of employment opportunities created among the BRI nations was about 244,000 (He, 2020, p. 21). There are two typical cases that highlight the success of this endeavor. First, the Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, which created more than 37,000 employment opportunities. Second, the Aktobe Oil Company, owned by the China National Petroleum Corporation, facilitated the creation of more than 30,000 employment opportunities for the locals and accounted for more than 70% of the local revenue in taxes. According to information of the State Council Information Office (2018) and another report made by the State Council Information Office (2017), the investments made by China have generated more than \$2.01 billion in tax revenues for all the BRI nations. Beyond the data posted in different official documents regarding the achievements of the BRI, it has also created additional opportunities for industries based in China in the manufacturing, telecommunications, hydro, energy, and transportation sectors. Concerning international cooperation capacity, these industrial sectors have been under multinational-owned enterprises in every industry that have substantially expanded their operations into nations located within the Belt and Road.

Xi often described cooperation at industrial levels as the chief way through which economic development and unity between China and other nations through the Belt and Road could be achieved (Wang, 2020, p. 45). In addition, he has often stressed that international cooperation on equipment and capacity manufacture needs to be fostered. By 2017, he had successfully engaged about 30 nations to ensure institutionalized collaboration regarding capacities. The capacity cooperation between Kazakhstan and China and that between the Belarus Industrial Park and China became the flagship projects in international cooperation at industrial capacity levels. Some Chinese companies that had an overcapacity, such as hydro, metal, coal, and steel, would greatly benefit from the increased international cooperation on capacity under the BRI's framework of operations, given that the majority of contracts and investments by the BRI were taken up by the transport and energy sectors (Gong, 2019, pp. 1-2). For the MoU between Kazakhstan and China on strengthening investment cooperation and capacity in 2015, agreements on capacity cooperation in glass, auto, hydro, and steel were included. One of the most successful examples of these agreements is that between the Belarus Industrial Park and China, which was the nation's typical policy in setting up a platform that could help in accelerating industrial-level agglomeration, where all sectors could come together,

converge, and then have a scaled effect on their operations (Zhang, K. 2023, pp. 228-230 and Karlis & Polemis, 2019, p. 8).

Overall, considering the significant demand experienced in other nations for the BRI project, it implies that the steel enterprises and other sectors in China relating to transport are perfectly positioned. Most analysts in China believe that the demand for steel products will continue to increase across the Belt and Road (He, 2020, p. 14). Particularly, nations located in the Middle East and the Southeast part of Asia would have such an increased demand for steel products. Thus, this sector was considered a priority, and capacity cooperation was viewed as a potential means through which structural reforms could be undertaken within the local steel sector in the Chinese domain (Gong, 2019, p. 10). In that case, the BRI was primarily projected as a project that was key to expanding overseas market domains for China's steel markets and enhancing its reputation internationally to help it improve its steel value chain across multiple regions (Juego, 2018, pp. 71-72).

2.3 Chinese Officially Stated Aims

2.3.1 Pivot Pillars of the BRI

According to "The Vision and Proposed Actions Outlined the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road and the Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt," there are five key priorities that are associated with the construction of the BRI project: **people-to-people bonds, financial integration, unimpeded trade, facilities connectivity, and coordination of policies** (NDRC, 2015). Based on the number of finances that was expected to be used by China in constructing the BRI plan, it is crucial to note that capacity cooperation and connectivity of infrastructure are treated as critical objectives in the entire undertaking. Particular focus and priority have been shifted to focusing on the transport sector (shipping, port, highway, and rail) and the energy sector (coal, oil, gas, and hydropower).

The Chinese government perceives the BRI positively and optimistically, emphasizing its potential to foster "mutual benefits" and other advantageous outcomes, as outlined in the 2015 NDRC document. This perception is rooted in key terms that consistently highlight the expected reciprocal advantages and collaborative opportunities inherent in the initiative. The document articulates the strategic vision of the BRI through terms such as "win-win cooperation," "shared development," "interconnectivity," and "inclusive growth," which collectively underscore the initiative's stated overarching goals of economic integration and regional stability.

1. *Policy Coordination*

Policy coordination aims to ensure consistent development strategies from the BRI countries in a bid to support coordination. For example, the NDRC paper of 2015 advocates extensively for intergovernmental cooperation, mechanisms for policy exchange as well as

strategic cohesion (NDRC, 2015, pp. 3-4). Bilateral and multilateral agreements may facilitate a collaborative environment, while the forum will allow for the sharing of policy experiences. Strategic cohesion integrates the national schemes into the BRI framework concurrently and advances harmony in progress (Cai, 2017, p. 12). To the NDRC view, this well-coordinated approach is core to improving projects and building long-term partnerships, strengthening the relationship for sustainable development.

2. Facilities Connectivity

Connectivity among facilities seeks to improve infrastructure networks to ensure smooth transportation and logistics functioning. In this regard, the NDRC outlines the creation of functional transportation networks, energy infrastructure, and shared technical standards among the priorities identified (NDRC, 2015, p. 5). For instance, an efficient railway, road, port, and air stations reduce transportation costs and encourage trade. Energy infrastructure ensures a sufficient supply of energy, which is a basic necessity in carrying out economic activities. Common technical standards facilitate interoperability and reduce the cost of operation (Chan, 2017, 56). The infrastructure gaps being addressed shall facilitate better connectivity and economic integration, laying a foundation for sustained development and prosperity.

3. Unimpeded Trade

Unimpeded trade aims to remove barriers, thus fostering a free economic environment. NDRC highlights the need for simplification of customs procedures, lowering of tariffs, and elimination of trade barriers (NDRC, 2015, p. 6). Simplification of customs reduces bureaucratic delays, while lowered tariffs allow for trade flow. Reciprocity market access and lowered protectionism create a level playground, which is advantageous across the board and to all countries. Investment promotion draws foreign direct investment and stimulates growth (Chaisse & Górski, 2018, pp. 376-378). According to the NDRC an open trading environment enhances economic cooperation and stability, so mutual benefits work together toward regional stability.

4. Financial Integration

Financial integration aims to back economic activities that ensure financial stability. NDRC lists among financial instruments the use of financial institutions, improvements in monetary cooperation, and development of financial markets (NDRC 2015, p. 8). The availability of institutions like AIIB ensures the availability of funding for projects. The implementation of currency swap arrangements and the use of local currency reduces exchange risks and enhances stability. This also improves access to financial services by developing local financial markets and supporting growth through development (EBRD 2016, p. 10; Rolland 2017, p. 22). Financial integration assures project viability, contributing to long-term development and stability.

5. Closer People-to-People Ties

Closer people-to-people ties foster cultural exchanges and mutual understanding. The NDRC (2015, p. 9) highlights educational and cultural initiatives, tourism promotion, and human capital development. Cultural exchange develops social cohesion and the tourism infrastructure for the economies. More excellent skills and learning occur in developed states through training, scholarships, and capacity-building programs (Chaisse & Górski, 2018, p. 12). A more robust sense of shared destiny, to the NDRC view, supports socio-economic development and cultural understanding.

6. Green and Sustainable Development

Green and sustainable development promote practices that are not harmful to the environment. NDRC emphasizes green technologies, green investment in renewable energy, and green protection of the environment. Green projects reduce negative environmental impact, while renewable energy makes the economy low in carbon. Ensuring biodiversity means guaranteeing that economic activities are carried out sustainably, and in the end, the achievement of sustainability in addressing environmental challenges will provide the economic growth of now with payback for future generations.

The BRI 2015 vision of the NDRC provides a comprehensive guideline for enhancing connectivity, trade, financial integration, policy coordination, and people-to-people linkages. It should develop a sense of win-win cooperation that propels economic growth and aims to be sustainable development (NDRC, 2015, p. 2). However, academic studies and inquiry, substantiated by empirical research, are essential for understanding the BRI's geopolitical, economic, and social dimensions and supporting global, sustainable, and inclusive development.

2.3.2 Strategic Framing: China's BRI Discourse and Key Words

The NDRC document explicitly states that "win-win cooperation" is a cornerstone of the BRI, aiming to create a framework where participating countries can mutually benefit from enhanced economic ties and infrastructural investments (NDRC, 2015, p. 2). For this, the NDRC aims to stimulate trade and investment flows, foster economic diversification, and enhance productivity across member states. This perspective is echoed in scholarly analysis, which suggests that the BRI's emphasis on mutual benefits helps to mitigate fears of economic dominance by positioning China as a partner rather than a hegemon (Cai, 2017, p. 101). Additionally, research by Rolland (2017) highlights that the BRI's cooperative framework aligns with China's broader diplomatic strategy of fostering a multipolar world order (Rolland, 2017, p. 23).

The emphasis on "shared development" further illustrates the Chinese government's commitment to promoting balanced growth by facilitating technology transfers, knowledge

sharing, and capacity building among developing countries (NDRC, 2015, p. 5). This concept is reinforced by the AIIB, which finances BRI projects and stresses the importance of inclusive development. Scholars such as Zhao (2016) argue that shared development under the BRI can lead to sustainable economic growth by addressing infrastructure gaps and boosting industrial capabilities in less developed regions (Zhao, 2016, p. 55). The World Bank also supports this view, noting that the BRI has the potential to lift millions out of poverty by enhancing connectivity and economic opportunities (World Bank, 2019).

The significance of "interconnectivity" is another critical aspect highlighted in the document, emphasizing the importance of building robust transportation, energy, and communication networks. By improving infrastructure connectivity, the BRI aims to reduce trade barriers, lower logistics costs, and increase market access, thereby driving economic growth and development (NDRC, 2015, p. 8). According to a study by the OECD, enhanced connectivity through BRI projects could significantly boost global trade, particularly by facilitating smoother and faster transport routes (OECD, 2018, p. 14). Additionally, the concept of interconnectivity is closely linked to the idea of creating economic corridors that span multiple countries, thereby fostering regional cooperation and integration (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018, p. 28).

Moreover, the term "inclusive growth" reflects the Chinese government's aspiration to ensure that the benefits of the BRI are broadly shared among all participating countries, particularly the less developed ones. It should be achieved through targeted investments in critical sectors such as healthcare, education, and sustainable development projects, which are intended to uplift communities and reduce inequality (NDRC, 2015, p. 11). Research by Huang (2016) indicates that inclusive growth is a strategic objective of the BRI to address the socio-economic disparities between and within countries, enhancing social stability and economic resilience (Huang, 2016, pp. 318-320). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also emphasizes that the BRI can play a pivotal role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth (UNDP, 2017).

Analyzing these terms in the context of the NDRC document and additional sources reveals the multifaceted rationale behind China's optimistic portrayal of the BRI. The positive framing serves to attract international support, alleviate concerns over China's rising influence, and legitimize the initiative as a global public good. By consistently emphasizing mutual benefits, cooperation, and shared prosperity, the Chinese government seeks to construct a narrative that positions the BRI as a transformative force for global development, capable of addressing pressing challenges such as poverty, underdevelopment, and infrastructure deficits. As summarized by Cai (2017), this strategic communication helps to present the BRI not only as an economic venture but also as a diplomatic tool for fostering peace and stability (Cai, 2017, p. 104).

Complementing the analysis of the NDRC (2015) document, President Xi Jinping's speeches and statements on the BRI provide further insight into the Chinese government's positive perception and strategic framing of the initiative. Xi's rhetoric consistently emphasizes themes of "win-win cooperation," "mutual benefits," "shared prosperity," and "interconnectivity," which align closely with the key terms found in the NDRC document. These speeches reinforce the narrative that the BRI is a globally beneficial endeavor aimed at fostering economic development, regional integration, and international cooperation.

On January 18, 2017, in his speech at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Xi Jinping highlighted the BRI's "win-win cooperation" and "shared development" as a core component of the BRI's objectives. He said, "The Belt and Road Initiative I put forward aims to achieve win-win and shared development" (CGTN, 2017). The phrase "win-win and shared development" highlights the commitment to mutual benefits, which goes together with the NDRC in terms of promoting collaborative and inclusive economic development.

Similarly, the theme of "inclusive growth" can be traced in the same 2017 speech, where Xi also emphasized the BRI's role in addressing global inequalities and fostering sustainable development: "The Belt and Road Initiative is rooted in the ancient Silk Road. It focuses on the Asian, European, and African continents but is open to all friends. It is an initiative for open and inclusive development" (Xi, 2017). This aligns with the NDRC's vision of the BRI as a means to uplift less developed regions through targeted investments in critical sectors such as healthcare, education, and sustainable development projects (NDRC, 2015, p. 11). Xi's emphasis on inclusivity and openness highlights the initiative's potential to bridge development gaps and promote equitable growth across diverse regions.

Later on, in a keynote speech at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017, President Xi Jinping reinforced the importance of "win-win cooperation", stating, "We should build an open platform of cooperation and uphold and grow an open world economy. Together, we can build a broad community of shared interests" (Xi, 2017). This emphasis on cooperative frameworks mirrors the NDRC's assertion that the BRI is designed to stimulate trade and investment flows, foster economic diversification, and enhance productivity across member states (NDRC, 2015, p. 2). Xi's use of the term "community of shared interests" underscores the initiative's goal of creating interconnected economies that benefit all participants, reinforcing the idea of mutual advantages and collaborative growth.

Xi also frequently uses the term "shared prosperity" in his speeches, reflecting the Chinese government's commitment to promoting balanced and inclusive growth through the BRI. On August 27, 2018, during a symposium held to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the BRI, Xi prioritized "attention to some urgent projects that benefit local people" (Xinhua News, 2018). Within the NDRC framework, projects which directly improve the lives of local

communities are paid particular attention, revealing how the BRI goals of "shared prosperity" can be applied in practice with the developmental projects improving the life quality.

Additionally, in his address at the 2019 Belt and Road Forum, Xi stated, "We should pursue common prosperity and development by promoting policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties" (Xi, 2019). This statement likewise aligns with the NDRC document's emphasis on "shared development" and highlights the initiative's multifaceted approach to fostering economic growth and regional stability through various forms of cooperation (NDRC, 2015, p. 5). The focus on "policy coordination" and "infrastructure connectivity" further echoes the document's key themes of interconnectivity and collaborative development.

Furthermore, President Xi often invokes the concept of "interconnectivity" in his speeches, underscoring its importance in the BRI's strategic framework. During his remarks at the 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Chief Executive Officers (APEC CEO) Summit, Xi stated, "We will pursue the Belt and Road Initiative as a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development" (Xi, 2018). This statement reflects the NDRC document's focus on building robust transportation, energy, and communication networks to reduce trade barriers, lower logistics costs, and increase market access (NDRC, 2015, p. 8). Xi reiterates the initiative's goal of enhancing economic integration and fostering regional cooperation by emphasizing interconnectivity, aligning with the broader objectives outlined in the NDRC document.

On October 18, 2023, President Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, elaborating on the strategic significance of the Belt and Road Initiative and its long-term commitments. He declared, "The BRI ... aims to enhance policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-people connectivity" (Xinhua, 2023), which resonates with the NDRC's emphasis on "infrastructure connectivity" as the building block of economic integration. Elaborating on the initiative's wide-ranging vision, Xi said, "We have endeavored to build a global network of connectivity ... covering the land, the ocean, the sky and the Internet" (Xinhua, 2023), thus highlighting the NDRC's goal of "interconnectivity." He also reinforced the initiative's guiding principles, saying, "The Silk Road spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit" (Xinhua, 2023), mirroring the NDRC's emphasis on "mutual benefit." Taken together these statements highlight the framing of the BRI as a transformative force in promoting broad-based global collaboration and shared prosperity.

Furthermore, Xi delineated the BRI project as "the great practice for the community of shared future for mankind" (Li & Taube 2020, p. 126). In that case, this statement was a personal confirmation by the president. That said, these actions helped to solidify the BRI as a facet of the president's vision for global governance (Huang, 2020, p. 19). The BRI started to grow into an

approach applied by China to participate in different international economic cooperation platforms, augment the models used in global governance and development, build the aspects of shared communities for humankind, and foster healthy economic globalization in multiple domains.

Analyzing these key terms in the context of President Xi Jinping's speeches and the NDRC (2015) document reveals a consistent and coherent narrative that underscores the Chinese government's positive and optimistic perception of the BRI. The alignment of themes such as "mutual benefits," "win-win cooperation," "shared prosperity," "inclusive growth," and "interconnectivity," and "infrastructure connectivity," in both Xi's rhetoric and the official document reinforces the strategic framing of the BRI as a transformative global initiative. This strategic communication is designed to attract international support, alleviate concerns over China's rising influence, and legitimize the BRI as a global public good aimed at fostering sustainable development and regional stability.

In conclusion, the positive terminology used in President Xi Jinping's speeches corresponds closely with the key terms in the NDRC (2015) document, reflecting the Chinese government's unified and strategic perception of the BRI. These consistent themes not only elucidate the vision for the initiative but also aim to enhance its appeal and legitimacy on the global stage, positioning the BRI as a catalyst for economic growth, regional integration, and international cooperation. By emphasizing mutual benefits, cooperative development, shared prosperity, inclusive growth, and interconnectivity, the Chinese government strategically frames the BRI as a transformative and globally beneficial initiative that addresses pressing developmental challenges while fostering a more interconnected and cooperative world.

In the Research Method section, a table will record the full accounting of the key terms identified in analyzing the Chinese government's perception of the BRI. The table will be an essential device for responding to and tracing whether China's BRI perception is in line with the views of the countries under consideration: Malaysia and Germany. All these key terms will be methodologically organized and displayed as follows: mutual benefits, win-win cooperation, shared prosperity, inclusive growth, and interconnectivity. This study will try to conduct a comparative analysis of how each country perceives the BRI and whether any significant divergences or convergences exist within their overall perspectives. In this regard, a structured approach will help in getting a better understanding of the dynamics shaping bilateral relations within the context of China's ambitious global infrastructure initiative.

2.3.3 Ever-Expanding Themes for the BRI

The core aims stated by China in constructing the BRI include promoting economic advancement in China and other neighboring nations that are located along the Belt and Road via connecting maritime infrastructure and land-based facilities and boosting cooperation on an

industrial level between China and these other nations (He, 2020, p. 18). By April 2017, the first BRI Forum (BRF) was conducted in Beijing (Zhang, Alon, & Lattemann, 2018, p. 322). The BRI's framework expanded to include multiple themes, reflecting China and Xi's increasing ambition across various aspects of life. This expansion introduced initiatives such as the Polar Silk Road—focusing particularly on the Arctic shipping route—the Digital Silk Road, and the Green Silk Road, all part of a philosophy aimed at fostering a community with shared visions for humanity. In that BRF meeting, the idea of the BRI being seen as the primary initiative being conducted by China while participating in the global cooperation unit, as demonstrated by Xi, was raised. He explained the three crucial tenets of how the BRI was supposed to considerably improve economic cooperation on a global scale in his initial speech that was delivered at the BRF. The second component was economic prosperity and co-development through industrial collaboration, infrastructure, and financial connectivity, which includes different connectivity in standards, rules, and policies across the globe. The last component of the entire framework entailed maintaining an open global economy via offering public goods, global governance, and motivating free trade and investments in a multilateral trade system.

Still, Xi did not provide explanations on how the adoption of the BRI was particularly supposed to help in improving global economic governance. However, he has continually advocated for the vision of attaining a system of shared growth through collaborating and discussing with other key stakeholders to ensure China's version of global governance is embraced in multiple avenues in a win-win, cooperative, and consultative manner. In March 2019, Xi was invited to speak at the China-France Forum for Global Governance speech and noted that the BRI was supposed to help enhance the concepts of international economic cooperation and multilateralism as a productive way to promote co-development and world economic growth (Wang et al., 2022, p. 56). While such enthusiasm from Xi can be used to depict the considerable focus on describing the BRI as a solution to the efforts made by China in augmenting global cooperation on economic development with an intense level of morality, the green aspect of the BRI can be assumed to have also attracted massive attention from international players within the past two years.

In the BRI's road map, sketched in 2015, several developments on green technology and low carbon emissions were mentioned. In particular, Xi advocated for sustainable, low-carbon, and green developments in the 2017 speech and made joint proposals that helped in establishing the BRI International Green Development Coalition together with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (Cuiyun and Chazhong, 2020, p. 11). Later, the Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road and the Belt and Road Ecological and Environmental Cooperation Plan was issued by the Chinese government after the BRI was conducted (Ascensão et al., 2018, p. 207). In 2019, the BRI International Green Development Coalition was established officially after the second BRF was held in Beijing, acting as a platform that will help in transferring green technology, sharing environmental knowledge, and communicating regarding different policies (Ascensão et al., 2018, p. 208). There were various state-sponsored

funds, such as China's National Green Development Fund, to invest more in green technology to be employed for the BRI.

Given the rapid speed at which the global economy has developed within the last decade, the president proposed positioning the BRI as a central pathway for innovation. That said, the Digital Silk Road at the BRI summit was meant to intensify cooperation in quantum computing, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and digital economy and help advance the development of smart cities via cloud computing and big data. Between 2019 and 2021, the NDRC's Center for International Cooperation has actively led efforts in fostering cooperation amongst different countries in the BRI, especially on the Digital Silk Road (Belt and Road Forum, 2023, p. 8, 20). By 2019, after carrying out the second BRF, China had a MoU signed with sixteen other nations on the initiative to build the Digital Silk Road. In the meantime, China seems to have advantages due to telecommunication technologies, wireless internet (5G), and internet, offering crucial infrastructures in all these domains. There are different state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that are setting global technology standards and equipment by investing in BRI nations, which is a segment of what the president highlighted as being the "connectivity in standards and rules" at the initial BRF (He, 2020, p. 21).

Overall, the strategic discourses of the BRI are not constricted to geographical restrictions, nor has it been limited in expanding into the western side of the globe. For instance, the idea behind the BRI project has entered Latin America, defining the region as a BRI's natural extension. Also, China has placed its signature on an MoU with about nineteen nations in the Latin American region by 2019, such as Venezuela, Costa Rica, Chile, Panama, etc. Furthermore, China has also been motivating other developed nations in the West to unite within the BRI since 2015 (Ellyatt, 2019). In March 2019, Italy became the first nation from the group of seven (G7) to join the BRI (Ellyatt, 2019). However, in March 2024, Italy terminated their partnership with the Belt and Road Initiative, citing concerns around economic and strategic implications (Mazzocco & Palazzi, 2023). As of 2023, although the exact number may fluctuate due to inaccuracies and challenges in tracking, the approximate number of countries that have signed MoU with China is up to 151 (Nedopil, 2023). Figure 6 below displays explicitly all nations in greater detail, categorized by the regions, the year of signing the memorandum, and income levels.

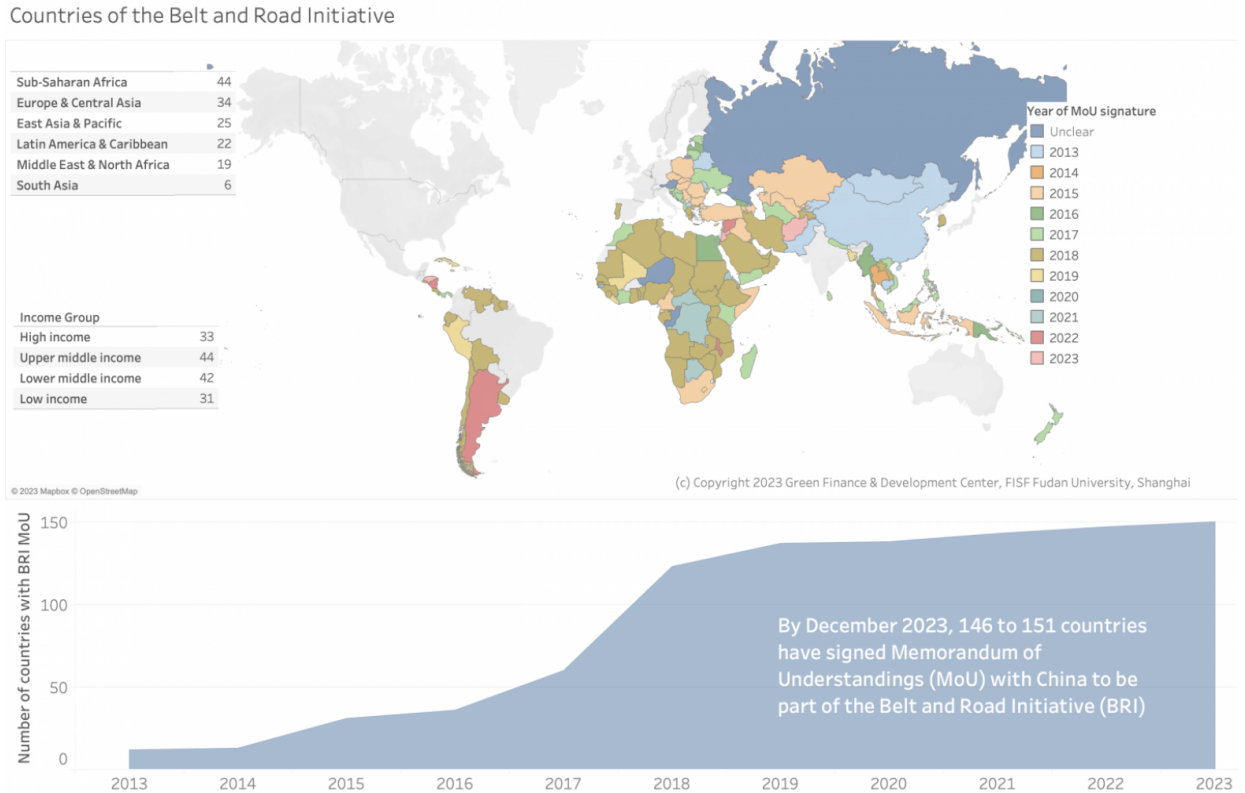


Figure 6. Countries that have signed an MoU with China under the BRI, as of December 2023 (Source: Nedopil, 2023).

In addition to the vital maritime and land-based Silk Road, the advancement of the Arctic shipping routes has been detained since 2013 (Ellyatt, 2019). The idea of having sectoral-based Silk Roads, such as the air Silk Road, electricity Silk Road, and energy Silk Road, has often been proposed by different sectors and agencies in the Chinese government. In summary, it is apparent that the evolution of the aims of the BRI project, as detailed by the Chinese government, has often been expanding into a package of different strategies. In that case, Xi and his administration have usually injected new meanings to help serve new and emergent visions and ambitions in global governance and economic development.

2.4 Negative Perceptions

2.4.1 Debt-Trap Diplomacy and Neo-Colonial Allegations

There are huge concerns about the BRI being linked to a modern system of neo-colonialism. The Chinese BRI project has often been accused of debt-trap diplomacy since 2017 when it was first linked to a debt trap by Indian scholar Brahma Chellaney (2017). Later, some governments have often blamed China's BRI project for being neocolonial due to what is termed as debt trap diplomacy to help in funding the infrastructural development project (ISS Today, 2018). Subsequently, the "debt trap" has become a common term among many China-critics in

different academic, media, business, and political circles globally for the past three years. China seems to be contending that the initiative has offered huge markets for various commodities, augmenting resource prices and reduced exchange inequalities, expanded the transfer of technologies, stimulated the growth of industrialization, created employment, and boosted infrastructure, which implies that the host nations have significantly benefited (Blanchard, 2018).

Allegations that the government of China has deliberately put nations into the BRI into a trap for debt lack solid proof. Academic studies on overseas lending by China through different institutions have completed studies and provided data that suggests why such assertions might not be accurate. According to information provided by the Center for Global Development, Hurley et al. (2018, p. 5) opine that the BRI might not likely result in a systemic debt problem for most regions that are focused on the initiative altogether (Hurley et al., 2021). In addition, in an article for the New York Times titled "Is China the World's Loan Shark?", Deborah Brautigam (2019a) opines that there is more data provided by the China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University that showcases that lenders that are non-Chinese still had the majority of the debt across 17 nations that could be identified by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as at risk of being in debt-based distressful moments. According to the research conducted in Latin America concerning the investments made by China and in the Caribbean region, more researchers, such as Ray and Wang (2019) based at the Global Development Policy Center, have made conclusions that the loans provided by China are not substantial enough to cause most of the involved nations to exceed the debt-sustainability thresholds required by the IMF (Ray and Wang, 2019).

Johns Hopkins University's Deborah Bräutigam dismissed all accusations of debt-trap diplomacy as a "meme" driven by negativity towards China's rise (Bräutigam, 2019b). She supports the argument that debtor nations willingly agreed on loans with China and previously had positive experiences (Bräutigam & Rithmire, 2021). Global media, on its part, has also been accused of unethical portrayal of China's partnerships (Bräutigam, 2019a).

The China Africa Research Initiative report, co-authored by Bräutigam, found that loans from China are not the principal cause of Africa's debt crisis. Similarly, Anastasia Papadimitriou claims that under the BRI cooperation program, the parties are mutually responsible, which practically denies neocolonial intentions. Finally, according to the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the cause of Sri Lanka's debt crisis is domestic mismanagement, not Chinese loans. Lowy Institute reports have expressed worry over China's lending while identifying institutional weaknesses in Pacific nations (Hameiri & Ly, 2020). They have also rejected that the Hambantota Port debacle was a Chinese plot (Hameiri & Ly, 2020). Rhodium Group studies demonstrate Chinese influence on debt renegotiations but reject media sensationalism (Kratz et al., 2019). Similarly, quoting Darren Lim, Kirsty Needham rejects "debt trap diplomacy" (Needham, 2019). The Center for Global Development suggests that China writes off debt instead of seizing assets (Hurley et al., 2021). Gyude Moore dismisses "debt-trap

diplomacy" as Western anxiety over the rise of China (Moore, 2018) but later underlines the benefits of China partnering with African countries (Moore, 2021). Nanyang Technological University ascertains that the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic exposes a myth related to debt trap diplomacy (Ji & Rana, 2020). The question still remains unresolved regarding how China aids in debt restructuring amid the troublesome scenario of debt payback (Needham, 2019). It also delayed the loan repayments for the other debt-addicted countries from the Asia Pacific community along with Tonga (Needham, 2019).

On the other hand, the most common case is that of Sri Lanka, which different authors can use to epitomize the debt-trap diplomacy of the nation of China. However, having a detailed, closer examination of the investment made by the Chinese government in Sri Lanka helps clarify the situation. In particular, a case study of Sri Lanka provided by He (2017, p. 23) highlights a lack of sufficient grounds for which the allegations made by the international community against China can be justified. In the case study, the accusations of the debt trap for Sri Lanka do not showcase an understanding of the underlying reasons why China chose to make BRI project investments that led to the debt distress since it was stemming from a misinterpretation of the BRI project by the Chinese government (Jones and Hameiri, 2020, p. 18). In return, the risks and problems arising are caused by the nation's long-established investment model in overseas countries, where the NDRC is in charge of approving the projects, central government-owned SOEs are expected to help implement projects, and state-owned commercial and policy banks are expected to provide support financially. That said, most of the investments have often been consumed by massive projects in different fields undertaken by energy, transport, and other crucial sectors.

Former Tanzanian President John Magufuli referred to the loan agreement for BRI projects as exploitative and with extreme conditions laid down by the financiers from China (Chaudhury, 2019). Therefore, he was against the proposed thirty-three-year assurance and ninety-nine-year lease, which he felt was a way for the Chinese contractors to claim ownership of port land while looking for reimbursement on project construction, which was unethical and exploitative (Chaudhury, 2019).

Similarly, other authors, such as S. K. Chatterji (2020), an Indian commentator, considers the debt trap as an economic domain of the salami slice strategy fostered by China. Chatterji (2020) provides the example of Beijing putting pressure on Tajikistan to hand over more than a thousand square kilometers of land since it owed China close to \$1.2 billion out of the \$2.9 billion debt. Other nations having similar risks caused by sovereign slicing include Laos, Montenegro, Kyrgyzstan, the Maldives, Mongolia, Madagascar, and Pakistan, which have borrowed vast amounts of money from China. In addition, in May 2021, Félix Tshisekedi (Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) President) called for the mining contracts signed by former president Joseph Kabila to the Chinese to be reviewed (Loffman, 2021). The document that was supposed to be intensely reviewed was the Sicominex multibillion-dollar 'minerals-for-

infrastructure' agreement (Kavanagh and Clowes, 2021). In addition, Shar Baloch (2021) postulates that the plans made by China to link its Xinjiang province in the west to Gwadar within the Pakistan Baluchistan province through a \$500 million investment at the Gwadar port seem to have been resisted by local fishermen who have for long protested against illegal fishing and trawlers from China.

While China propagates shared growth principles, it still maintains considerable control over final decisions and would rather have these be made in a multilateral framework with their dominance being palpable (Zhou & Esteban, 2018, pp. 467-468). Indeed, at the core of the financial sustainability of the BRI is a model dependent very much on state financing—however, this comes with significant challenges (Jamali, Westcott & Verma, 2024, p. 34). Especially worrisome in this respect are the coinciding debt risks and inefficiencies in Chinese state-owned enterprises and banks that may severely darken the prospects for China to push forward the financial sustainability of BRI projects (Bulman, 2023, pp. 245-251, 256-258). This is especially so considering that a massive part of these loans depends on, and are increasingly being taken from, the Exim Bank of China and China Development Bank—reducing foreign reserves runs against the argument of non-sustainability (Bandiera & Tsiropoulos, 2019, pp. 7-8).

State-driven models of investment always hold within them the risks in transparency and local resistance issues that can impede the efficiency of a project (Massot, 2020, p. 540). Greater transparency in terms of project selection and financing would reduce over-lending and potential debt crises (Massot, 2020, p. 542). It would also ensure more prudent investment, benefiting Chinese SOEs by reducing risk and raising financial sustainability (Zhang, 2023, p. 226, 228).

In many participating countries, the decision-making process regarding the BRI is politicized, and officials are often working within a complex terrain to gain favor from the Chinese leadership and advance their careers (Wang & Cao, 2021, p. 219). Predisposing factors that couple with an unfavorable investment climate in most BRI countries amplify economic and political costs, grounding the sustainability concern (Narins, 2022, p. 250). For example, political instability, weak governance structures, and low credit ratings raise default risks (Zhou & Esteban, 2018, p. 366).

In most cases, Chinese investments through the BRI do not involve the well-entrenched role of the private sector; instead, SOEs and state-owned banks dominate the scene (Arase & Carvalho, 2023, p. 85). Such disequilibrium between China's economic capacity and recipient countries' economies worsens the situation regarding debt-related problems (Bandiera & Tsiropoulos, 2019, p. 21). The fast rate of investment increase in emerging countries like Sri Lanka and Malaysia has stretched their loan absorption capability, thus further accelerating debt-driven crises (Narins, 2022, p. 252).

China will be in a problematic position of economic and political considerations to make the BRI fully financially sustainable. What such a multilateral balancing act would require of China, therefore, is giving up some level of control while still managing, in one way or another, to maintain an influence over critical decisions regarding how such a potentially game-changing project proceeds (Chin & Gallagher, 2019, p. 45). The AIIB is a possible lynchpin in this turn of events, given that it provides an opportunity for collaboration while safeguarding China's strategic interests (Dollar, 2018, p. 56).

Yet, the number of challenges is numerous, where the main over-reliance on state-based financing breeds some toxic natures, such as opacity or resistance from local and regional sources (Jones & Zeng, 2019, p. 78). China needs to improve its transparency and overall project funding so that the country can avoid the problem of over-lending and save any economy from any unexpected debt crisis (Bräutigam, 2020, p. 92). Chinese SOEs should also be somewhat conservative with their investment portfolio to be financially sustainable (Hillman, 2018, p. 30).

Debt sustainability, to which the People's Republic of China aspires in the process of implementing the BRI, is a complicated issue (Li, 2019, p. 100). In this regard, transforming the initiative into a genuinely multilateral agreement does promise a lot but involves a very complex bundle of considerations on its economic, political, and institutional implementation (Wang, Xu, Jin, & Wang, 2024, pp. 21-22). It is only through such concerted approaches to these challenges that China does to the long-term financial viability of the BRI; it will continue to contribute to global economic development (Zhu, 2020, p. 119).

2.4.2 Supporters and Critics

The BRI project is enjoying great support from different nations. Today, endorsements for the project have been issued by more than a hundred and fifty countries (Nedopil, 2023). Russia had earlier partnered with China, and Russia seems to have instituted about 150 joint projects with China, such as natural gas pipelines and the Polar Silk Road (Ehret, 2019). In April 2015, Igor Shuvalov, former Russia's First Deputy Prime Minister, stated, "The nation of Russia ought not to perceive the Silk Road Economic Belt as a threatening factor to its traditional, regional sphere of influence, but as should view it as an opportunity for the Eurasian Economic Union" (Economist, 2020). In addition, June 2016 saw Andrzej Duda, Polish President, scheduling a meeting with China's Xi Jinping (State of Poland, 2022). During the meeting, the president of Poland noted that "Polish corporations will benefit hugely" from the BRI (Wensha and Jing, 2016). Xi and Duda signed a declaration on the need for strategic partnerships between both nations. They reiterated that China and Poland perceived each other as partners associating for the long-term in the strategic move to improve the economic development of the region. Despite some past political shifts, with President Andrzej Duda in office since 2015, Poland has been a vital player in the BRI to date, 2024. Bilateral trade between China and Poland has surged as China remains Poland's largest trading partner in Asia (Nedopil, 2024, p. 8). Discourses on

investment in major infrastructure by China, such as the Central Airport in Poland, point to the continuity in the initiative (Kuo, 2017).

Another example, in 2020 Kazakhstan reconfirmed its support for the BRI and confidence over what its strategic geographical position as a key transit hub between Eurasian trade routes could achieve (World Bank, 2020, p. 9).

In addition, in 2021, Kenya had finally completed the Nairobi-Mombasa railway — the largest infrastructural project ever undertaken by this country — up to date under the auspices of the BRI and financing from China confirm prospects for further economic growth and development (Duan, 2024).

In 2017, former Greek Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis (2017) wrote in a Project Syndicate article that he had had a highly encouraging experience with the BRI and would offer tremendous support for the undertaking (Varoufakis, 2017). Such remarks showed that Chinese authorities had willingly combined their self-interests with patient investment attitudes and absolute commitment to negotiating over and over to ensure that a mutually advantageous agreement was reached (Varoufakis, 2017). Thereby, Croatia and 14 other nations from Eastern Europe had already dealt with China before and provided strong support to the BRI undertaking. Here, the new partners to the project were expected to sign a Memorandum of Understanding worth close to €2.5 billion across different sectors, such as port infrastructure, logistics, and transport.

When the second Arab Forum for Environment and Development occurred in 2019, China also worked on engaging a vast array of partners for its project through the Build the Belt and Road, Share Development and Prosperity initiative, which included 18 countries from the Arabian region (Hao et al., 2020, p. 20). In this meeting, Africa Times (2019) opined that the general stand for most nations was that the BRI programming was an excellent chance for each of the countries to gain influence and that it would provide other allies in Africa with intense foreign aid.

Despite the considerable support provided by different nations to the BRI undertaking, there has also been an emerging opposition to the whole idea. For instance, various skeptics and observers, majorly from different non-participant nations, such as the US, have often interpreted the BRI as a geostrategic plan that intends to take over the Sino-centric network of trade established internationally (Chohan, 2018, 214). In response to these concerns, other nations, such as Australia and Japan, have responded to the accusations made by the US, forming a counter initiative dubbed the Blue Dot Network in 2019. This initiative was later followed by the group of seven's Build Back Better World Initiative in 2021 (Liao & Beal, 2022, pp. 3-6). Furthermore, the US proceeded to propose a counter initiative to the BRI that was labeled the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (FOIP) (Hosoya, 2019, p. 25). Most US-based officials

articulate that the FOIP has three foundational elements not well defined in the BRI, such as proper governance, economics, and security (Rossiter, 2018, p. 120).

Building on this momentum, the beginning of 2019 saw an entire redefinition of the general definition of the terms “open” and “free” into four different perspectives. These perspectives included adhering to international norms and rules; reciprocal, fair, and free trade; peaceful dispute resolution; and respecting independence and sovereignty (US Department of Defense, 2019).

Meanwhile, in South Asia, officials working for the Indian government have shown repeated objections to the BRI (Hindustan Times, 2020). Specifically, Indian authorities have a firm belief system that the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project significantly ignores the essential concerns of New Delhi regarding its territorial integrity and sovereignty (Hindustan Times, 2017).

In East Asia, South Korea has attempted to come up with its vision for the connection between the West and the East, known as the Eurasia Initiative (EAI) (Hwang, 2019, p. 134). South Korea has been incessantly calling for the old Silk Road to be reinstated or reviewed, with President Park Geun-hye’s main objective being to motivate a flow of social, political, and economic interactions through the Korean Peninsula from Europe (Hwang, 2019, p. 134). Building on this foundation, her successor, President Moon Jae-in, proceeded to announce an independent foreign policy initiative known as the New Southern Policy (NSP), whose primary intention was to strengthen existing relationships with the region of Southeast Asia.

Lastly, in Southeast Asia, Vietnam’s position on the BRI has been shaped by its conflicting interests with China. For example, being at odds with the Chinese giant has caused significant hesitation and indecision regarding whether to oppose or support the BRI undertaking (Di Lan and Truong-Minh Vu, 2019, p. 235).

Apart from that, being an already wealthy nation, Singapore is not heavily in need of massive financing options from external bodies or national and technical assistance in conducting its domestic infrastructural buildings. Moreover, there are different strategic defense factors in play, such as ensuring that a single state is not the dominant nation in the economic calculation of the Asian region (Chan, 2019, p. 189). While the Philippines has had closely knit ties with the US, China has also sought its support for the current BRI project as it intends to dominate the South China Sea (SCS). In return, there have been considerable policy adjustments made by the Philippines to favor claims made by China about the SCS by Rodrigo Roa Duterte, the former Philippine President. He largely expected to be granted equal support for other massive expansion projects in infrastructure in his nation when he is in need (De Castro, 2019, p. 215). Under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the Philippines has moved to a more assertive approach in pursuit of its interests in the South China Sea through a four-pronged strategy:

unilateral, bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral (Nguyen & Tok, 2025, p. 50). This approach comprises, among others, protests and legal claims invoking the 2016 Arbitral Award, enhancing the defense cooperation with the US, joint naval exercises with Australia and Japan, engaging international partners in maintaining a rules-based order against China's increasing assertiveness (Rabena, 2024). After China fired water cannons on Philippine ships near Ayungin Shoal in August 2023, the administration of Marcos Jr. laid out an updated national security policy, regarding the West Philippine Sea as the foremost national interest (Nguyen & Tok, 2025, pp. 49-50).

While Greece seems to have joined the bandwagon and become part of the BRI, other European nations have voiced their ambivalent perceptions. In January 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron noted that the ancient Silk Roads were never dominated by the Chinese, and the new roads could not be allowed to go in one direction. In September 2019, Shinzo Abe (then Japanese Prime Minister) and Jean-Claude Juncker (former European Commission President) signed a document agreeing on further infrastructural developments, which was supposed to help in countering China's BRI project and help in linking Asia to Europe and help in coordinating different digital, transport, and infrastructure (Eva, 2019).

Furthermore, in 2018, Daniel Andrews, the premier of the south-eastern Australian state of Victoria from the Labor Party, signed an MoU on the BRI that would help in establishing infrastructural ties and more connections with China (Taylor, 2020). Peter Dutton, the leader of the Liberal Party and the former minister for Home Affairs, described the BRI as a Chinese propaganda initiative that would only bring about vast foreign interference. As such, Dutton demanded that Victoria had to explain and provide reasons as to why it was the only state in Australia that had signed such an agreement. According to what was shared by former Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Victoria had stepped into the territory of federal government policy (SBS News, 2017). Morrison stressed that the Victoria State Government and the National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China had not supported the decision made in enforcing the agreement that was penned down (Young, 2021). He also stated that such issues on foreign affairs are expected to be determined by the federal government, and their jurisdiction ought to be respected in cases they are charged with addressing in settling foreign policies (Economist, 2020).

As a result, in April 2021, then Foreign Minister Marise Payne made declarations that Victoria would leave the BRI project, and such a move would ensure that the state pulled out of the made agreements between sides completely (Economist, 2020). The decision made by the federal government to veto this deal showcased the relationship that was increasingly soured between the Chinese and the Australian governments after China allegedly tried to apply different techniques through economic coercion as a form of response to the government of Australia's support to inquiry into how the Covid-19 started (Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021). Also, these economic coercions were made to

deal with the government of Australia's decision in supporting the US across different regional disputes that opposed China, such as the issues in the SCS (Thayer, 2020). Other concerns also include those related to Taiwan (Taipei Times, 2021).

2.5 BRI's Role in Shaping Debt Sustainability and Global Power Dynamics

The interactions between China and different recipient nations, as well as how the country responds to vital opinions, substantially affect the future and whether the BRI will advance. The recent accusations over the diplomacy of the debt trap might not be based on solid evidence but have resulted in severe concerns being made over the sustainability of the debt being offered to BRI nations globally. However, China denies that it does not intentionally set up the debt trap in any of these nations, and there is no proof to show the same (Lai et al., 2020, p. 111). While there is no proof of the debt-trap set up by undertaking the project in most of the target nations, the issue of debt sustainability is a vital concern for the investments made by China in the BRI project (Jones and Hameiri, 2020, p. 18).

The problem of unsustainable debt still exists in developing nations as they endeavor to stabilize their economies through growth. Having huge Chinese investments within brief periods only increases the risks associated with debt distress in many BRI nations, such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Maldives, Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka (Hurley et al., 2019, p. 5). In these countries, China has heavily invested in projects to help BRI's advancement. However, most of these nations do not have various options when they are offered a considerable loan amount from China-based capital sources since their governments are often battling severe environmental, social, political, and economic issues. In case these nations ignored or did not pay attention to concerns over debt sustainability when making investments in some of these extensive projects, the investments made have the probability of pushing some of these nations close to being in a debt crisis that might need decades to get viable solutions to by their governments (Hurley et al., 2019, p. 5).

In light of these concerns, China has gradually adjusted its BRI approach toward more sustainable and manageable projects. The shift is encapsulated in the idea of what President Xi Jinping called "small but beautiful", or *Xiaoermei* [小而美], that was first articulated at the 2021 Belt and Road Symposium (Ye, 2022). In addition, by focusing more on smaller and higher quality projects rather than on large scale investments, China seeks not only limiting the financial and environmental risks of its own investments but also making its BRI projects to align better with the development agendas of recipient nations, in order to ensure that benefits are sustainable and widely shared. The "small but beautiful" model is designed to promote sustainable growth and improve connectivity among regions with very varying economic conditions, such as Africa, while mitigating financial risks (Lema, 2023; Ye, 2022).

As another debt sustainability issue response, China is offering measures that can help and improve the crisis in the receiving countries. As one of the most vital techniques to assist in mitigating risks in unsustainable debt, the MoF, through analyzing the measures and debt ceiling provided by the IMF and World Bank for low-income economies, has often worked on the development of the Debt Sustainability Framework for Participating Countries of the BRI since 2017 (Zhongzheng, 2022, p. 329). This framework was then released in 2019, showing the partnership between China and 28 other nations to help augment the quality of decisions concerning financing, investments, and debt management for sustainable, high-standard, and high-quality funding systems. The institution of the Multilateral Cooperation Center for Development Financing was fostered by the MoF alongside other multilateral development banking and financial establishments (Bandiera & Tsiropoulos, 2019, p. 17). As a mechanism meant to help coordinate, the Center's key role was expected to help augment the financing of different projects via capacity building, preparation of projects, and sharing vital information to ensure success.

The domestic constraints experienced in investing and financing, alongside the extensive received critique of debt sustainability from within and outside China, might push the BRI participants to cooperate with other foreign institutions and organizations in raising substantial support and foreign capital from multilateral banking and financial institutions to ensure that the BRI project is sustained within the onset of the future years. Such an undertaking might result in a win-win situation of cooperation between China and other developed nations in advancing the BRI project. In that case, through diversifying the means used to finance the BRI project, it is possible to organize sustainable and stable arrangements in financing compared to what has been seen in the previous years. The capital market in China has offered about \$71.4 billion to be used by enterprises via equity financing (Wang & Cao, 2021, p. 55). Still, a large sum of BRI financial options is often provided through commercial and financial institutions owned by the Chinese state.

Given the expanding themes of the BRI project, there is robust suspicion from the US and other Western-allied nations about China's geo-economic and political tools in reshaping the global political and economic order. However, China denies that its geopolitical aim is to overthrow the current political and economic orders (Larson 2020, p. 176 and Parepa, 2020, p. 27). Certainly, BRI advancement through considerable Chinese investments will allow the Chinese to profoundly impact the existing order of economics globally through setting different standards and rules in infrastructural development and multiple other sectors and help in the provision of public goods to nations located along the Belt and Road (Parepa, 2020, p. 10). In addition, the definition of the BRI as one of the vital road maps to build a shared future community for humanity by Xi has raised a global idea on worldwide governance that only tends to strengthen such suspicion instead of bringing it under control. Besides, the BRI seemingly constitutes China's practices and ideology in fostering global economic growth via investments dominated by the state in promoting trade and connecting infrastructure. In the end, such a move

differs from how the US or the Western nations established free-market economies and liberal democracies. From the perspective of Western powers, such a model of development driven by the Chinese state to augment economic growth for underdeveloped economies and emerging markets needs to be carefully assessed to determine its possible problems and risks.

3. Analytical Framework

3.1 Constructivism

Constructivism in IR is a critical viewpoint that emphasizes the role played by ideas, norms, and identities in shaping the international system while sharply opposing material realism and, to some extent, liberalism. It shows how governments actively construct social realities by interaction, ideas, norms, and narratives.

3.1.1 Theoretical Foundations of Constructivism

Fundamentally, constructivism challenges the positivist epistemology on which most conventional IR theory is founded - an assumption that the material world context is independent of human thought. Constructivism is an approach that contends that reality is both socially constructed and, at the same time, underpinned by social processes in which human interaction and shared meaning are critical to the formation of what we experience as real. Knowledge is not supposedly 'found' from this perspective; it is constructed actively, knowledge and understanding is created through social engagements and discursive practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Onuf, 1989). Within the realm of IR, analysis following from this viewpoint displaces itself away from purely material conditions—economic capacity and military strength—explaining it to an ideational factor, including norms, values, and beliefs (Wendt, 1999).

Constructivism sees the international system not as something fixed, impersonal, or objective but as something that is constantly constituted and reconstituted by practices and discourses of the actors in it (Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986). And it is these very agents, through their respective interaction by always acting in rational-interest behavior, that do not merely react in a system already logically set to create and perpetuate such norms regarding international conduct (Adler, 1997). The international environment, therefore, is seen as an ongoing project, wherein meaning is continuously negotiated and renegotiated through social interaction and communication (Checkel, 1998).

This theoretical approach is especially endowed to understand governmental knowledge creation. A rethinking that accepts that governments are not literally passive and reactive entities, triggered through external stimuli in a pre-given fashion, but rather play an active part in developing and spreading norms that condition international behavior (Finnemore, 1996). Through their policy-making processes, diplomatic engagements, and the strategic use of public discourse, governments are instrumental in constructing the social realities that frame both domestic and international understandings of global issues (Risse, 2000). By engaging in these processes, governments can influence and even reshape the international norms and values that underpin global governance, thereby actively participating in the constitution of the international system itself (Barnett & Duvall, 2005).

3.1.2 Core Principles of Constructivism

Some of the primary principles accompanying constructivism that distinguish it from materialist strands in IR theory include:

Social Construction of Reality

One of constructivism's most central tenets is a fact of social construction of reality. According to this principle, reality is not an independent fact but a socially accomplished understanding through interaction. At the most general level, this implies that in IR, the international system not only assumes a shape through the distribution of material capabilities but is also formed by what states and other actors think, believe, and consider themselves to be. Of course, out of this argument comes the international system as an artefact of social processes, collectively undertaken, in which meanings are continually bargained for and reconstituted (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The Primacy of Ideas and Norms

Constructivism provides the most profound answer, emphasizing the primacy of ideas and norms in shaping state behavior. Ideas should be considered a broader system of beliefs—an underlying structure shaping the identity and behavior of a state—while norms are shared expectations about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior by actors of a certain kind. The ideational elements are anything but fixed; they are developed through interaction in and with society and may vary over time and space. For constructivists, understanding the role of ideas and norms is paramount in explaining state behavior on the international stage, where these factors often guide processes of decision-making, many of them displacing even material considerations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

The Construction of Identity and Interests

In sharp contrast to realist and liberal theories in general, both posit that state interests are fixed and derived from material considerations, while constructivism claims that state interests are socially derived through interaction. Leading to this construction are state identities, which are seen to be constructed from historical experiences, cultural contexts, and domestic political processes. Such an exercise informs us of how states view their interests, and subsequently, one can predict their behavior in the international arena. This principle maintains the fluidity of state interests and the critical role that identity plays in determining state action and interaction at the global level (Wendt, 1992).

Mutual Constitution of Agents and Structures

Constructivism challenges the rigid distinction between agents and structures, positing a mutual constitution between them instead. As such, although structures influence agents' behavior, the latter nonetheless shape the very structures within which they operate. Co-constitutive in IR, this means that the international system and state behavior articulate a relationship in which states shape the international order through practice, while the international order, in turn, shapes the behavior of states (Giddens, 1984).

3.2 Government Knowledge Creation

From a constructivist perspective, governments are not just playing wittingly in an environment of international affairs, said largely to be objective players; they are active players that construct knowledge themselves. This process of knowledge creation involves different viewpoints, ranging from the strategic deployment of narratives to the making of national identity and the promotion of specific norms.

3.2.1 Narrative Construction

Major ways in which governments construct knowledge are by developing specific narratives that frame the issues and propagating them in return. These narratives very often play an extremely significant role in terms of public perception and, in this way, work to back up even policy outcomes. Official statements, media, educational institutions, and diplomatic communications are employed to set these narratives at work. By framing issues via specific lenses, governments can direct public debate, shape the agenda, and legitimize the choices they make in policy. For example, national security narratives can be very carefully framed to justify interventions by the military or to motivate public support for other major policy efforts (Somers, 1994).

3.2.2 Shaping National Identities

One important area relating to government-led knowledge production is the area of national identity construction and promotion. National identity construction is a sustained, dynamic process in which governments are engaged to shape how citizens—indeed, audiences around the world—come to understand any given nation's place variously in the structure of the world order. In articulating and promoting certain national identities, governments can raise public support for their policies and associate themselves with a certain public image internationally. This process of identity formation is crucial for aligning both domestic and international perceptions with the government's strategic objectives, thereby consolidating its legitimacy and authority (Katzenstein, 1996).

3.2.3 Promotion of Norms

Additionally, governments also play a vital role in pushing norms, an important dimension of constructivist explanations of IR. Governments pursue particular norms so that their interests are manifested in behavioral patterns that are either domestic or international. The promotion of norms pertaining to human rights, environmental sustainability, or economic cooperation, among others, aims at setting new standards of appropriate behavior and, as such, shapes the expectations and actions of other states and non-state actors (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

3.2.4 The Role of Discourse

In the constructivist approach to the exercise of power within government, discourse is primary to the establishment of social reality, through which language can be strategically used for knowledge construction, perception creation, and legitimation. This occurs due to special constructions of narratives — power embedded in language, in the absence of other points of view — in the discourse justifying government policies and/or actions, for example, military intervention as "humanitarian." At the same time, dissenting voices can be suppressed to reinforce dominant narratives (Foucault, 1972). For this reason, discourse analysis also tends to unveil how language manages to lay the basis for regimes of truth by defining what is regarded as legitimate, hence excluding other viewpoints. Therefore, strategic discourse becomes a requirement of political landscapes at both the domestic and the international levels (Fairclough, 1995).

3.3 Discourse Analysis and Constructivism in Political Language Use

Discourse analysis is underpinned by a constructionist orientation toward knowledge. Constructivism lies on the philosophical assumptions that postulate that multiple views about the world are legitimate and texts are open to interpretation, while language is not representational. The relativism in social constructivism suggests that evidence from discourse analysis is not legitimate from a traditional research viewpoint. Arguably, people construct knowledge from what they experience in their lives (Bednarek and Caple, 2014). The individual experiences and engagements expose individuals to different forms of knowledge they acquire, combine what they already know, and create new meanings for similar situations. In that regard, discourse analysis is vital in examining different meanings that reflect the political perceptions of Germany and Malaysia, represented by governmental officials and relevant stakeholders, about the BRI. Discourse analysis is also critical and allows for triangulation. For instance, the comparison of different viewpoints at distinct timeframes renders the method reliable in the synthesis of critical evidence (Keller et al., 2019). As such, discourse analysis allows for the construction of likely meanings in relation to the attitudes and viewpoints of Germany and Malaysia about China's BRI project. In essence, the multiplicity of diverse viewpoints is leveraged to determine similar and competing perceptions, judgments, and attitudes of nations toward the BRI.

3.4 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Its Application on the BRI Perceptions

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a vital tool in understanding how language constructs, reflects and perpetuates social and political realities. Rooted in the work of scholars such as Norman Fairclough (1995) and Teun A. van Dijk (1998), CDA operates on the premise that discourse is not merely a reflection of reality but an active agent in shaping it. This subchapter outlines the theoretical foundations of CDA and its application in analyzing the perceptions of the BRI by Malaysia and Germany, particularly in how these perceptions align or diverge from China's self-perception, and narrative, answering the main RQ: *How and why has the BRI perception by the governments of Malaysia and Germany's changed and developed since 2013?*

3.4.1 Theoretical Foundations of CDA

CDA draws from a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating elements of linguistics, social theory, and political analysis. Norman Fairclough's (1995) model is particularly influential, proposing a three-dimensional approach that encompasses (1) the analysis of text, (2) the analysis of discursive practices, and (3) the analysis of social practices. This model is essential for understanding how language at the textual level relates to broader social and political contexts.

Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse simultaneously represents, constitutes, and legitimizes social relations and structures. This perspective is critical for analyzing how different actors perceive the BRI, as it allows for an examination of how language in political speeches constructs realities around the initiative.

Teun A. van Dijk (1998) complements this approach by emphasizing the role of discourse in shaping social cognition. Van Dijk's focus on the interplay between discourse and ideology is vital for understanding how the narratives surrounding the BRI may reflect underlying beliefs, values, and attitudes in Malaysia and Germany.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is a foundational step in CDA that involves a thorough reading and systematic examination of the text to identify key terms, themes, and linguistic features. Fairclough (1992) emphasizes that textual analysis in CDA is not merely about describing the language used but about understanding the relationship between language and social practices. In the context of this study, textual analysis will focus on identifying and categorizing the key terms related to the BRI as they appear in the speeches of Malaysian and German leaders. Such an approach has already been employed on China's official governmental discourses with key terms identified and analyzed to derive the dominant Chinese BRI narrative.

This step involves analyzing the frequency and distribution of these terms, which reflects the importance assigned to different aspects of the BRI. Moreover, the context in which these terms are used—whether economic, political, or social—provides insight into how the BRI is outlined within each discourse.

Contextual Analysis

Contextual analysis in CDA investigates the larger socio-political and historical contexts in which the discourse is situated. According to Wodak and Meyer (2009), understanding the context is crucial for interpreting the meanings and implications of discourse. This involves examining the historical relationship between Malaysia, Germany, and China, as well as the domestic political climates that may influence each country's stance on the BRI.

This step allows for a deeper understanding of the factors that shape how the BRI is perceived by situating the discourse within its specific national and international context. It also enables a comparison of how these contextual factors might lead to different interpretations or evaluations of the initiative in Malaysia and Germany.

Collocational Analysis and Semantic Prosody

A key concept within CDA is semantic prosody, which refers to the evaluative meaning that a word or phrase acquires through its typical collocates—words that frequently appear alongside it (Louw, 1993; Stubbs, 1996). Collocational analysis, therefore, involves examining the surrounding words that accompany key terms related to the BRI in the speeches.

As Stubbs (1996) argues, semantic prosody is essential for understanding how certain terms can take on positive, negative, or neutral connotations depending on their context. For example, the term "investment" may acquire positive semantic prosody if it is frequently associated with words like "opportunity" and "growth" or negative prosody if linked with "debt" and "risk." This analysis provides insights into the implicit attitudes towards the BRI conveyed through the language of the speeches.

Discursive Strategies

Discursive strategies are specific ways language is used to create meaning and legitimize certain perspectives to ensure that the audience is positioned in the expected way. Wodak and Meyer define discursive strategies as rhetorical means realized in speakers' argumentation to achieve their communicative purposes, which are either persuasive, justificatory, or critical.

Discursive strategies on the description of BRI perceptions may run along some of such metaphors and analogies, on the one hand, and argue with specific patterns of argumentation, either toward or against the Chinese narrative and discourse on the BRI. For instance, one speech could use metaphors like "bridges" and "links" to frame the BRI in a positive way or

"dependency" or "risk" to frame it more negatively. Such strategies make vivid underlying ideologies and power relations embedded in arguments.

Framing Analysis

As explicated by Entman (1993), framing analysis deals with the way some issues come to impact mainly on the interpretation through the frames in presentation. In this case, frames can be equated to the lenses used to mobilize or downplay certain aspects of what transpires around us and, therefore, prevail in determining audience perception of a certain issue. In this regard, framing is an essential tool in CDA in establishing how discourse constructs social reality.

While framing analysis examines whether the initiative is framed as an opportunity, a threat, or a neutral development in the discourse of Malaysian and German leaders during the speaking process about the BRI, it must recognize the dominant frames used in the discourse and how they stand in relation to China's self-representation of a cooperative and mutually beneficial initiative that is the BRI.

3.5 CDA Criteria for Comparing BRI Perceptions

Element	Criteria	Sub-Criteria
Textual Analysis	Identification of Key Terms	- Frequency of BRI-related terms (e.g., "investment," "cooperation," "infrastructure")
		- Identification of thematic categories (e.g., economic, political, social)
	Contextual Relevance	- Contexts in which key terms are used (e.g., within economic development, foreign policy)
		- Tone and modality associated with key terms (e.g., certainty, hesitation)
Contextual Analysis	Historical Context	- Historical relationship with China
		- Previous engagement with Chinese initiatives

	Political Context	- Domestic political climate during the period of speech
		- Current bilateral relations with China
		- Influence of domestic and international politics on BRI perceptions
	Cultural Context	- Cultural values and ideologies shaping perceptions of foreign projects
Collocational Analysis	Semantic Prosody	- Collocates of key terms (e.g., "investment" with "opportunity" vs. "risk")
		- Positive, negative, or neutral connotations of collocates
		- Frequency of positive, negative, or neutral collocates
Discursive Analysis	Discursive Strategies	- Use of rhetorical devices (e.g., metaphors, analogies)
		- Argumentation patterns (e.g., justification, critique, neutrality)
		- Identification of implicit meanings or presuppositions
Framing Analysis	Issue Framing	- How the BRI is framed (e.g., as an opportunity, threat, or neutral initiative)
		- Emphasis on economic, political, or social aspects
		- Identification of dominant frames in the discourse

	Actor Framing	- How China is portrayed in relation to the BRI (e.g., as a partner, competitor, or neutral actor)
		- How the respective state (Malaysia or Germany) positions itself in relation to the BRI
Interpretation	Overall Sentiment	- Aggregate evaluation of whether the BRI is perceived positively, negatively, or neutrally
		- Comparison of the overall tone and sentiment in Malaysia's and Germany's governments' representatives' speeches
	Alignment with Chinese Perceptions	- Degree of alignment or divergence with Chinese self-perception of the BRI (from NDRC (2015) and Xi's speeches)
		- Reflection on how the alignment/divergence might affect bilateral relations and policy outcomes

Table 1. Analytical framework (AF) (Source: Designed by author).

The sequential analytical steps are: textual analysis, contextual analysis, collocational analysis, discursive strategies, and framing analysis, which together constitute a CDA overall framework for political discourse analysis. With this framework, the research can systematically compare the sense-making of the BRI in Malaysia and Germany and show to what degree that will be aligned or deviated from the sense of the China narrative.

This theoretical approach allows for nuanced insight into how the BRI is perceived but enables a critical look at the broader socio-political implications of these perceptions. The above Table 1 provides a synthesis of the criteria and sub-criteria, which set the direction for the analysis in this thesis and for the structured approach in the eventual comparative analysis between the perceptions of Malaysia and Germany of the BRI, and whether this aligns with China's narrative.

It should be noted that due to the wide array of criteria presented in the Table 1, an exhausted analysis of all of them would go far beyond the scope of this study. Instead, the focus has been given to the most relevant ones in order to address the research questions.

4. Research Method

The chapter focuses on the strategies used to collect research data that meets the aims and objectives of the study. The chapter comprises a description of the research method, data collection, and the data analysis approach. The criteria for data collection are also presented to demonstrate the credibility of the evidence considered and how it contributes to the fulfillment of the research aims and objectives and answers the key RQs.

4.1 Research Method

The study is based on a qualitative research method. According to Pathak, Jena, and Kalra (2013), qualitative research entails collecting and analyzing non-numerical research data. The method is considered reliable in collecting and synthesizing extensive evidence because it is not limited to the interpretation of evidence. Unlike the quantitative research method, the qualitative research method does not limit the interpretation of evidence to only available research evidence; rather, multiple viewpoints can be generated from the data based on the knowledge and understanding of the researcher (Hesse-Biber, Nagy, and Leav, 2010). As a result, the method guarantees flexibility in interpreting research evidence. The flexibility also allows for the generation of new ideas and concepts that offer in-depth insights into the research problem while demonstrating specific areas for future research (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, 2020). The qualitative research method proved reliable in collecting and analyzing evidence showing how different individuals from the political class from Malaysia and Germany perceive the Chinese BRI project. Through qualitative analysis of evidence from diverse standpoints, the results will contain the desired rigor toward the synthesis of critical evidence.

Qualitative research methodologies best analyze political discourses in keeping with the qualitative approach to research; more importantly, they channel their meanings, attitudes, and perceptions through language. Fairclough (1992) views CDA as a very strong analytical tool toward the understanding of the way language reflects social reality while at the same time being used in constructing it. This research will use CDA to probe the perception of Malaysia and Germany toward the BRI, focusing particularly on the discursive strategies, semantic prosody, and framing used in political speeches.

4.2 Search Strategy

Information on the perceptions of the German and Malaysian governments about the BRI project was sought from speeches, print media, and research articles about the BRI project and respective reactions by the two governments. For instance, media interviews involving the politicians from both Germany and Malaysia were considered because they offer firsthand insights into how the governments of the respective states perceive the BRI program. Therefore, more specific information was sought to avoid generalizations. The perspective led to the identification of key exclusion and inclusion criteria to reduce the likelihood of generalizations

and biases. For instance, only speeches from active leaders or sitting political leaders were considered in the analysis to ensure the sentiments reflect the perceptions of the government. Moreover, consideration was given to evidence from local media sources from Germany and Malaysia because they offer firsthand insights into their respective government sentiments about the BRI. Likewise, speeches and media interviews from Chinese political leaders were given priority due to their likelihood of demonstrating a reflection on the specific attitudes of other states about its BRI project. The target study period is from 2013 to 2022. The confinement to this first decade itself imposes a closed temporal scope of research that allows for a more exact analysis of the shifting attitudes. Further, it helps in zeroing in on specific trends and shifts in perception that could be disguised within a longer time frame associated with less sharp focus. This includes treating the first ten years as building basic expectations, investments, and alignments: it is thus essential to understand the formative decade regarding the BRI's real possible long-term sustainability and impact on bilateral relations. From the Chinese perspective, this decade represents the period in which China has been trying to lay down the foundations and gain expansive global influence through infrastructure and investment.

Analyzing the first decade of the BRI serves a great role in understanding whether and how international perceptions have changed and what responses shaped the developing geopolitics of the world. Therefore, any media, interview, or article published earlier than 2013 was excluded from the study. Likewise, political speeches, interviews, and research respective governments' narratives after 2022 were excluded from the study for their lack of contextual relevance in terms of the research timeframe. The 2013 to 2022 period was also sought to help demonstrate dynamics in the two countries' perceptions regarding the BRI.

The strategy helped align the prospective evidence with the main RQ: How and why has the BRI perception by the governments of Malaysia and German changed and developed since 2013? Respectively, the selection of the period offers a more arranged way for establishing changes in the political attitudes of the German and Malaysian governments about the BRI (in the first decade). Research evidence published in Asian languages was also excluded to ease the readability and interpretation of evidence without the need for translation. Commentaries on IR and policies affecting the BRI were also sought for inclusion to help demonstrate how Germany, Malaysia, and China related with regard to the BRI project. The criteria were considered wholesome in narrowing the evidence gap to the study context and guaranteeing the synthesis of specific and credible evidence concerning the perceptions of Malaysia and Germany about China's BRI.

4.3 Data Analysis

The data retrieved from the speeches, articles, and news media was analyzed using content and discourse analysis techniques. Discourse analysis refers to the examination of language and its functions to draw specific contextual meanings (Foucault, 2013). The technique is used in the analysis and interpretation of both oral and written language and non-verbal

communication aspects, including gestures and tone. Materials suitable for discourse analysis include books, periodicals, brochures, advertisements, website content, social media posts, interviews, and speeches (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). The aspects render the method suitable for the analysis of data in the present study since it seeks to provide in-depth insights into the perceptions of the German and Malaysian governments concerning the BRI project.

Per the definition of discourse analysis, an assessment of a language can help establish the intended message and its respective implications. In that regard, an analysis of speeches, interviews, articles, and news media helped deduce the specific pointers that demonstrate how Malaysian and German governments perceive the BRI over a specific period. Furthermore, an analysis of the language used by political leaders from the respective governments was critical in demonstrating the contextual meaning of the various words and lingual stylistic features they employed in their speeches. For instance, in the present research context, discourse analysis involves the examination of words and text on multiple levels of meaning to help provide a more authentic interpretation of what the speakers and writers implied concerning the research topic. This will be further deepened by fusing content analysis together with CDA in order to offer a general force in explicating perception in Malaysia and Germany regarding the BRI. Content analysis is the identification and enumeration of the number of times specific words, concepts, ideas, or phrases in the key evidence illustrate something about the problem. The context in language application may allow for an examination aimed at unveiling meanings, relationships, and implications, hence detecting bias, partiality, negativity, positivity, and neutrality in discourse (Keller et al., 2019).

Aspects of sentence construction were also examined with a specific focus on the contextual meaning to demonstrate how the political leaders in Germany and Malaysia perceive the BRI. Some of the contextual evidence sought includes power dynamics, subjectivity, economic and trade ties, social organization, as well as the *keywords* (KWs) with respect to the BRI project. These key terms are extrapolated from subchapters 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 on the Chinese officially stated aims from the NDRC, 2015, and President Xi's speeches. They indicate a positive Chinese perception of the BRI in terms of mutual gains, improved connectivity, and inclusive development. They were primarily used to classify the perceptions of Malaysia and Germany, as they represent the founding objectives and strategic language of China's BRI, which is critically important in understanding and interpreting the initiative's perception in different countries. The CDA applied here to track the various ways particular language and terminologies affect and shape the discourse around the BRI from political and economic dimensions (van Dijk, 2014). Speeches for the initiative within the specified period range were also assessed to establish the trends in the attitudes of German and Malaysian governments about China's BRI. As a result, CDA was also employed in the interpretation of the German and Malaysian governments' changing sentiments about the BRI project. Therefore, both the contextual evidence about perceptions of the BRI and changing sentiments toward the project were

adequately considered in the analysis of data, with content analysis proving reliable in capturing key information that was in line with the research aims and objectives.

Content analysis involves a determination of the presence of specific words, concepts, ideas, and phrases that demonstrate specific evidence about a study problem. Employing content analysis in a study helps in quantifying and examining specific meanings, relationships, and implications through the evaluation of the contextual language used (Keller et al., 2019). For instance, bias and partiality, negativity, positivity, and neutrality can be deduced from research evidence through examination of particular words and phrases and what they signify. In the present study, content analysis was used to identify KWs that point toward the attitude of the two countries regarding the BRI program. Phrases and words signifying the relationship between the two nations and their sentiment toward the BRI were therefore sought to offer insights into how German and Malaysian governments perceive the BRI. The suitability of the technique to analyze data from multiple qualitative sources also rendered it more adaptable to the present study. For instance, content analysis is primarily used in the analysis of books, speeches, and articles, which were part of the sources of information in the present study.

Content analysis, though eminently suitable for such and very unobtrusive, retains a subjective aspect in the process of interpretation and is less scientifically rigorous. To counteract that, grounds for the selection or rejection of materials are accorded so that the analysis process focuses only on the statements relevant to the discourse. There is also a problem given content analysis: reductionism, the concentration on words, means the loss of general word context, which is vital to getting a better comprehension of the discourse. To overcome these limitations, CDA serves as a supplement. By nature, CDA can help in making a deeper exploration of the ways in which language and terminology are constituted and mandated by the political and economic discourse of the BRI (van Dijk, 2014). Contrary to content analysis, which may render itself to a mere count of frequencies, CDA attends to context, rhetorical strategies, and how arguments are made. In line with constructivism, this approach allows the divulgence of power-related, ideational, and social structures of meaning within the discourse concerning the governments of Malaysia and their German counterparts, as well as how these governments envisage and further their views on the BRI. The orientation of the technique, therefore, rendered it more suitable for the analysis of data in the present study. For example, through content analysis, a measure of the level of negativity, neutrality, and positivity was drawn from the different speeches, articles, and news reports about the sentiments of the German and Malaysian governments concerning China's BRI. Particularly, the content analysis helped in the assessment and establishment of the intentions, attitudes, patterns, and focus on the words and phrases used to refer to the BRI project by German and Malaysian state officials. In that regard, the process of content analysis entailed coding for specific words and terms that aligned with the research objectives and determining their meanings to demonstrate the different perceptions and attitudes of the German and Malaysian governments regarding the BRI.

However, despite its suitability and proving unobtrusive, content analysis involves subjective interpretation with limited scientific rigor. Nonetheless, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria offset limitations of subjectivity by narrowing the content to the most desirable outcomes. Another limitation regards its reductive nature, in that it only focuses on more particular words, overlooking important aspects of text and speech that can reflect more reliable evidence with regard to the research topic. For example, focusing on negative or positive words without considering the entire sentences and subject interpretations can provide a false depiction of the viewpoints of the German or Malaysian governments about the BRI. Deeper meanings and nuances might be disregarded. However, triangulation ensures that information from multiple sources is compared and contrasted to ensure its validity and authenticity. Arguably, comparison and critical synthesis are the core strategies for addressing the limitations of content analysis. In particular, taking evidence from both speeches and texts and comparing them provides reliable insights into the actual meaning of sentiments from political leaders from the German and Malaysian governments. As a result, the content analysis of multiple sources of evidence, including speeches, news reports, and interviews, was strategic enough to guarantee the synthesis of more credible evidence reflecting how the German and Malaysian governments perceive the BRI.

Discourse analysis and content analysis are subjective in that they are dependent on the interpretation of evidence by the researcher. In discourse and content analysis, evidence is drawn from research data based on the researchers' observations and perceptions, rendering the method less rigorous in guaranteeing the collection of evidence with minimal biases and conflicts of interest. However, in the present study, triangulation was employed to minimize subjective interpretation of information. In Flick, 2004, triangulation refers to the utilization of various methods, variable sources, or different theoretical perspectives to cross-verify and validate research results in a way that will improve the reliance and validity of the studies. Comparison of evidence from different sources proved important in addressing likely conflicts of interest. As a result, the findings were based on validated and justifiable evidence. Moreover, the integration of sentiments from different leaders' speeches and written reports from the media added to the rigor, authenticity, and validity of the study outcomes.

By integrating qualitative research methods, particularly CDA and content analysis, this study develops a robust framework for analyzing the perceptions of Malaysia and Germany regarding the BRI. These methods facilitate a nuanced understanding of how language influences and reflects political discourse, capturing the broader social and geopolitical dynamics at play. Employing triangulation and rigorous analytical techniques ensures that the study's findings are both credible and reflective of the actual sentiments and attitudes of the German and Malaysian governments towards China's BRI between 2013 and 2022.

Methodologically, the analysis of key terms reveals significant patterns in the connotations associated with specific language use, categorizing these connotations as positive,

negative, or neutral. These findings are crucial for understanding the underlying attitudes and strategic considerations that inform the discourse. The distinction between these connotations provides a foundational basis for a deeper examination of how political leaders articulate their stances on the BRI, offering valuable insights into the broader implications of their rhetoric. These preliminary findings will be further explored in the subsequent subchapter dedicated to the analysis of key terms.

4.4 Key Words in Chinese Narrative

Table 2. Chinese NDRC (2015) Narrative Keywords (compiled by author)

Positive	Neutral	Negative
1. people-to-people bonds 2. financial integration 3. unimpeded trade 4. facilities connectivity 5. infrastructure connectivity 6. win-win cooperation 7. shared development 8. interconnectivity 9. inclusive growth 10. mutual benefits 11. community of shared interests 12. shared prosperity 13. policy coordination	N/A	N/A

The key terms in the Table 2 above were searched to help categorize the respective perceptions of the German and Malaysian governments on the BRI project and to examine whether they are reflected in the use of different terms by the two respective countries. These key terms were not only sought to help categorize respective perceptions of Malaysia and Germany but were also extracted from the subchapters 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 on Chinese officially stated aims from National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China (2015) as well as from President Xi's speeches. Among these are "win-win cooperation," "shared development," "interconnectivity," "inclusive growth," "mutual benefits," "community of shared interests," "shared prosperity," "policy coordination," and "infrastructure connectivity."

Chinese interpretations of these terms are positive; they sound like an enormous room for win-win, connecting, and promoting inclusivity in development.

The segmentation proved reliable in establishing some of the policies the governments have adopted to support the BRI project while benefitting. The KWs were significant pointers that eased the identification and retrieval of evidence from selected speeches and media reports. Thus, the key terms supported the synthesis of more specific evidence while reducing the likelihood of generalizations.

5. Perspectives of the Malaysian and German governments

5.1. Malaysia

Since the BRI was launched in 2013, Malaysia has receptively and entirely embraced the project (Ngeow, 2018, p. 175). In particular, Malaysia's interaction with infrastructure related to the BRI and other infrastructure projects has seen one of the most comprehensive scopes, ranging from the construction of railroads, the establishment of different industrial parks to cooperation on ports and partnerships in digital connectivity (Ngeow, 2018, p. 175). Besides, it is also the most financially significant project and likely the quickest, considering the pace of its initiation, negotiations, and actual implementation (Chuin, 2019, p. 179). The reception of the BRI in Malaysia seems to have been recalibrated when the Mahathir Mohamad-led Pakatan Harapan (PH) administration was in authority over the country from May 2018 to February 2020 (Kuik, 2022, p. 261). Several projects backed by China had initially been suspended by Mahathir. Part of the reason is that he has criticized the BRI due to a possible threat to national sovereignty, as well as potentially exploitative terms of Chinese-backed projects he deemed "unfair deals" that could land Malaysia in a "debt" (Kuik, 2021, p. 436). However, Mahathir allowed other ventures to continue being undertaken and pledged massive support for the BRI.

Mahathir negotiated with China for about nine months regarding the terms and costs of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), which was viewed as highly controversial at the time (Lim, 2018, p. 82). In April 2019, Mahathir agreed that the ECRL would be resumed and also restored another project backed by China, the Bandar Malaysia, which was expected to be a joint venture housing the terminus of the Kuala Lumpur (KL)-Singapore High-Speed Rail (HSR) that had earlier on been promised (Lim, 2018, p. 82). Since then, some of the restored ventures have been developed alongside others, such as the rolling stock manufacturing centre at Batu Gajah, the expansion of the Kuantan Port, and the construction of the Kuantan Industrial Park. These projects were intricately related to the BRI and had also been promoted by different administrations, such as the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by Najib Razak between 2009 and 2018 (Kuik, 2020, p. 450). Despite recalibration, support from Malaysia for the BRI-related projects was continued under the PH government. It was also highly favored under the Perikatan Nasional (PN) Plus ruling coalition, headed by Muhyiddin Yassin (Kuik, 2021, p. 425). Muhyiddin Yassin had just replaced Mahathir as prime minister on March 1, 2020. Such continuity highlights the enduring persistence with which Malaysia embraced BRI-related projects.

That said, numerous scholars and observers, such as Kuik (2020, p. 435), have a reason to characterize Malaysia as being very persistent despite the fluctuations that come with engaging in the BRI project being puzzling. While there is substantial domestic concern over the perceived "debt trap" in Malaysia and other risks related to such an undertaking in relation to China, the ties between Malaysia and China seem to have overwritten these concerns. Yet, tensions caused

by territorial disputes in the South China Sea remain a persistent obstacle to trust, casting a shadow over these bilateral ties. The same situation has been witnessed in Brunei, the Philippines, and Vietnam. While Malaysia seems to have viable options for partnerships in connectivity apart from China, it has maintained its relations. It has not kept its distance from China like Myanmar under Thein Sein, the Philippines under Aquino III, or Vietnam (Kuik, 2020, 423). Furthermore, it has not also chosen to engage selectively with the BRI project or gradually like Thailand and Indonesia. Consequently, Malaysia's persistence in engaging with and embracing the BRI can be termed as being counterintuitive. All in all, due to such risks in bilateral relations with China as security in terms of territory sovereignty in the South China Sea, possibility of economic dependency, maintaining its autonomy, avoiding Chinese influence, Malaysia, during Mahathir's second term in office, used a hedging strategy that can be described as flexible, yet consistent, direct interaction with China on political, diplomatic, and economic levels, as well as aspects of limited balancing and limited bandwagoning (Gerstl, 2022, p. 46, 64-65).

From the literature on the relations between Malaysia and China provided by different scholars, it is apparent that the discourse of Malaysia depicts how a small state could leverage external power asymmetry in legitimizing and enhancing the political authority of its ruling elites. Such a legitimization-motivated imperative, particularly an in-grained desire to balance procedural legitimization, particularism, and performance, has seen the Malaysian government succeeding in embracing such ventures funded by foreign governments that have introduced vast inter-elite contestations and discontentment at the grassroots level. Consequently, this results section on the Malaysia perspective will be divided into three sections. The first segment traces the distinct dynamics of asymmetrical power relations between China and the Malaysian government. In that case, this segment will examine the existing vast gap in power with China that caused Malaysia to employ a more pragmatic approach, which in return downplayed its apprehensions as the nation prioritized benefits and profits. The following section also unravels the different sources of authority for the political elites in Malaysia. It showcases how these sources help in shaping external and domestic policies, specifically those of infrastructural partnerships that are funded by foreigners. In the end, the last segment of this section will apply an asymmetrical authority model to help explain why Malaysia has been persistent and pragmatic in embracing the BRI despite being affiliated with a cyclical viewpoint reconsideration.

5.1.1 Transforming China and Malaysia Relations

The relationship between China and Malaysia has often been underpinned by different asymmetrical power structures, resulting in ambivalent perceptions from Malaysia on policies toward China. In that case, Malaysia seems attracted to the benefits and profits it can gain from such ties but has always been mindful and apprehensive of the adverse implications of such asymmetric relations. According to Kuik (2021, p. 430), asymmetry in power implies the

chances of a more robust power harming a lesser powerful nation in different ways equally as it could provide help on diverse fronts. In that case, attractions and apprehensions exist on both sides of the divide. The manifestations, proportions, and degree of attraction and apprehensions might change. However, the core ambivalent attribute does not change much (Kuik, 2021, p. 422; Gerstl, 2022, pp. 48–49). According to Ba and Kuik (2018, p. 3), this instance is particularly true, such that when geographical proximity overlaps with asymmetry, the ambivalent impacts of power asymmetry are multiplied. In that case, any geographical closeness results in the actions of a powerful neighbor affecting the interests of the smaller state even more, whether they are intended or not deliberate (Gerstl, 2022, p. 50).

Geographical proximity and power asymmetry remain critical structural attributes that have been known to condition the capacity and space of Malaysia in pursuing its autonomy, prosperity, and security ambitions. These factors underpin the evolution of relations between China and Malaysia from mutual hostility witnessed between 1957 and 1969 to the limited levels of normalization between 1970 and 1989 and have been responsible for the mutually productive and increasingly cordial partnerships (Kuik, 2021, p. 423; Gerstl, 2022, pp. 49–50). After Malaysia gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1963, when the larger federation was instituted, and throughout the 1960s, the relations between Malaysia and the PRC have been known to be both adversarial and confrontational (Kuik, 2021, p. 423). In the 1990s, Kuik (2021, p. 424) opines that there was a huge turnaround.

Under leadership by Tunku Abdul Rahman (the first prime minister of Malaysia), the nation declined China's efforts in establishing officiated ties and chose to align itself with other powers in the West, such as indirect relations with the United States and direct connections with the UK via the Anglo-Malayan Defense Agreement (AMDA) (Kuik, 2021, p. 423). Between 1963 and 1967, when Indonesia implemented the *Konfrontasi*, a military campaign with low intensity against Malaysia, Beijing offered support to Jakarta. At the time, the mutual hostility between China and Malaysia had been rooted in distinct ideological differences, support by China for the Communist insurgency (whose intentions were to have the KL government overthrown), and the ambiguous Overseas policy by China (Gerstl, 2022, p. 51).

However, the late 1960s saw significant internal and external changes that pushed Malaysia into reconsidering its anti-China and pro-West stature (Kuik, 2021, p. 423). As the British announced their East of Suez policy in 1968 and as the US Guam Doctrine in 1969 showed an outright intention to withdraw from Indo-China, the elites in Malaysia realized that they were no longer provided with security from the West (Allès & Perrodin, 2019, p. 121). Under Abdul Razak Hussein's leadership, Kuik (2021, p. 422) opines that the elites were forced to shift their allegiance and external pressure to pro-regionalism that was non-aligned from pro-west (Allès & Perrodin, 2019, p. 123). Other leaders in Malaysia, such as Tun Ismail Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, started looking for ways to establish long-lasting ties

with China as a move that was needed to help in curbing threats received from the Communist guerillas.

Such structural shifts overlapped with the prevalent domestic needs of the ruling elites in the country. After the electoral setback for the ruling Perikatan and the ensuing ethnic riots that occurred between the Chinese and the Malays, Razak's government was forced to introduce the pro-Malay New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 and ensured the United Malays National Organisation's (UMNO) dominance was consolidated with renaming and enlarging the Perikatan as BN, which occurred in 1973 (Kuik, 2021, p. 423). Such developments led to a drastic reduction in the role played by different non-Malays in the economic and political life of Malaysia. In efforts that helped align the fears of local voters from China, then Prime Minister Razak made a move that would result in rapprochement with the Chinese state and eventually lead to the pacification of ethnic Chinese. In May 1974, Malaysia was able to normalize its relationship with China (Kuik, 2021, p. 424). It became the first member state of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that managed to have established diplomatic ties with the PRC at the time (Yuen, 2019, p. 27).

Despite such normalization, the choice to apprehend Chinese leaders in Malaysia continued into the late 1970s and early 1980s due to the "dual-track policy" adopted by China in the separation of different party-to-party relations from government-to-government ties. Besides, it also resulted from the policy in Beijing laid forth to treat ethnic China citizens as *foreign* nationals (Yuen, 2019, p. 30). As a result, the leaders in Malaysia continued to be wary of China's intentions, even after then Prime Minister Mahathir made his first trip to China in 1985.

The constant alterations in the threatening sources after the Cold War ended began pushing Mahathir's administration to treat China as an indispensable partner. In coping with the challenges of strategic uncertainty and economic globalization, Mahathir promoted further multilayered cooperation on an international scale, such as the ASEAN-Plus, sub-regional, and bilateral agreements (Kuik, 2021, p. 424). Such relationships helped augment ASEAN's diplomatic and economic role to help shape the regional affairs within the Asia-Pacific region. At the time, China became a vital partner in every layer of cooperation. As a result, the 1990s saw Malaysia playing an instrumental role that initiated ASEAN-China relations through dialogue as the country partnered with China to foster Asian connectivity (such as the Singapore-Kunming Rail Link (SKRL)) and Asian integration (such as ASEAN Plus Three (APT)), and supported each other in issues around interests of third world nations and Asian values across the continent.

By the onset of the late 1990s, the asymmetry of power between Malaysia and China had grown into a reality that could be leveraged upon rather than resisted. Leveraging such power could help in pursuing the ruling elites' interests that had been prioritized in Malaysia. The ruling elites utilized China's economic growth and political influence to boost Malaysia's economic development and regional influence (Goh, 2007, pp. 115-116). The possible threats and risks

affiliated with such power asymmetry were supposed to be managed and downplayed, especially those in China and Malaysia's claims over territories based in the SCS. In 2013, when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi succeeded Mahathir, the relations between China and Malaysia had already transformed into a productive and stable bilateral partnership (Kuik, 2021, p. 424). At the time, there was robust bilateral trade and considerable growth in bilateral investment. Again, political trust was at an all-time high. China supported Malaysia's attempts to create the APT Secretariat initiative in KL. While the attempts failed, the support from China depicted that the relationship between Malaysia and China was mutually beneficial after the Cold War.

Under the rule of Najib and Abdullah, the pragmatic and cordial approach towards China continued to deepen. As a result, there was an expansion in economic ties, and China grew to become the largest trading partner for Malaysia in 2009 (Kuik, 2021, p. 424). There was tremendous multiplication in the flows of investment, and China invested more resources into Malaysia than Malaysia's investments in China, which reversed the pattern of creating ties in bilateral investments (Ngeow, 2018, p. 170). There was an expansion in diplomatic partnerships at the time as the two nations joined hands together to push for the 2005 inauguration of the East-Asia Summit (EAS) in Malaysia. Besides, there was an increase in the connectivity between people, which was a sharp contrast to what happened before the 1990 period when the movement between the people in China and Malaysia was controlled to help insulate Chinese Malaysians from being influenced by China. Strategic and defense cooperation improved after China and Malaysia signed a 2005 MoU on defense. In the end, the bilateral relations between both nations were also elevated into a comprehensive and strategic partnership at the end of 2013, when the BRI was launched by China.

In Malaysia, the transformation of the relations between China and Malaysia to a mutually cordial beneficial partnership from one that was mutually hostile depicts that proximity and asymmetry do not have any notable inherent logic. The impact of such structural factors has often been filtered in literature by internal conditions, such as the domestic political needs of the ruling elites in a nation. Such internal conditions have often prompted the elites from the ruling parties to play down or up different perceived risks and opportunities. It is such internal logic that can help in understanding the concept of preserving authority in Malaysia: Legitimizing in a multiethnic quasi-democracy.

5.1.2 Preservation of Authority: Legitimizing in a Multiethnic Quasi-Democracy

In all political undertakings, the concept of legitimation is vital, especially for politics in Malaysia, which is a middle-income, multi-ethnic, and parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy (Kuik, 2022, p. 257). The complexity of politics in Malaysia primarily stems from the nation's heterogeneity in different internal attributes. This physical separation exists between different territories (such as Sarawak and Sabah on Borneo being separated from Peninsular Malaysia by sea), the divide between the urban and rural sides, state and federal

relationships, and socially contested memories that occurred through history, class, religion, and ethnicity. Such multidimensional heterogeneity is often reflected in the diversity of people's demands on different issues, values, and religious or political belief systems (Ostwald & Oliver, 2020, p. 3). More importantly, the successful governing of the state of Malaysia needs its ruling elites to pursue a course of action through different legitimation pathways to help in appealing to the distinct demands of various segments of the society in Malaysia.

Currently, available literature provided by Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2020, p. 2021; 2022) documents three pathways that can be used to justify Malaysian politics, which are central to the embrace given to the BRI after it was launched in 2013. They include procedural, particularistic, and performance legitimation. First, procedural legitimation refers to the acquisition of political authority and mandate via conformity and elections to social justice and democratic values (Puyok, 2016, p. 4). Second, particularistic legitimation denotes the maximization of authority and gathering of support via political mobilization based on an identity, which has been primarily achieved by advocating for people's rights in Malaysia (Liang, 2019, p. 372). Lastly, performance legitimation denotes the justification of authority and the growth of individual wellbeing and the overall economy (Chheang, 2021, p. 380). All these three pathways, i.e., procedural, particularistic, and performance legitimation, are often pursued concurrently in the country and diverse combinations based on the political needs of the ruling elites. Concurrently pursuing the adoption of these three pathways is an inevitable aspect, partly due to diversity in demands for the heterogeneous population in Malaysia and due to the nature or attributes of each of these pathways. More importantly, some characteristics of these three pathways also complement each other mutually. In contrast, others are more conflicting and competitive, such as fostering socio-economic justice and safeguarding the rights of the Malaysian people across all the existing ethnic groups.

It is imperative to find an optimal balance across these three pathways, which remains the most contentious issue for the ruling elites in Malaysia in their quest to enhance their chances and authority to rule the rest of the citizens (Kuik, 2021, p. 425). There are fault lines in which mobilization of distinct narratives, society and state interactions, and inter-elite contestations often occur. In the end, democracy, ethno-religious identity, and development have been the most potent narratives to mobilize Malaysian politics. Since 1957, when Malaysia gained its independence, the process of delivering growth and pursuing development has been a critical pathway through which successive governments have achieved legitimation. Pursuing development for all based on the performance-founded form of legitimation has been undertaken side by side with the particularistic pathway based on identity for a majority of the ethnic groups in the country, which has helped in safeguarding the interests of the Malays (Puyok, 2016, pp. 12-13). Despite a state-sanctioned affirmative action policy that restricts ethnic Chinese participation in a variety of activities, Malaysia's ethnic Chinese minority (about 25% of the population) has long played a key role in growing bilateral trade and collaboration (Chin, 2009, 175). Such a combination between pathways and the related discourse tends to shape different

policies and drive politics, which allows the BN to attain procedural legitimacy by winning a mandate via elections until mid-2018.

The concept of development seems to have been heavily politicized, and economics in Malaysia have taken a similar route. For the elite in PN, PH, and BN administrations, the core concept of development seems to have served domestic legitimation through three functions, i.e., reformation, reassurance, and redistribution (Chin, 2023, p. 120). Respectively, each of these functions reportedly targets varying constituencies, such as the Bumiputera ethnic and indigenous groups, other ethnic minorities (such as Indians and Chinese), and all the other Malaysians, particularly those living in urban areas and the young. The key development policies in the country, such as the pro-majority affirmative action program, are intended to help redistribute the nation's wealth, increase the economic participation of the country, reduce the interethnic inequality in income, eradicate poverty, and reassure the Malaysian people that the government is committed despite the pro-Malay policy to ascertain that they also have opportunities to succeed in the country like the other Malays. Despite that, other pronouncements made in line with development agendas involve the projection of different reforms, with a particular emphasis being placed on the structures over the nation's direction and an enlargement of the economic pie in Malaysia (Baviera, 2021, p. 283). These development pronouncements are supposed to help inject hope into the people and ensure that the current administration attains support from voters across different localities, classes, and ethnic groups.

Each of the current re-distributive, reforming, and reassurance political economy functions is intended to persuade the targeted audiences that their interests are safeguarded. Again, it is hoped that the political-economic functions will help to cover the political bases and interests of the elite ruling class in the country, which will help maximize and legitimize their rule. However, vertical and horizontal power diffusion has intervened when pursuing these functions. Such interventions have often occurred in the form of bottom-up demands that are done by different socio-political groups, relations conducted at the level of the federal and state governments, patronage politics (through corruption and cronyism), and inter-elite collusion and contestation (Yusof & Bhattasali, 2008, p. 28, 47). One of the most notable implications for these intervention processes is the redistributive primacy rationale over reforms and reassurance, which has become a recurrent theme in the political economy of the nation, especially with the current climate that comprises different lucrative projects that are backed and funded by the government.

Such a theme is defined by different attributes. First, the initiation of various projects meant to develop the nation is often driven by more political motivators than economic factors. Second, the adoption and installation of these initiatives are constantly juggled between stakeholder participation across different communities and the protection of crucial privileged people. Finally, the process is often defined by vital struggles between the elite groups, which is permeated by a discourse of showcasing the phenomena of different classes, i.e., the have-nots

versus those who are well connected politically, as a problem of identity or race (which includes the redistribution of economic fruits in a way that favors the Malay population) (Suffian, 2019, pp. 17-18), which develops into a rift between the non-Bumiputera and the Bumiputera).

Such intervention processes have deteriorated the developmental initiatives in Malaysia, either indirectly or directly. Often, the well-connected politicians in Malaysia have become the core principles in big-ticket undertakings or projects. As they control these projects, they have been subjected to the diffusion of power, contested by other competing preferences, values, and interests at the level of the society and the level of the political elites in the nation (Ngeow, 2019, pp. 121-122). The prevalence of such contests tends to filter the political and developmental logic across the country and end up containing the government's maneuverability. In addition, it also conditions the choices or preferences of the elites, especially those they selectively pursue. Ultimately, such occurrences mobilize and balance their prioritized pathways in legitimization, which tends to reshape the prospects and pace of the entire project, initiative, or undertaking (Ngeow, 2019, pp. 123-124). As a result of internal political logic, as previously delineated in this section, the process of ensuring that there is a productive bilateral relationship between Malaysia and China can be described as a vital component that better supports the nation's socio-economic development. Such pragmatism is caused by the elites in the country who have a continuous need to legitimize performance and the growing geopolitical and economic influence in China (Ngeow, 2019, pp. 126-128).

Given the limitations of resources and the domestic market in Malaysia, the need to embrace different external trading options and the necessity of leveraging diverse partnerships in external arenas have become a vital facet of the nation's external pragmatism (Chin, 2023, p. 124). The country remains dependent on trade, which makes it cyclical to unfair practices and economic downturns in other economies. In fact, as an economic recession triggered turmoil in the nation's politics, Mahathir almost lost his power and authority over the citizens. Substantially, the nation's external pragmatism has primarily been fostered due to internal alterations, such as the development of a sizable middle class amongst the Malays after the NEP was implemented. Ultimately, these occurrences have improved national confidence, which is affiliated with sustainable socio-economic transformation and changes how younger Chinese Malays perceive themselves (White, 2015). Currently, fourth and third-generation Chinese Malaysians have become more self-conscious of their national identity and ties with the political and cultural aspects of China. Ultimately, these present-day changes have a net effect on modern Malaysia's China policy, driven more by existing inter-state relationships than inter-ethnic considerations.

5.1.3 Connectivity Partnerships between China and Malaysia before the BRI

Most of the existing connectivity and infrastructure partnerships between China and Malaysia predate the BRI (Kuik, 2021, p. 426). Three successive leaders took the initiative of

cooperating with China, which often led to the notion that Malaysia was a small state that pulled before it was pushed by another stronger power. The connectivity and infrastructure partnership that were launched by leaders in Malaysia before the BRI include the SKRL under Mahathir 1.0, the Second Penang Bridge under Abdullah Badawi, and the Kuantan Port Expansion (KPE) and Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) under Najib Razak (Kuik, 2021, p. 426). Under Mahathir 1.0, the SKRL was first proposed in 1995 and was intended to connect the countries in the Southeastern side of Asia directly with the massive market in China. Under Abdullah Badawi, the Second Penang Bridge was proposed in late 2006 and would result in a 23-kilometer bridge connecting mainland Malaysia and the Island of Penang. For this project, China provided about \$800 million loan, the most significant loan to a foreign nation at the time (Kuik, 2021, p. 426). Lastly, under Najib Razak, the Gemas-Johor Bahru railway was built in 2009 after resident Hu Jintao visited Malaysia and helped connect the country's west coast to the other projects that were part of the SKRL. Subsequently, the Kuantan Port Expansion and Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park were constructed in 2012 as China launched the Qinzhou Industrial Park. The projects undertaken in Malaysia were considered “sister industrial parks” on the Peninsula of Malaysia’s eastern coast.

Furthermore, under the administration of then Prime Minister Najib, Malaysia was able to engage with China on different BRI-associated undertakings, some of which were launched way before 2013. Such BRI-associated projects undertaken before 2013 include the Gemas-Johor Bahru Electrified EDTP, the construction of the China Railway Rolling Stock Corp’s (CRRC) Rolling Stock Center, the development of the KL-Singapore HSR and Bandar Malaysia, and the institution of the ECRL (Kuik, 2021, p. 426). Between 2009 and 2016, various partnerships were announced between Malaysia’s local firms and other railway companies for the 191-kilometer rail project, which reflected changing alignments in interests (Kuik, 2021, p. 426). In addition, a memo was signed by the SR ZhuZhou Electric Locomotive to ensure that a rolling stock center for manufacturing was created in Batu Gajah. The construction of the HSR linking KL was already initiated in September 2010, and its funding was received from the 1MDB (Kuik, 2021, p. 427). It was expected to be a transportation hub that would help in connecting the planned KL-Singapore HSR to other rail systems across the country.

5.1.4 BRI Adoption in Malaysia: Enthusiasm and Recalibrations

Since Malaysia's political elite often seek to consolidate domestic authority and address power imbalances, the nation appears to have pragmatically pursued economically beneficial partnerships with China’s BRI (albeit with recalibrations after 2018, as illustrated in this section). Evidence of this elite-driven quest can be seen in the consolidation of power by political figures who have used BRI projects to bolster their domestic authority, such as the Najib Razak administration’s promotion of the ECRL to enhance political and economic leverage (Chin, 2019; Tham, 2020). Such an embrace has widened the strength and scope of the China-Malaysia economic tie. Also, it has boosted bilateral trading options and links to investments while

fostering movement between both nations and production factors. Despite unprecedented alterations in government within the recent few years, the ruling elites in Malaysia seem to have opted to document the benefits garnered from such a stable partnership with China while downplaying the associated problems and risks.

Since 2009, China has been ranked as the largest partner in trading with Malaysia. Between 2008 and 2018, Malaysia has been the largest partner in dealing with China within the ASEAN region. In addition, since 2014, China has been the most prominent investor in Malaysia. As such, since Xi made announcements on the BRI in 2013, the foreign direct investments (FDI) by China in Malaysia witnessed significant growth between 2012 and 2015, spreading across different states in the nation and helping to cover all aspects or sectors of the economy (Wan Saiful, 2017, 46; Tham 2018, 5; Gomez et al., 2020, 27). Internal political imperatives in Malaysia are responsible for the sustenance of such a trend.

Expanding economic association with China, which encompasses a much closer partnership on the BRI, has been perceived as an essential political endeavor for advancing the interests of the political elite in Malaysian government, which is noted to be based on patronage politics and performance legitimization. In a speech to establish the digital free trading zones in Malaysia, then Prime Minister Najib Razak noted that “We must certainly take advantage of China’s Belt and Road Initiative or BRI, which has the potential to create the world’s largest platform for *economic cooperation*.” In his speech on January 30 (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2018a), he also stated that:

“When I spoke to Xi Jinping in Beijing during the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation last May, he shared his anticipation about just what *possibilities* the BRI could open up. The BRI aims to connect cities in sixty-eight countries across Europe, Asia, and Africa. This represents a market of approximately 4.4 billion people or about 63 percent of the world’s population and 30 percent of global GDP [gross domestic product]. Those are the markets that Malaysia will be able to tap into even more once *connectivity* is enhanced. This is already happening. Take, for instance, Jack Ma’s participation in creating Malaysia’s Digital Free Trade Zone, an e-Commerce platform that complements the BRI goals of *unimpeded trade*. More than 1,900 SMEs [Small and Medium-sized Enterprises] are already committed to participating in the DFTZ [Digital Free Trade Zone]. It is expected that USD [United States dollar] 65 billion worth of goods will be moving through it, creating 60,000 direct and indirect jobs by 2025. The *export growth* of Malaysian SMEs’ goods is also targeted to double by the year 2025 due to this initiative. More importantly, the five international initiatives announced today also involve important *collaborations* with countries from around our region – India, Sri Lanka, China, and Indonesia – and I can assure you that when we say these examples of *cooperation* are *win-win*, this Government will be making certain that Malaysia does its *share of winning*” (emphasis added by author).

Former Malaysia's Prime Minister, Najib, in his speech, noticed high potentials of the BRI: the KWs he used were "possibilities," "unimpeded trade," "collaborations," "economic cooperation," and "win-win." They indicate an optimistic view on the role of the BRI both as an enabler of economic growth and the collaboration between nations.

For example, "possibilities" and "connectivity" imply a broad, almost endless stream of economic opportunities, with the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park being a physical embodiment of this expanded connectivity. "Unimpeded trade" signifies a trade that flows smoothly, while flowing without impediments can be supported by the fact that, as an example, Malaysia's exports to China have significantly risen since the inception of the BRI. The BRI words "collaborations" and "economic cooperation" point to the effort as multilateral. This then translates to harnessing synergy among cooperating countries, just as 'architecture building' in the actual projects being shared work efforts between Malaysian business groups and their Chinese partners (World Bank, 2019, p. 18, 81). Finally, "win-win" means mutual advantage that is projected from the project, emphasizing balanced, equitable policy toward global development.

In another speech by Najib held on 27 February 2018, he stated that:

"A key component of that is Xi's Belt and Road Initiative, from which Malaysia stands to reap huge *opportunities*, as it has the potential to create the world's largest platform for *economic cooperation*. As a responsible Government working to promote the *Malaysian people's interests*, we embrace the BRI. It would not be in our national interest to turn our back on it. But unfortunately, there is a former Malaysian leader who wishes to undermine that relationship. Whenever Chinese *investment* comes up, he accuses this Government of *selling* Malaysia's *sovereignty* to China. On that basis, did we sell our sovereignty to Japan during his time in power? As it happens, it is still the case that we have had more investment from Japan than from China and Hong Kong in the long run. But as far as I can tell, we are still a sovereign nation! In fact, Malaysian *investment* in China used to be bigger than Chinese *investment* in Malaysia. Did that mean we were buying Chinese sovereignty? Of course not! This is simple economic illiteracy – anyone who says this truly does not know how economics works. It is scaremongering for selfish political gain. We welcome *investment*, whether it is from China, Japan, India, Saudi Arabia, or any of the many countries with which we have friendly relations. And you see this in the multinational companies that have established or are relocating their regional offices to Kuala Lumpur" (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2018b; emphasis added by author).

In another speech, Najib emphasized those enormous "opportunities," "cooperation," and "investment" brought to Malaysia by the BRI, juxtaposing such benefits with the pejorative

context of "selling sovereignty" linked to his predecessor, former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad.

From an analytical perspective, his double mention of the term "economic cooperation" underlines the joint effort, which is in itself the very tenet of the initiative: common growth. The word "opportunities" brings with it a substantial economic promise in all implications, within infrastructural projects like the ECRL, which has suddenly burgeoned (New Straits Times, 2018). The investment is based on high monetary and resource commitment or influx, given the BRI's promise for Malaysia - as a result of huge Chinese direct investment inflows in various Malaysian sectors (World Bank, 2019, p. 37).

The mere mention of "selling sovereignty" is placed in criticism; this highlights a critical juxtaposition of the strategy of the current government with past concerns, thereby fostering strong support for the positive narrative around Malaysia and the BRI. Here, Najib referred to Mahathir Mohamad. The latter had been Malaysia's Prime Minister between 1981 and 2003 and again between 2018 and 2020. Although relations between Najib and Mahathir were strained by both political rivalry and different perceptions of the BRI (Sipalan, 2024), Mahathir's critical stance on certain BRI projects was most likely a significant factor shaping Najib's motivation (Lam, 2020). Another contributing factor is that the differences over the BRI policy were huge but also formed part of a broader political context of contestation within Malaysia as a whole and leadership struggle (Palatino, 2015).

However, the corruption of former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal has a bearing on the context of Malaysia's broader economic and political environments regarding the BRI. Evidence brought in his trial showed that Najib had offered Chinese state-owned firms large-scale infrastructure projects, such as ECRL and gas pipelines, in return for financing cover over its debts at 1MDB (South China Morning Post, 2019). The new setup explicitly shows how BRI projects have been turned into political leverage to buy one's way to a debt problem, amounting to an illustration of the shadowy aspects and possibly corrupt transactions under the BRI scheme (Hillman, 2019).

Although identity in Malaysia seems to be contested on the grounds of racism, the external manifestations of these politics seem to get more complicated. The economic interactions between China and Malaysia, primarily how Malaysia engaged with the big-ticket projects related to the BRI, seem to be less shaped by the equation of China versus Malaysia and seem to be more dynamic politically. In that case, the China and Malaysia infrastructural partnership is seemingly driven by forces that are politically connected for the Malays and surrounding interests centered on the leaders, such as the Mahathir-led PH bloc, Najib's BN coalition, and the current Muhyiddin PN-Plus administration (Bush, 2022). It seems that while the elites might have a different perspective, the politically connected Malays are the key beneficiaries of the projects based on projects. The Chinese Malays have become executors or

subordinates of ventures that are dominated by Malays, and the existing contestations in political terms are fought over projects along inter-elite lines rather than inter-ethnic lines. Such recurrent themes have often been linked to diverse leadership administrations and structures, such as during the BN times and different governments, from PN-Plus to PH and BN (Kuik, 2021).

5.1.5 Recalibration Politics under Mahathir 2.0

After Mahathir's electoral victory in May 2018, the ECRL was two other pipeline projects backed by China, i.e., the Trans-Sabah Gas Pipeline (TSGP) and the Multi-product Pipeline (MPP) were suspended, and the KL-Singapore HSR was postponed, which recalibrated the BRI embrace by Malaysia (Malgeri, 2019, p. 15). Through leverage on his mandate on an electoral basis and sentiments shared at the grassroots level, Mahathir was able to request a renegotiation of the ECRL to help in resetting terms, reducing costs, and ensuring that the project's implementation would favor Malaysia more (Liu & Lim, 2019, p. 220). In a media interview, he stated that, "If we get *better terms*, then, of course, we will continue." As such, he heavily criticized the previous payment terms that had been executed "without regard for the progress of the construction." Concerning the previous undertakings, he noted that "Then there's the issue that they give the contract to a Chinese company, and they bring in workers and everything from China, so what is there for Malaysia? We must *gain something for Malaysia*" (Azim, 2018; Star Media Group Berhad, 2018a; emphasis added by author). After renegotiations for almost a month led by Daim Zainuddin, a confidante of Mahathir, Malaysia and China declared a solid decision to resume the construction of the ECRL. Construction costs were relatively reduced, the track was slightly shortened, there was higher participation from the local workforce, and the completion date was slightly extended from 2024 to 2026.

According to many observers, such as Chin (2021, p. 10), Malaysia under Mahathir 2.0 seemed to push back against the BRI project sponsored by Beijing. This move challenged the assertiveness shown by China in the SCS and also countered the hegemony of the Chinese in the region. While such views and changing perceptions might be considered a little bit too simplistic, the response given by Mahathir might be complex enough in reality. Although Mahathir made a decision to suspend three projects, he also permitted other projects related to China, such as Alibaba's DFTZ, Gemas-Johor Bahru (JB) Electrified Double Tracking Project (EDTP), MCKIP, and the KPE construction, to be continued. He also continuously stressed that Malaysia should support other Chinese investments and the BRI (Chin, 2021, p. 11). To have these points underscored, Mahathir visited China within the first three months after taking office and visited the headquarters of the tech giants in China, such as Zhejiang Geely and Alibaba, before he continued into Beijing. He raised the issue of unfairness in the dealings and cases of the loans with Chinese leaders and blamed Malaysia's debt crisis on Najib's BN administration.

The moves conducted by Mahathir were a section of his strategy to renegotiate with China, which was also part of his more comprehensive, long-standing pragmatic China policy

(Khoo, 2021, p. 330). Such moves did not showcase a state of independent authority and its formulated position strongly resisting China's pressure in getting involved in the project. Still, they were about the pragmatic renegotiation of a smaller state over how it asymmetrically related with an increasingly assertive neighbor when uncertainty was increasingly growing. In that case, Mahathir perceived all projects related to the BRI as not being in isolation but as one of the numerous issues that would grow to impact not only China's association with Malaysia but also Malaysia's SCS territorial claims. At a press conference held in May 2018, before Mahathir was sworn in as the seventh prime minister, he raised concern over the territorial disputes in the SCS as he responded to a question raised by a journalist concerning the fate of different Chinese-based BRI initiatives in the country. After showing considerable support for the projects, Mahathir notes that "Malaysia reserved the right to renegotiate terms of some agreements with Beijing, if necessary." He also added, "We have no problem with that [the BRI], except, of course, we would not like to see too many warships in this area [the SCS] because [a] warship attracts other warships" (Star Media Group Berhad 2018b). The statements made by Mahathir showcase that there was considerable growing concern over the military activities being carried out by China in the waters being disputed since Malaysia had outlooked the situation in the SCS, which had become a concern that would raise rivalry between America and China (Lai and Kuik 2020).

The approach adopted by Mahathir was dependent on maintaining equidistant ties with all powers in play and then leveraging them to ensure he could cope with power rivalry and external uncertainties. While he cautiously managed issues related to China, he also upgraded ties with Japan, which helped in securing political, economic, and security support from Tokyo. As he toured London and New York, he also managed to woo other investors from Europe and America. He also supported Huawei despite claims that it had supported cyber espionage, stating that Malaysia had a right to make independent decisions regarding its relationships with China. He also added that while the elites in the nation had admitted that China was an immense power, there was a need to understand its strategies and policies to make required adjustments to gain benefits from it (Bernama, 2019). Regarding his stance on Xinjiang situation, Mahathir remained deferential publicly but was defiant quietly.

When dealing with China, Mahathir seems to have calculated all benefits and risks pragmatically, cultivated his choices, and made reasonable tradeoffs in policy choices (Yu, 2019, p. 15). Such an approach was continued by the Muhyiddin administration, which is evident in their decisions on continued work on the ECRL and other initiatives despite the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Such a continuation in pragmatism depicts the efforts by the elites in Malaysia to enhance legitimization. Regardless of the coalitions or leaders in power, the elites sought to balance procedural, particularistic, and performance pathways to justify and leverage external conditions, such as the asymmetric power relations between Malaysia and China. In return, Malaysia could maintain its space in creating or developing different opportunities to help preserve and legitimize its authority nation-wise. The ECRL resumption

after facing protracted renegotiations and contestations showcases the salience of performance legitimization based on development in the country. As such, since the BRI was launched in the country, the political landscape showcases that there are different political and developmental imperatives that underpin the continued support from the elites without considering the related controversies.

Overall, it is apparent that the BRI-based projects have been viewed as more than bridges that connect Malaysia to China because they have a much broader and more comprehensive significance to the people. In socio-political terms, the BRI has helped in bridging the gap in development between the west and east coasts of the country by linking the less developed regions, such as Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan, with other areas that are more developed, such as Putrajaya, KL, Negeri Sembilan, and Selangor. It has also helped in introducing more foreign and domestic investments that have helped in stimulating export, import, logistic, and commercial growth, resulting in the development of tourism along different proposed areas for rail alignment. The projects linked to the BRI not only bolster the justification for development-focused performance but also alter the elite's viewpoint, reinforcing a sense of unique identity-based legitimation. Since the construction of the projects involves numerous states, the ECRL denotes that Malaysia is committed to advancing the interests of the citizens, which will also reinforce the image of pro-Malay elites for years to come (Liu and Lim 2019).

5.1.6 Malaysia's Proactive BRI Engagements under Najib Razak and Ismail Sabri

The early projects detailed in the previous section laid the basis or foundation for other subsequent partnerships in bilateral connectivity between China and Malaysia after the launch of the BRI in late 2013 by Xi. At the time, former Prime Minister Najib repeatedly expressed overwhelming support from Malaysia for the BRI when Xi first visited the country in 2013 and when Najib visited China in 2014. Ngeow (2019;13) opines that on multiple other occasions, former Prime Minister Najib established a cross-ministerial committee that he chaired to help in coordinating, monitoring, and following up on the projects financed and related to the bilateral cooperation between both nations. In May 2017, the BRI MoU was signed in Beijing. In July 2017, the Belt and Road Initiative National Secretariat (BRINS Malaysia) was established at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) to help in coordinating, facilitating, and monitoring the adoption of all BRI projects in Malaysia and to help in monitoring other BRI-related projects globally (Chong et al., 2020, p. 30).

In 2015, the Rolling Stock Centre (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of the CRRC, initiated the production process. In the end, the facility became one of the first rolling stock plants that were constructed outside China and was the primary train manufacturing center throughout the southeast region of the Asian continent. In 2016, CRRC announced plans that would lead to expansions to ensure the ASEAN market was fully explored. In addition, the ECRL was announced in 2016 when Najib visited China. At the time, the financing and contract

framework for the engineering, procurement, construction, and commissioning (EPCC) were signed, and the contract was offered to Communication Construction Company Ltd (CCCC) (Kuik, 2021, p. 427). In contrast, the Exim Bank of China was in charge of the financing process (Kuik, 2021, p. 427). This project has become one of the most significant infrastructural undertakings in Malaysia to date. Still, it remains controversial as it was backed by a foreign nation due to the exorbitant price involved, which raised concerns over the Najib administration's scandals with the 1MDB and the blatant lack of transparency in the whole process. The extensive investigations and lawsuits based on the embezzlement of billions of dollars in the 1MDB scandal and against top officials in Malaysia shook the political and economic landscape. According to Wright & Hope (2018, pp. 3-5), there was a ripple effect in modern Malaysia as a result of Najib's alleged criminal activity. It dramatically influenced the political environment in Malaysia and contributed to his primary opponent's victory in which Najib's government was defeated in the elections of 2018 by Mahathir (Baron, 2018).

After the launch of the BRI, infrastructure and connectivity projects backed and funded by China have seemingly drawn much attention beyond Malaysia and have been advancing with different success prospects. Both the KPE and MCKIP projects seem to have made notable and substantial progress altogether, attracting significant investments (Kuik, 2021, p. 430). In September 2018, the first phase of the KPE was completed, and the second phase was completed in June 2019. Despite the delay caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Gemas-JB EDTP is expected to be completed by late 2022 as the CRRC Rolling Stock Centre continues to expand its operational framework, cooperate with different local suppliers, and employ more than 90% of its staff from local companies (Kuik, 2021, p. 430). It also facilitates the transfer of technology by ensuring that more local staff are trained. While these developments contrast with other undertakings, the BRI seems to have been an add-on for Malaysia. Still, it can be noted that the variations in the prospects of China-backed projects result from political contestations, economic viability, and the composition of different partnerships.

On 26 April 2018, Mahathir stated, "Yes, the Belt and Road idea is great. It can bring the land-locked countries of Central Asia closer to the sea. They can grow in wealth and their *poverty reduced*. Everyone will benefit from the *ease of travel and communication* that the development of the Belt and Road project will bring" (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2018c; emphasis added by author). Also, the former Prime minister noted that "An essential element is the *freedom of passage* along these routes. A passageway is only as good as the freedom it provides. Both the sea and the land routes will pass through many countries. Bureaucratic hassles will slow the speed of travel. Therefore, these passages must be free and open to all" (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2018c; emphasis added by author). In addition, on 25th June 2018, he stated that

"We in ASEAN can enjoy *net gains* if the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be designed to serve *national and regional interests*, just as *the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan* is

intended. There should be no doubt that the BRI, given that with the full and fair participation of all stakeholders, can be a *win-win* proposition. National and regional *development efforts* would then be *mutually complementary*. Much depends on how we discuss and negotiate” (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2018c). He added that “We should then all work closely to see how we can identify and energize complementarities. Since Japan and others have their *connectivity* and *infrastructure development plans*, these we also welcome. Thus, if ASEAN does not seize this moment when these initiatives are for the taking, others may do so and in their way or nothing positive may happen at all” (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2018d; emphasis added by author).

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir uses such terms in his speeches when referring to the positive meaning of the BRI as: "benefit," "net gains," "win-win," "connectivity," and "infrastructure."

Mahathir talks about the "benefit" as he uses Malaysia's economic growth by increasing trade and investment from the BRI; the term "net gains" means practical economic improvements. It is a "win-win" one, as it gains mutual benefits where Malaysia has better export capacity, while China boosts its access to maritime routes (Ngeow, 2019, pp. 36-37). "Connectivity" means logistical networks, along with transportation infrastructure, within ASEAN (Chinvanno, 2015, p. 10). Finally, "infrastructure" would be anything from ports, railways, and highways, which are very critical to Malaysia's economic landscape (Malay Mail, 2024 and Xinhua, 2023). It can, therefore, be agreed that the BRI is focused on tremendous terms in regard to shared prosperity in driving both national and regional growth.

In another speech at the Global Chinese Economic and Technology Summit (GCETS) held on 16th December 2021, then Prime Minister Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob opined that,

“Malaysia and China’s *economic collaborations* were further strengthened with the signing of the Five Year Programme for Economic and Trade Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and 2017, respectively. In fact, Malaysia is one of the earliest supporters of China’s ambitious BRI policy, recognizing its huge *economic potential* and role in promoting *greater integration*” (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2021; emphasis added by author).

Earlier on, in another statement delivered at the 130th China Import and Export Fair (Canton Fair) Opening Ceremony on 14th October 2021, former Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yakoob also stated that

“Such areas had already been the cornerstone of China’s trade and economic policies for many years. It has been embodied in the Belt and Road Initiative and China’s 14th Five-Year Plan. Malaysia, being one of the first countries to support the BRI, wishes to reaffirm our confidence that this strategic and forward-looking initiative will open up

more frontiers of *connectivity*. We firmly believe that this *mutual understanding* will create new possibilities for *growth* and *development* across the Asia Pacific, Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe” (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2021b; emphasis added by author).

In his speeches, Ismail Sabri Yaakob highlights the positive perceptions of the BRI through terms such as "economic collaborations," "economic potential," "greater integration," and "connectivity."

Statistically, this occurrence of these KWs creates a strategic narrative, much in these ways: "Economic collaboration" identifies this collaboration between Malaysia and China, while "economic potentials" stand for the potentialities seen through the intensification in FDI and lightened market potentials within Malaysia (World Bank, 2019, p. 13), "greater integration" distinguish the role of the BRI in fostering regional cohesion and strengthening ASEAN-China ties (Chinvanno, 2015, p. 13), and "connectivity" points to the initiative's aim to enhance infrastructure and linkages. The repeated use of these words results from the confidence in the ability of the BRI to set positive growth and development momentum in many regions.

All in all, both Najib and Mahathir used positive adjectives when describing the BRI. "Possibilities," "unimpeded trade," "collaborations," "economic cooperation," "win-win," "opportunities," "cooperation," and "investment" are some of the words and phrases found in Najib's speech. Some words used in Mahathir's speech include "benefit," "net gains," "win-win," "connectivity," and "infrastructure." And some terms in Ismail Sabri Bin Yaakob's speech include "economic collaborations," "economic potential," greater integration, and "connectivity." Out of the three, it is only Mahathir who declares loudly about the downsides with "better terms" and "gain something for Malaysia," criticizing the previous payment conditions and the lack of local economic benefits. Najib, while largely positive, also expressed concerns with phrases like "selling sovereignty," referring yet opposing to his predecessor, Mahathir. The term "economic cooperation" appeared in two instances for Najib and once for the other utterances. In the speech produced by Ismail Sabri Yakoob, the content is not so drastically different from that of Najib, dwelling on key terms counted as positive, such as "economic collaborations" and "connectivity." The concepts and respective collocations with "connectivity," followed by "win-win," were mentioned by all three Prime ministers, determining their central place in the BRI's narrative.

“If we get *better terms*, then, of course, we will continue.” As such, he heavily criticized the previous payment terms that had been executed “without regard for the progress of the construction.” Concerning the previous undertakings, he noted that “Then there’s the issue that they give the contract to a Chinese company, and they bring in workers and everything from China, so what is there for Malaysia? We must *gain something for Malaysia*”

5.1.7 Malaysia's Hedging and Strategic Acceptance of the BRI

Mahathir exhibits Malaysia's acceptance of the BRI project with the stipulation that it remains a purely economic and not a militaristic endeavor by the Chinese government. According to Jamil (2023, p. 9), contrary to the consensus view, Malaysia maintained a firm but non-confrontational stance in its SCS Policy, aiming to limit military tensions rather than engaging directly with China's assertive actions in the region. Mahathir further emphasized policy initiatives to compel China to spur the growth and development of the Malaysian economy. For instance, they argued that the Chinese government must first assess the Malaysian capability before considering the project deliverables in terms of labor and local materials (Chin, 2021). The government of Malaysia, in formulating a pertinent policy, held that for them to accept the BRI and honor China's initiative, "(i) it must utilize local materials as the full importation of foreign materials for these mega projects does not benefit local enterprises and developers; (ii) Chinese investment must stimulate domestic employment as the argument that Malaysia has no skilled worker is unfair. Chinese firms would need to first assess the capacity and ability of the local workforce before determining their staff requirement; and (iii) Chinese investments would need to ensure technological and knowledge transfer to local industries" (Mail, 2021). Accordingly, they wanted every aspect of the BRI project aligned with the interests of Malaysia. Clearly, the Malaysian government was determined to utilize the BRI project to its advantage, including promoting economic growth and development, bolstering foreign relationships, and enhancing its foreign policy in accommodating foreign investment and increasing its financial and economic network (Jamil, 2023, p. 13).

Arguably, the government demonstrated state centrism in that it sought to prioritize its interests in engagements with China. Further evidence suggests that the Malaysian government's intent was to secure China as a key trading ally through the BRI project. In an interview, Muhyiddin Yassin argued that "China being our largest trading partner cannot be taken lightly because if we do not have close ties with them, Malaysia stands to lose out" (Jamil, 2023, p. 15). Per the statement, Malaysia took a "hedging" standpoint towards the BRI in that it considered its gain from the project and how it would bolster its ties with China, while avoiding becoming dependent on China (Gerstl, 2022, p. 64). Arguably, the government acknowledged and accepted the BRI with its policies grounded in mutual benefit but with an emphasis and prioritization of Malaysian interests (Gerstl, 2022, pp. 48-49). Likewise, Anwar emphasized a strategic foreign policy supporting economic collaboration and cooperation ensuring the growth and development of Malaysia. Anwar said that "China is an important neighbor. Of course, it's a priority to enhance bilateral trade, investment, and cultural relations with China ... I would not just leave (ties with China) as it is. (They) need to be enhanced" (Times, 2023). The evidence demonstrates that the government of Malaysia, no matter which politician from which political party was Prime Minister, had a positive perception toward China due to its consideration of China as a key and strategic neighbor. Accordingly, the government of Malaysia is likely to further have a

positive regard for BRI since it has demonstrated consistent policy development in favor of its foreign policy with China.

5.2. Germany

Beginning in 2013, the BRI reflected China's self-proclaimed position as a rising economic superpower, building its influence through infrastructure investments and trade. On its part, Germany carefully balanced diplomatic and economic relations with China while cooperating with other countries to shield itself against China on its stated national political and economic interests.

Germany's approach to the BRI has been shaped significantly by the policies and outlooks of its Chancellors, reflecting their individual political philosophies, economic priorities, and strategic visions for Germany's role in global affairs. The chancellorships of Angela Merkel, representing the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and Olaf Scholz, from the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), each shaped their distinct approaches to China and the BRI. Their differing party ideologies influenced how these leaders navigated policy. Nevertheless, both chancellorships bear testimony to a consistent hallmark of German foreign policy, where economic interests must be carefully balanced with national security, human rights, and adherence to international norms.

Angela Merkel was the Chancellor from 2005 to 2021, promoting a consensual foreign policy and possessing a moderate, pragmatic, and strategic stance toward international relations, particularly with China. Merkel stressed on economic diplomacy since she knew that the German export-based economy would nurture closer relationships between the two countries. During her chancellorship, China became Europe's most prominent trading partner, especially for Germany. The Merkel government always upheld a careful balance: pleading for human rights and democracy, as well as following up on economic interests. This placed her under a kind of two-faced policy, where she raised some well-articulated concerns about human rights on one front but touted economic cooperation on the other. In response, Merkel's government saw in the BRI an opportunity for German businesses to enter very lucrative infrastructural projects while also warning other nations of becoming dependent on China (Ciesielska-Klikowska, 2018, p. 99). Olaf Scholz, who succeeded Merkel as head of government in 2021, took her policies a step further by addressing new challenges emerging on the geopolitics scene. The Scholz administration, notably the Green Party, dares to be more vocal on the strategic impacts of moving toward China and underscores the need for a more balanced and diversified approach to international partnerships. Scholz's administration has been more vocal about the strategic implications of China's rise, emphasizing the need for a balanced and diversified approach to international partnerships. While maintaining economic ties, Scholz has advocated for a stronger and more unified European stance on issues related to China, including the BRI (Godehardt, 2024, pp. 19-28).

For German companies, the BRI was initially regarded as providing access to new markets and the implementation of large infrastructure projects as useful particularly for the sectors of engineering and manufacturing. One of declared Germany's goals is to ensure the Chinese market is open for German companies and undertake all necessary measures to that end (Chang & Pieke, 2018, p. 211). Still, not everything about Germany's engagement in the BRI process is unproblematic (MERICS, 2023). The basic concerns relate, therefore, to the transparency and sustainability of BRI projects along with increased Chinese influence in Europe. Germany, on the other hand, has pushed for the integration of European standards on competitive terms and assure environmental sustainability into the BRI projects (Benner et al., 2018, p. 41). Germany's approach to the BRI can be contrasted with those of other European nations, which vary widely in their levels of engagement and enthusiasm for the initiative. For example, Italy embraced the BRI at the beginning by signing an MOU with China for infrastructure investments when it had been going through hard times economically. This, however, remained under criticisms from the other European countries and the United States, as it was considered to be a strategic mistake that would escalate the effects of China in Europe (Pugliese, Ghiretti, & Insisa, 2022, p. 1044). The MOU, though, was not renewed in 2024. In contrast, France, under President Emmanuel Macron, has taken a more cautious approach to the BRI. Although it has taken cognizance of the economic opportunities, France has stressed the need for a more collective European response to ensure that the BRI is conducted in line with international norms and standards. Macron has been at the forefront of suggesting that if Europeans decide to engage the PRC, it must be done in firm strategic prudence yet with a note of cooperation (Ntousas & Minas, 2022, p. 157). What is more, the increased investment interest of many Central and East European Countries (CEE) caused by the BRI brings a chance for the latter to strengthen their economies and infrastructures. The last five years have seen several countries, such as Hungary and Serbia, seeking Chinese investments that at times skirt EU regulations—raising some questions as to whether the risk of a 'Fragmented Europe' is real, pushing forward different approaches to China and the BRI.

Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz, respectively, aimed to balance business opportunities with broader geopolitical considerations. As German-Chinese relations deepen, the dynamics of these relations will be of great importance for both countries and the international community as a whole.

In the following, this chapter elaborates on the development and the current state of Chinese-German relations in light of China's Belt and Road Initiative. It starts with an evaluation of the historical bases founded by German-Chinese relations in the post-war period as a stage for understanding how power dynamics shaped their interactions. The chapter proceeds with the analysis of domestic political factors in Germany, showing how political elites and societal trends shape foreign policy decisions in that country. It charts more than a critical account of the strategic engagements of Germany with China over connectivity and infrastructure projects, outlining the key partnerships and Germany's step-by-step approach to balancing economic and

geopolitical considerations. It assesses Germany's engagement with the BRI over the course of different phases of leadership, disentangling the motivations, strategic adjustments, and worries that bind German policy from the third Merkel term to the Scholz administration. At every stage of this chapter, what is foregrounded here is Germany's quest to navigate a complex geopolitical landscape further complicated by the BRI.

5.2.1 The Emergence of Chinese-German Diplomatic Relations

In fact, the nature of German-Chinese diplomatic relations changed dramatically over the decades, conditioned by the shifts in global power dynamics, economic interests, and political ideologies. After World War II, Germany was divided into East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and West Germany, or the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Each entity pursued different diplomatic paths with China. Formal relations between the GDR and the PRC were strengthened by their shared communist ideologies virtually from the moment the PRC was founded (Schaefer, 2021). This incipient alignment was underpinned by support for socialist principles and ideological solidarity against Western capitalist states. The GDR's relations with China were typified by cooperation in education, culture, and technology transfer, albeit formerly conditioned by the broader Sino-Soviet tensions, which at times also left their imprint on the Beijing-East Berlin relations.

At any rate, this could be perfectly clear in respect to the existence of the FRG—a Western democracy and a member of NATO - diplomatic relations with China only much slower over the years of the Cold War and ideological tautness. Originally, that had been due to West Germany's relations with the US and commitments to containment of communism. Still, the relaxation of the Cold War during the late 1960s and early 1970s created new opportunities for diplomacy. In 1972, the FRG finally recognized the PRC and established formal diplomatic relations. It was a sequence of actions under the policy pursued by Chancellor Willy Brandt called *Ostpolitik*, aimed at normalizing relations with Eastern European countries as well as China (Niedhart, 2016, pp. 19-20). Normalization initiated a more pragmatic and economically oriented connection between the countries, laying a foundation for further cooperation.

In the second half of the 20th century, economic interests became the basis of Chinese-(West) German relations. China's fast industrialization and economic liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s opened enormous opportunities for German businesses to take advantage of. During the period of Chancellor Helmut Kohl between 1982 and 1998, the proactive encouragement of economic interaction with China led to increased bilateral trade (Hilgers, 2021, p. 98). The visits of Kohl in China helped to provide the base for bilateral facilitation of trade and investments, technology transfers, and long-term partnerships between German and Chinese firms. He emphasized mutual economic benefit through which Germany would be able to provide advanced industrial technologies and expertise and gain access to China's burgeoning market.

In the 21st century, under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and then Angela Merkel, from 1998 to 2005, prospects deepened further, notably from 2005 to 2021. The government of Gerhard Schröder focused on strategic economic partnerships with China, looking at the prospects of harnessing the potential of the Asian giant to turn into a major player in the world. Yet more than any other, it was during Angela Merkel's time that the importance of China as a strategic partner was underlined carefully with economic cooperation in balance with cautious political engagement. Her tenure was marked by a high intensity of reciprocal visits at the level of state visits and economic forums that strengthened bilateral relations (Ciesielska-Klikowska, 2018, p. 139). Merkel's pragmatic approach sought to ensure that Germany could capitalize on China's economic rise while maintaining a critical stance on issues such as human rights and intellectual property rights.

Unlike China, Germany is a parliamentary democracy and highly regards the rule of law and transparency. Balancing between domestic German and international principles and interests becomes a very delicate procedure, especially in issues of foreign policy. Germany's interest in China and the BRI merely shows that Berlin exhibits pragmatism and that it is seizing economic opportunities that the endeavor may offer while it consistently addresses issues of human rights, proper environmental standards, and geopolitical stability (Ogden, 2014).

The emergence and development of Chinese-German diplomatic relations since the launch of the BRI in 2013 have been influenced by multiple pathways that justify German politics in this context. These include economic pragmatism, strategic diplomacy, and balancing of values with strategic interests. Such a context explains why Germany engaged with the BRI.

Chinese-German relations have been essentially driven by economic pragmatism. Germany, the biggest economy in Europe, and China, the second-biggest economy in the world, grew to have seemingly a symbiotic relationship. Germany's advanced technology and industrial capability merge well with China's manufacturing prowess and huge market potential. The trade between these two countries has grown to massive proportions over the years, especially towards the beginning of this century, with China actually stepping into the position of Germany's largest trading partner, taking over from France (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024). The mutual economic benefits, in particular, and the huge opportunities German business enterprises have traditionally enjoyed in the Chinese market have called for the practical approach of targeting growth and stability. In this sense, Germany's interests match very well with the large infrastructure development projects of the BRI, which indirectly open up new markets in other countries: Germany is trying not only to increase its global economic presence but also to guarantee new markets for its high-value exports.

This has forced Germany to walk a tightrope in terms of balancing its commitments to partnerships and alliances with Western nations and a pragmatic economic engagement with China. Germany holds political weight in its stance within the EU and in its participation in the

global institutions of governance, thereby allowing it to engage China globally - be it on the issue of climate change, international security, or trade regulation. The strategic need to maintain close economic ties with China while fulfilling its obligations towards Western alliances has compelled Germany to adopt a dual approach. At the bilateral level, Germany has managed to nurture close economic ties and launched high-level dialogues to discuss issues of mutual concern. At the multilateral level, Germany uses its position within the European Union to help fashion a collective European strategy toward China. Such a dual approach helps Germany to maximize its influence and safeguard its interests in an increasingly multipolar world (Hilgers, 2021, p. 12, 71).

Ideologically, distinct cracks exist between democratic values, which Germany upholds, and China's authoritarian model of governance, which is characterized by a lack of democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law. This will cause intermittent tension, especially with respect to human rights violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Yet, China and Germany have proven that they can put these differences aside in the search for mutual economic advantage from the partnership (Benner et al., 2018, p. 40). That such ideological differences must be balanced against economic and strategic imperatives has fashioned the pragmatic policy of Germany pertaining to Sino-German relations. The BRI is a platform on which all these pragmatic considerations come into view, allowing Germany to engage with China on economic terms while remaining critical of Beijing regarding political and human rights issues.

The main German goods that are either exported to or produced by German companies in China are automobiles, machinery, and chemicals. When produced in China, the PRC thus benefits from German technologies and know-how (Zenglein & Holzmann, 2019, p. 55).

This leaves strategic diplomacy with an important role. In engaging with Germany, China very carefully follows a twofold path: one at the bilateral level and the other at the multilateral level. At the bilateral level, what is practical between China and Germany is obviously the close economic ties forming the basis of their relationship. Meanwhile, there is a constant top-level dialogue between the two nations on matters of common interest and concern. Usually, these dialogues do not go beyond the confinement of trade, investment, and technology cooperation and, by large, indicate how deeply their economies are related. Multilaterally, Germany uses the position granted within the EU to shape a collective European strategy in relation to China. This dual approach by Germany enables Berlin to maximize its influence on issues and protect its interest (Ciesielska-Klikowska, 2018, p. 107). Through its participation in EU-China dialogues and policy coordination with other member states of the EU, Germany hopes to provide unity, which enables it to bargain more effectively and makes sure to guard European values and standards in the process of dealing with China.

To sum up, the complexity of the process of the emergence of Chinese-German diplomatic relations is governed by several historical, economic, and ideological factors

involved. Economic pragmatism, strategic diplomacy, and balancing values and strategic interests lie at the heart of how Germany engages with the Belt and Road Initiative. Strategies such as this dovetail very well with the fact that Germany is seeking some kind of way to ally with China to derive as much value as possible economically, leaving the strategic influence and value commitments insulated. These pathways will, therefore, be core elements to Germany's foreign policy in securing a stable and dynamic relationship with China in continued engagement with China. Against this background, the BRI will continue to be crucially important in determining any prospective trajectory of Sino-German relations - fraught, as always, with opportunities and challenges that require careful navigation and strategic foresight.

5.2.2 Germany's Connectivity and Infrastructure Engagement with China – Case Studies

Sino-German cooperation with China in connectivity and infrastructure began even before the BRI and has taken on a new strategic outlook. Germany has been deeply reserved about Chinese investments in fields where the economic benefits come with geopolitical concerns (Bartsch & Wessling, 2023, pp. 118-119).

The integration of global markets has benefited the German economy, yet it has also led to concerns about job security and wage stagnation. The ruling elite must navigate these challenges to maintain performance legitimacy, balancing economic growth with social equity (Baccaro & Pontusson, 2016, p. 199). Germany's role in the EU significantly influences its political trends. As a leading member state, its commitment to the EU is important for procedural as well as performance legitimation. The political elites need to address such complex issues of European integration related to sovereignty, economic policy, and migration to sustain their legitimacy (Schmidt, 2020).

Germany's political system also deals with the associated disadvantages of globalization. Even as the world markets have uplifted Germany's export-based economy, they have also made it extremely sensitive in terms of economic reliance and unemployment in the labor market. In so doing, the political elites have got to balance off the gains of globalization with policies that take care of the local industry and labor, consequently keeping the performance legitimacy in check. The growing interdependence of global economies calls for taking new approaches to strategic foreign policy, trade agreements, and international cooperation, in which Germany has been very active, especially within the European Union (Baccaro & Pontusson, 2016).

One important pre-BRI initiative was an agreement between Deutsche Bahn and China Railways, signed in 2011. The cooperation built and greatly improved rail connectivity to the "Eurasian Landbridge" to facilitate more trading between Germany and China (Gaspers, 2016).

With the formal launch of the BRI in 2013, these types of Sino-German collaborations took on heightened strategic importance. This is further evidenced by Germany's strategic

integration of these projects into multilateral frameworks, including the OSCE during its 2016 chairmanship, which additionally illustrates a comprehensive approach to infrastructure development adopted in Germany (Gaspers, 2016). Moreover, the German Foreign Ministry has conducted bilateral dialogues with China in order to discuss the economic and geopolitical implications of these projects (Stanicek & Tarpova, 2022, p. 57).

German corporations, particularly Siemens, have been part of quite a few projects associated with the BRI that testify to their industrial collaboration in harnessing the opportunities that come along with the BRI (Zhang, 2020). Starting in 2017, Siemens entered into over ten agreements with Chinese partners to support BRI-related infrastructure and technological projects. These collaborations have spanned areas such as power generation, energy management, building technology, and intelligent manufacturing. Targeting BRI markets in regions like Indonesia, the Philippines, Nigeria, Mozambique, and South America, Siemens has demonstrated its commitment to enhancing connectivity and infrastructure in line with BRI goals (Siemens, 2018).

Furthermore, in 2018, the group set up a dedicated office in Beijing tasked with coordinating its BRI-related activities, underscoring its commitment to the initiative. It acts as a global platform by enhancing the efficiency of internal and external forces for BRI projects and expanding communication with different stakeholders (Siemens, 2018). Siemens has also partnered with over 100 Chinese Engineering, Procurement, and Construction (EPC) firms in more than 100 markets worldwide, highlighting its extensive involvement in BRI projects (Siemens, 2018). Through its consulting arm, Siemens Advanta, the company established a "smart city digital hub" in Hong Kong's Science Park, developing solutions for smart buildings and energy efficiency. Siemens has also supported smart city initiatives across several Chinese urban centers, integrating its digital and automation solutions to improve infrastructure resilience and sustainability (Siemens, 2021). By promoting these innovations, Siemens underscores Germany's broader role in facilitating the digital aspects and high-tech infrastructure solutions within the BRI framework (Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 2020).

In 2019, Siemens extended its cooperation with China's CRRC Zhuzhou Locomotive Co., a leading railway equipment manufacturer, to jointly develop rail technology projects. The objective behind this cooperation is to establish digital rail services that would ensure an efficient utilization of freight and passenger rail networks across the countries linked by the BRI (Schmalz et al., 2024).

Siemens has also been essential in China's move to upgrade its energy infrastructure. In 2020, Siemens Energy signed a memorandum with China Power Engineering Consulting Group to jointly promote energy projects along the BRI route. These collaborations cover renewable energy species, such as wind and solar, and match BRI's sustainability vision with Germany's corporate clean energy solutions (Bailey, 2020). Siemens reinforces the German approach that is

not only for connectivity, but for infrastructure that is environmentally friendly, echoing Germany's balanced approach to economic and environmental priorities.

Apart from Siemens, other German companies have also carried out BRI-related activities. In 2019, DuisPort collaborated with COSCO Shipping Logistics to establish the largest inland container terminal in Europe, located in Duisburg. This project enhances Germany's role in the China-Europe rail freight market, aligning with BRI objectives (Market Insights, 2023).

Aligned with this, German carmakers such as Volkswagen (VW), BMW, and Mercedes-Benz, have vigorously pursued joint ventures and partnerships with local Chinese firms to align with China's infrastructure and technological development, particularly in the areas of electric vehicles (EV) production and intelligent transport systems. These collaborations have taken on added significance in the BRI era, providing platforms for both connectivity and technology transfer (Shucun & Chuntai, 2019, p. 156).

In 2014, VW extended a partnership with China's joint venture partner FAW Group by 25 years until 2041 to invest in new direct shift gearboxes production facilities in Tianjin, China. This collaboration focused on increasing production capacity, particularly for energy-efficient vehicles, which aligns with the BRI's emphasis on sustainable infrastructure (Volkswagen AG, 2014). In 2017, VW and FAW signed a new 10-year plan to jointly develop and manufacture EVs, greatly expanding VW's foothold in booming China. This move illustrates VW's commercially-driven willingness to align with China's policy goals, including those influenced by the BRI, which prioritizes green and high-tech infrastructure (Volkswagen Newsroom, 2019). China's rise as the world's leading market for EVs has prompted VW to focus on producing and developing EVs, aiming to retain competitiveness in this rapidly evolving market (Sebastian, 2022). In 2024, VW announced a partnership with Chinese EV company XPeng to co-develop a new digitized and electrified architecture for Volkswagen-branded EVs to be manufactured in China by 2026. This collaboration aims to reduce manufacturing costs by 40%, enhancing competitiveness against local companies like BYD (Volkswagen Group, 2024). Moreover, VW's CEO held meeting in Beijing with Chinese industry and commerce ministers in order to to discuss free and fair trade as part of the global economy and, among others, technology, highlighting that open markets are utterly important in the realities of global economic challenges (Reuters, 2024).

Audi, a VW subsidiary, has also sought partnerships with Chinese partners. In 2024, Audi announced a partnership with SAIC to develop a China-specific platform for intelligent and EVs. This collaboration aims to create the Advanced Digitized Platform, which will reduce the time-to-market by over 30% for Audi's Chinese EV models, with the first model expected to launch in 2025 (Audi Media Center, 2024).

BMW and Mercedes-Benz have also shown strategic engagement with China in connectivity and infrastructure-related projects and collaborations. In 2018, BMW Group established a joint venture with Brilliance Automotive to expand its production capabilities in China. This expansion includes investments in intelligent manufacturing systems and digital infrastructure, areas that resonate with the BRI's objectives of technological and infrastructural advancement (BMW Group, 2018). Notably, the partnership focuses on developing digitized factories that integrate with China's new urban transport networks, improving connectivity between production hubs and urban areas. Mercedes-Benz, under Daimler AG, took similar steps by joining with Chinese battery cell manufacturer CATL in 2019. This collaboration not only supported Mercedes' EV goals but also involved establishing a battery cell manufacturing plant in Thuringia, Germany, to supply EVs for the Chinese market, thereby linking German production capabilities to China's automotive industry through BRI-inspired connectivity (CATL, 2020). With a supply chain stretching from Europe to China, Daimler is a prominent example of Germany's strategic interest in China's system of road and rail infrastructure, key for keeping access to one of the world's biggest automobile markets (Huotari et al., 2020, pp. 36-39). In 2024, the European Commission approved plans for Mercedes-Benz Group China and BMW Brilliance Automotive to establish a 50:50 joint venture for a fast-charging network in China (European Commission, 2024). The partners aim to add 1,000 locations with about 7,000 EV charge points available to any EV driver by the end of 2026, with a focus on the areas with the highest density of electric cars and plug-in hybrids (SENKU MACHINERY, 2024).

These collaborations highlight the strategic importance of the Chinese market for German carmakers, particularly in the context of the global shift towards electric mobility. Without cooperation with China and better regulation and incentives, the target of 15 million electric cars on Germany's roads by the year 2030 could be missed by as much as 6 million cars, according to an analysis by the transport policy think tank Agora Verkehrswende (2024). This underscores the necessity of Sino-German cooperation in achieving ambitious environmental targets.

In conclusion, as seen in the video produced by GLOBALink (2024), the global managing director from Roland Berger, a German consultancy, emphasizes the critical importance of the Chinese market for German companies. He describes China as "existential" for German firms due to its vast market size and innovation leadership. He further highlights that China's large and rapidly expanding economy offers extensive opportunities for German industries, particularly in sectors aligned with the BRI. This enormous market sustains not only large corporations such as Siemens in industrial cooperation with China, but also highlights a strategic realignment with BRI as German companies pursue commercial interests to use China's market for technological and infrastructural improvements that drive global connectivity.

5.2.3 Motivations for Germany's Cooperation on the BRI: Initial Support and Cautious Engagement under Merkel III until 2017

German policies towards China's BRI during Angela Merkel's third government reflect an overall balance - the result of a careful balancing with economic interests, geopolitical considerations, and the evolving order of the world system. Unlike Malaysia, powered by immediate economic gains and domestic political calculus, the German approach to deal with the BRI has been initially positive and followed by a more measured critique, likely due to concerns about the initiative's implications for European unity and global governance.

The initial attitude of Germany towards the BRI was rather benevolent, and its broader economic strategy sought to deepen trade relations with China—its biggest non-European trading partner. Already in October 2014, the German government held the official opinion about the BRI as something with the potential to improve connectivity between Europe and China, along with all the attendant economic opportunities this oversaw. This was clearly articulated in the following way in the final communiqué of the third government consultations between Germany and China in 2014:

“Deutschland begrüßt den weiteren Ausbau der transkontinentalen Handelsrouten im Landverkehr zwischen Europa und China und die Initiative der Wirtschaftsachse entlang der Seidenstraße. Diese eröffnet neue Chancen für die deutsch-chinesische und die europäisch-chinesische Zusammenarbeit und leistet einen Beitrag zu Stabilität und Wohlstand in Zentralasien und den entlang der Route gelegenen Ländern” (PIB, 2014, p. 1).

This can be translated as:

“Germany *welcomes* the further expansion of the transcontinental overland *trade routes* between Europe and China and the initiative of the economic axis along the Silk Road. This opens up *new opportunities* for German-Chinese and European-Chinese *cooperation* and contributes to *stability* and *prosperity* in Central Asia and the countries along the route” (PIB, 2014, p. 1; emphasis added by author).

The KWs reflect a certain positive stance: “welcomes” (*begrüßt*), “new opportunities” (*neue Chancen*), and “contributes to stability and prosperity” (*leistet einen Beitrag zu Stabilität und Wohlstand*), views the BRI as likely to promote economic growth and regional stability. This very early friendly reception might be understood in light of the general setting of Germany's export-oriented economy and the expectation that it will gain from enhanced infrastructure and trade routes that the BRI constitutes. Moreover, such support formed part of the broader strategy of Germany to engage China as a pivotal partner within global economic governance,

particularly through platforms like the G20, where the latter held huge clout (Ntousas & Minas, 2022, p. 182).

By 2015, Chancellor Merkel had started to take a more sophisticated position concerning the BRI, which was related to wider German concerns about the implications for European cohesion and global governance. In October 2015, during the Bergedorf Round Table in Beijing, Merkel uttered continuous praise for long-term strategic thinking during the development of the BRI and called for a wider social debate about the consequences. She specifically referred to the EU-China Connectivity Platform, which Germany had insisted on, that would ensure that the integration of the BRI into European infrastructure was done in a manner that respected European interests and standards. Merkel stated:

“Bei der Gelegenheit will ich eine Bemerkung machen: Wir sehen, dass China manchmal innerhalb der Europäischen Union Gruppen bildet, mit denen man dann spezielle Kooperationsformate bildet – mal in mittel- und osteuropäischen Ländern, mal in südeuropäischen Ländern, teils auch in Ländern, die noch nicht Mitglied der EU sind, sondern nur Beitrittskandidaten. Ich will nur sagen: "Man kann auch mit der ganzen Europäischen Union reden"" (Merkel, 2015).

This can be translated as:

“I would like to take this opportunity to make a comment: We see that China *sometimes forms groups* within the European Union, with which *special cooperation formats* are then formed - sometimes in Central and Eastern European countries, sometimes in Southern European countries, sometimes also in countries that are not yet members of the EU, but only candidates for accession. I just want to say: `You can also talk to the entire European Union'” (Merkel, 2015; emphasis added by author).

Increased cautious remarks: "sometimes forms groups" (*manchmal innerhalb der Europäischen Union Gruppen bildet*) and "special cooperation formats" (*spezielle Kooperationsformate*) reflect concern that Beijing's approach may leave inner-European divisions worse off. On the part of Germany, it expresses generally concerns about the BRI's potential impacts on furthering an existing split in Europe by bringing dependences with the less strong economies of EU countries. The insistence on "talking to the entire European Union" highlights Germany's commitment to speaking from a unified European position towards China, which, in consequence, places the latter into an essential perspective as a significant collective bargaining power in dealing with an Asian partner (Buras & Puglierin, 2021, pp. 11-12).

Despite these concerns, Germany continued to engage with the BRI, although its support became increasingly conditional. Illustrative include comments made by Merkel during a press conference with President Xi Jinping in May 2017 in which she said that while Germany was

willing to undertake projects under the BRI, it would do so if the bidding process was transparent:

“Deutschland hat positiv begleitet die Anstrengungen zu der sogenannten Seidenstraßen-Initiative... Wir glauben, dass wir uns gerne an solchen Projekten beteiligen werden und hoffen auf eine transparente Ausschreibung” (Merkel, 2017, as cited in Harnisch, 2018).

This can be translated as:

“Germany has *positively supported* the efforts of the so-called Silk Road Initiative... We believe that we will be happy to participate in such projects and *hope for a transparent tendering process*” (Merkel, 2017, as cited in Harnisch, 2018; emphasis added by author).

The phrase “hope for a transparent bidding process” (*hoffen auf eine transparente Ausschreibung*) is cautionary in nature. Germany insisted on international standards of governance and fair competition in the context of the BRI. This kind of conditional support could be understood as a component of a more comprehensive German strategy toward engaging with China on the BRI and simultaneously encouraging reforms that would eventually make this initiative more inclusive and aligned with European norms (Pepermans, 2018).

The consistent but mindful support for the BRI was confirmed once again by Merkel when, in an April 2017 interview, she announced Germany's support for the forthcoming BRF in Beijing. According to Xinhua Silk Road, 2017, “Germany *supports* the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative and wishes *success* for the Belt and Road Forum on International Cooperation to be held in Beijing next month”.

This statement, free from any critical or conditional wording, speaks primarily towards being diplomatically toned towards the maintenance of a positive bilateral relationship with China, but not at the cost of implicit acknowledgment of the BRI's larger role in inclusive global economic diplomacy.

The depth of Germany's engagement with the BRI takes on added perspective from then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier. On 18 May 2016, Steinmeier spoke at the Economic Conference of the German OSCE-Chairmanship, focusing specifically on the relevance of the BRI in the greater Eurasian context with regard to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). He noted:

“Die Eurasische Wirtschaftsunion hat im letzten Jahr ihre Arbeit für einen östlichen Teil der OSZE-Region aufgenommen. Die neue Seidenstraßeninitiative Chinas scheint immer operativer zu werden und hat das Potential, Rahmenbedingungen und Chancen im OSZE-Raum mitzugestalten. Ich freue mich deshalb heute, eine Delegation

Chinas begrüßen zu können. Nicht zuletzt, weil China als aktueller G20 Vorsitz auch dort Konnektivitäts-Fragen auf die Agenda setzt!” (Steinmeier, 2016).

This can be translated as:

“The Eurasian Economic Union started its work for an eastern part of the OSCE region last year. China's new Silk Road initiative seems to be becoming more and more *operational* and has the potential to shape *framework conditions* and *opportunities* in the OSCE area. I am therefore delighted to welcome a delegation from China today. Not least because China, as the current G20 Chair, is also putting connectivity issues on the agenda there!” (Steinmeier, 2016; emphasis added by author).

In this regard, Steinmeier pointedly noted that the BRI might potentially impact "framework conditions and opportunities" (*Rahmenbedingungen und Chancen*) in the OSCE region, which may be viewed as evidence of a rather warily optimistic perspective regarding the initiative's influence. Stressing the practical developments of the BRI, Steinmeier highlighted the fact that Germany views the BRI expressly in geopolitical terms as an important development that impacts not only the immediate neighbourhood but much of wider Eurasia as well. His remarks, however, may also be interpreted to denote that Germany views the BRI to be a project that needs to be sensitively managed in the context of broader regional dynamics, notably in regard to Russia and the emerging EAEU (Harnisch, 2018).

The more Germany became involved in the BRI, the more critique it received from various corners, conditioned by an array of concerns about the strategic implications of this initiative. In an interview from the year 2017, German Ambassador to China Michael Clauss reflected one of the widely-held apprehensions: the BRI being "Sino-centric" and sought that the initiative be developed on an "equal basis":

“We *welcome* the Belt and Road Initiative because it *strengthens globalization*. But it is globalization with Chinese characteristics, meaning it’s a *Sino-centric* project. We want to participate in developing this project on an *equal basis*” (Claus, 2017a, as cited in Harnisch, 2018; emphasis added by author).

The terms "Sino-centric" and "on an equal footing" point towards an increasing realization in the corridors of power in Germany about the likelihood of the BRI to tip the global scale of trade and power to China's ways. That perspective was also channeled through then-Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who, in a series of speeches in 2017, expressed concerns regarding, inter alia, much more far-reaching Chinese geostrategic intentions and labeled the BRI in the context of an all-pervasive plan to eventually build "a universally-comprehensive system in order to frame the world in China's interest" (Gabriel, 2017).

Gabriel's rhetoric was much sharper, reminding that the BRI was more than just an economic activity but, rather, a "geostrategic concept" for the realization of China's vision of the global order. In answering the problems raised by reporters, he set the proposed military probabilities of the BRI within a context in which Germany is concerned about the global security consequences of an initiative that challenges the Western liberal order:

“Die One-Belt-One-Road-Initiative... ist eben keine historische Handelsreminiszenz an Marco Polo, sondern letztlich eine geostrategische Idee, in der China seine Ordnungsvorstellungen durchsetzt—handelspolitisch, geographisch, geopolitisch, und letztlich womöglich auch militärisch” (Gabriel, 2017).

This can be translated as:

“The One Belt One Road Initiative... is *not a historical trade reminiscence of Marco Polo*, but ultimately a *geostrategic idea* in which China *asserts its ideas of order* - in terms of *trade policy, geography, geopolitics, and ultimately possibly also militarily*” (Gabriel, 2017; emphasis added by author).

With his statements, he implies a shift in the German government's perspective on the BRI: from presenting it as an overwhelmingly economic opportunity to a multidimensional challenge that needed well-thought-out strategic answers. Conclusions drawn also raised awareness of the fact that the BRI could potentially undermine European unity through the creation of new dependencies among the EU member states, particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe. It amplified this concern even more with the analysis of the German Foreign Office, showing how Chinese investments inside the EU had caused new politico-economic distribution conflicts, as observed:

“Schließlich werden (...) durch chinesische Investitionen auch innerhalb der EU neue politikökonomische Verteilungskonflikte ausgelöst. So wurde in Berlin aufmerksam im Jahre 2017 beobachtet, wie sich einige von der Eurokrise betroffene südliche Mitgliedsländer (u.a. Griechenland, Portugal, Malta), die zur Konsolidierung ihrer Ökonomien umfänglich chinesische Investitionen nutzten, europapolitisch Positionen vertraten und Entscheidungen im chinesischen Interesse blockierten, sodass eine gemeinsame kritische Haltung der EU gegenüber der Volksrepublik in wichtigen Einzelfragen nicht zustande kam” (WDDb, 2019, p. 12).

This can be translated as:

“Finally, Chinese *investments* are also triggering *new political-economic distribution conflicts* within the EU. In 2017, for example, Berlin closely observed how some southern member states (including Greece, Portugal, and Malta) were affected by

the euro crisis, which made extensive use of Chinese investment to consolidate their economies, took European policy positions, and *blocked decisions in China's interests*, with the result that the EU was unable to adopt a common critical stance towards the People's Republic on important individual issues" (WDDb, 2019, p. 12; emphasis added by author).

In other words, this shows the questioning perspective on China's influence generally within the EU, also raising puzzlement about the way Beijing is playing some European capitals against common European interest. The sentence "politico-economic distribution conflicts" (*politikökonomische Verteilungskonflikte*) and "blocked decisions in China's interests" (*Entscheidungen im chinesischen Interesse blockierten*) both allude to a critical view of the role a proactive China vis-à-vis the EU could potentially take in relation to China's broader strategy, portending major disturbances. The very opening sentence, "triggered new conflicts," suggests the destructive potential of the investments coming from China as a separative force within the European region.

Looking back to the government communique in 2014 which was generally sympathetic towards the BRI, thus providing a stepping stone for Germany's generally positive attitudes to the BRI's early phase, through the decision to become a founding member of the AIIB and a leading force in the establishment of norms around Asian infrastructure development. A significant part of Germany's engagement with the BRI was its being one of the founding members of the AIIB in 2016. The prominent participation of Germany in the AIIB, in which it emerged as the biggest non-Asian shareholder, was something that showed how it was going to exert an influence on something that was already a high-up venture for Chinese concern. Germany envisaged controlling the BRI through AIIB in issuing contracts, for it to withstand international standards on governance and environmental considerations. For the German government, AIIB provided a platform that was expected to bring positive synergies between the entities furthered by the BRI, other regional entities such as the Eurasian Union in question, and infrastructure projects—to utilize their concerning opportunities maximally and minimize the accompanying resulting risks (Kämpf, 2015, pp. 1-3; Dell'Aguzzo & Diodato, 2022, p. 12). Moreover, the representatives of the ruling parties urged for intervention to open the link between the country's existing regional organizations and initiatives, such as the Eurasian Union and the Silk Road Initiative, for the sake of benefiting from the synergy effects of financing infrastructure and interconnection projects of important significance and necessity. This strategic engagement is one such reflection where Germany remains pragmatic, trying to balance cooperative policies Harnisch toward China but still developing those policies so that overdependence on China does not thwart broader regional and global stability (Auswärtiges Amt, 2017, as cited in Harnisch, 2018).

This is in line with a more general strategy of engagement, on one hand, and of advancing plans to align China's initiatives with European values and interests, on the other. Through its

engagement in the AIIB, Germany sought to shape the implementation of the BRI so that it delivered global public goods, such as improved infrastructure development and connectivity, without taking a toll on things like environmental standards or fair competition (Pepermans, 2018).

Germany's engagement with the BRI during the period of the Merkel III government until 2017 may be characterized as a balancing act between cooperation and caution. Though the German government had genuinely early support for the BRI, seeing potential added value in terms of increasing trade and connectivity within the BRI, it quickly realized the strategic implications of the initiative for European unity and global governance. It would condition, therefore, that Germany's continued support of the BRI is marked by the aim of promoting transparency and the goal of adhering to European interests with an eye on the protection of these interests under relevant international standards.

Key German officials' speeches and statements in this period reflected a nuanced understanding of the BRI as both an opportunity and a challenge. For example, on the one hand, Germany strove for a deepened approach to China regarding the BRI, actively engaging in initiatives such as those of the AIIB and arguing that European infrastructure projects should be pursued with a dovetailing approach for the BRI's projects. On the other hand, the German officials, particularly Sigmar Gabriel, understood that the BRI had geopolitical dimensions and was a project capable of challenging the Western liberal order.

As China proceeds with the initiative, Germany will most likely maintain a balanced approach toward the BRI, one that will take into account these dual imperatives of opportunities and risks. Such wary engagement reflects an overarching German strategy in relation to the new geopolitical landscape of the 21st century, in which opportunities in economic arenas are increasingly tied to strategic challenges.

5.2.4 Strategic Concerns Towards BRI Implementation under Merkel III (2018-2019)

During Angela Merkel's third term as Chancellor (2018-2019), Germany's stance towards China's BRI became even more nuanced, reflecting both strategic concerns and cautious engagement. Merkel's government could see the economic benefits immanent to China's BRI, but it also could not keep from having serious concerns about the lack of transparency, reciprocity, and broader geostrategic implications.

In its high-level meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, whom Merkel was invited to meet by French President Emmanuel Macron at the summit in Paris in March 2019, Merkel conveyed that any cooperative framework must be of mutual benefits and with equal parlance. To quote her:

“I hope that we will be able to reach an agreement on *investments* as well as a number of other areas. The One Belt One Road Initiative is a very *major project* and as Europeans, we want to play a role indeed in this One Belt One Road-Initiative. But there needs to be *reciprocity*. It's still a little difficult to find how this reciprocity can function, but I think it is an excellent way of endeavoring to understand the *interdependence* between China and the European Union” (France 24, 2019, author's translation; emphasis added by author).

This line is reflective of Merkel's caution as well as openness to the BRI. The tone of the word "reciprocity" epitomizes what Germany dreads most—that the BRI could seriously tilt in China's favor and, however conditionally—still severely dent the quality of fair competition and mutual economic benefits. In this light, "interdependence" implies both a general acceptance of increasing economic interlinkages—both regional and global—with China on the part of the EU and the need to be balanced and fair on the other (Zhang, 2021, pp. 125-127).

Besides economic considerations, German anxiety has multiplied and extended to the geostrategic implications of the BRI. That would indeed be a concern for Europe as well, as suggested by Sigmar Gabriel, the then-foreign minister. In February 2018, he declared it explicitly during the Munich Security Conference:

“Mit dem Aufstieg Chinas werden sich die Gewichte massiv verschieben. Die Initiative für eine neue Seidenstraße ist ja nicht das, was manche in Deutschland glauben; es ist keine sentimentale Erinnerung an Marco Polo. Sondern sie steht für den Versuch, ein umfassendes System zur Prägung der Welt im chinesischen Interesse zu etablieren. Dabei geht es längst nicht mehr nur um Wirtschaft: China entwickelt eine umfassende Systemalternative zur westlichen, die nicht wie unser Modell auf Freiheit, Demokratie und individuellen Menschenrechten gründet” (Gabriel, 2018b).

This can be translated as:

“With the rise of China, the *balance* will shift massively. The initiative for a new Silk Road is not what some people in Germany think it is; it is not a *sentimental reminder of Marco Polo*. Rather, it is an attempt to establish a comprehensive *system to shape the world in China's interests*. This is no longer just about the economy: China is developing a comprehensive *alternative system* to the Western one, which is not based on freedom, democracy and individual human rights like our model” (Gabriel, 2018b; emphasis added by author).

Gabriel's declaration echoes profound preoccupations concerning the affirmed potential of the BRI to change the global power structure. The perception somehow that the BRI is more

than an economic project - a reference to "systemic alternative" (*Systemalternative*) to the Western model - underpins an all-encompassing Chinese strategy to assert geopolitical influence. Indeed, the sediment of such worry in Gabriel's rhetoric is that the BRI might contest the values of freedom, democracy, and human rights inherent in the Western governance model, thus marking the ideological divergence between China and the West as the new focal point in Germany's strategic thinking. In fact, those ideological differences became a focal point in Gabriel's rhetoric.

In an earlier address to the New Year's reception of the German Economy's Eastern Committee on January 10, 2018, Gabriel revealed more of the anxieties of Germany:

“Jetzt merken wir, wie gefährdet wir sind, wenn es keine Regeln gibt. Oder wenn der Garant der liberalen Ordnung, die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, dieses System verlassen und andere ihre Regeln einführen wollen. Wir müssen zur Kenntnis nehmen, dass China offensichtlich das einzige Land ist, mit einer geopolitischen Strategie. Ich finde, das ist nicht vorwerfbar. Es ist nur vorwerfbar, dass wir keine haben! [...] Es geht um die Durchsetzung eines eigenen chinesischen Verständnisses, einer eigenen Interpretation der Regeln im internationalen Handel” (Gabriel, 2018a).

This can be translated as:

“Now we realize how *endangered* we are when there are no rules. Or when the guarantor of the liberal order, the United States of America, abandons this system and others want to introduce their rules. We must take note of the fact that China is obviously the only country with a *geopolitical strategy*. I don't think that's reproachable. It's only reproachable that we don't have one! [...] It is a question of enforcing China's own understanding, its own interpretation of the rules of international trade” (Gabriel, 2018a; emphasis added by author).

By using the word "endangered" (*gefährdet*), Gabriel elaborates further on the nature of Germany's fears concerning potential hazard caused by self-seriousness of lacking directives of international character, coupled with an indispensable unilateral imposition on China's geopolitical approach by means of the BRI. His reference to the "Chinese understanding" (*chinesisches Verständnis*) of international trade rules indicates skepticism about the fairness and inclusivity of the BRI initiative, pointing to fears that China's influence could undermine the established world order. The critical tone in the speech of Gabriel underlines the necessity for Europe—and especially Germany—to formulate its own strategic reply to these intentions of China (Godehardt, 2016, p. 26).

It helped to add a general turn within Germany in favor of the idea that the West should devise an alternative to the BRI. This was not just to balance China's influence but also to provide recipient countries alternatives so that they do not fall into a potential debt trap and overreliance on China. In a speech to the 16th Ambassadors Conference, the newly appointed Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, who succeeded Gabriel as foreign minister in 2018, put it in the following words, dated August 2018:

“Unsere besondere Aufmerksamkeit verdient Chinas inzwischen weltumspannende ‘Belt and Road’-Initiative – die neue Seidenstraße. Neue Land- und Seeverbindungen zwischen China und Europa bieten große Chancen, auch für die deutsche Wirtschaft. Aber diese Initiative birgt auch Risiken. Ihr Erfolg wird davon abhängen, ob China bereit ist, aus einem rein auf China zugeschnittenen Projekt eine Plattform zu machen, die den Staaten zwischen beiden Polen Chancen für eigene Wertschöpfung gibt, die Umwelt- und Sozialstandards einhält und die darauf verzichtet, die EU durch Formate wie ‘16+1’ zu spalten” (Maas, 2018).

This can be translated as:

“China's now global 'Belt and Road' initiative – [die neue Seidenstraße] - deserves our special attention. New land and sea links between China and Europe offer great opportunities, also for the German economy. But this initiative also harbors risks. Its success will depend on whether China is prepared to turn a purely *Sino-centric project* into a platform that gives the countries between the two poles opportunities for their own value creation, that complies with environmental and social standards and that refrains from dividing the EU through formats such as '16+1'” (Maas, 2018; emphasis added by author).

Several strategic concerns are brought to the fore by Maas's speech. Terms like "China-centric project" (*auf China zugeschnittenes Projekt*) clearly mean that the initiative is viewed with suspicion as a thing that is geared much more for China's interests rather than for world interests. He further emphasizes that the BRI will have consequences that could be divisive for the European Union and that China, with the format “16+1”, engages with Central and Eastern European countries. Thus, this concern for EU unity reflects a broader German strategic interest in maintaining the coherence of the EU and coordinating the European response towards the growing influence of China (Zhang, 2021, pp. 126-127).

Gabriel shared these concerns and also previously admitted the growing influence of China. In still another speech to the Handelsblatt Asia Business Insights Conference on 28 February 2018, Gabriel said:

“Chinas Einfluss in der Region und weit darüber hinaus nimmt derzeit ungebrochen zu. China konstruiert Instrumente zur Gestaltung seiner Einflussphären mit einem nie dagewesenen Tempo: Mit der Seidenstraßeninitiative ist ein wirklich geostrategisches Projekt entstanden, das tief hinein nach Eurasien, Afrika und den Mittleren Osten reichen soll, um chinesische Ordnungsvorstellungen durchzusetzen” (Gabriel, 2018c).

This can be translated as:

“China's influence in the region and far beyond is currently growing unabated. China is constructing instruments to shape its spheres of influence at an unprecedented pace: with the Silk Road Initiative, a truly *geostrategic project* has emerged that will reach deep into Eurasia, Africa and the Middle East to enforce *Chinese ideas of order*” (Gabriel, 2018c; emphasis added by author).

By highlighting that the BRI is an "unabated" (*ungebrochen*) and "truly geostrategic project" (*wirklich geostrategisches Projekt*), Gabriel alludes to the BRI as definitely a planned attempt by China to distribute and consolidate its influence further within multiple regions. Implicit in Gabriel's sentiments is an argument focusing on this leading to a potential imbalance of power, where China's conception of order may replace existing norms at the global level. This critical view highlights that there is a need for Germany and Europe to develop strategic initiatives that can counterbalance the growing influence of China (Fallon, 2015).

Moreover, Gabriel was calling for a counter model of the West and emphasized that Europe had to elaborate its own strategy to compensate for the growing influence of China:

“Man kann China nicht vorwerfen, eine geoökonomische und geopolitische Strategie zu verfolgen. Allerdings müssen wir uns fragen – oder uns vielleicht vorwerfen lassen – dass wir keine eigene Strategie haben, jedenfalls keine, die über einzelne Länder hinausgeht. Erst im Ausgleich unterschiedlicher Interessen werden wir eine neue Balance finden. Nicht gegen China, sondern für unsere Interessen, um dann mit China Interessenausgleich zu suchen” (Gabriel, 2018c).

This can be translated as:

“China cannot be accused of pursuing a *geo-economic and geopolitical strategy*. However, we must ask ourselves - or perhaps allow ourselves to be accused - of not having a strategy of our own, at least not one that goes beyond individual countries. Only by reconciling different interests will we find a new *balance*. Not against China, but for our interests, in order to then seek a balance of interests with China” (Gabriel, 2018c; emphasis added by author).

The quote is vital because, if anything, it encapsulates that Gabriel accepts—indeed, at a strategic level—that China's ambitions are comprehensible, but such a lack of a common reaction from the West involves significant oversight. His phrasing is very neutral, though it says something in phrases like "not against China, but in favor of our own interests" (*nicht gegen China, sondern für unsere Interessen*). This means strategic balance, other than confrontation. Gabriel's argument in support of a Western strategy that moves beyond individual national interests to a unified European one to serve as a balancer that could offset China's increasing influence could be perceived as a China-warning. The above speech is particularly important in bringing out the maturing strategic narrative of Germany needing to ensure that there will arise a systemic counterweight to China's geopolitical ambitions—in the best-case scenario, through coordinated Western efforts (Benner et al., 2018, p. 42).

Against this backdrop, the narrative does not just look at the BRI challenges but calls for a balanced, proactive European response that assures Germany and its allies are not passive but are strategically ready to respond to China's rise.

Another very vital feature of Germany's attitude towards the BRI is that of fear of increasing economic dependence of other countries on China. The German government is concerned with the prospect that deepening economic ties under Belt and Road would erode economic sovereignty when industries from Europe become too reliant on Chinese investment and markets. This is a concern voiced already in 2019 by the report of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy ("Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie") (BWE):

“Mit dem Projekt der neuen Seidenstraße versucht China vorausschauend Absatzmärkte und Logistik zu sichern. Diese Strategie, die Prinzipien der Marktwirtschaft mit vorausschauender und flankierender Politik verbindet, hat bislang große Früchte getragen. In China sind Unternehmen mit Weltgeltung entstanden, ganze Industriebereiche könnten in den nächsten Jahren zum technologischen Monopol dieser Unternehmen werden. Mit der Folge, dass funktionierender internationaler Wettbewerb dann nicht mehr möglich wäre” (BWE, 2019).

This can be translated as:

“With the New Silk Road project, China is trying to secure sales markets and logistics with foresight. This strategy, which combines the principles of a *market economy* with *forward-looking and supporting policies*, has borne great fruit to date. Companies with a global reputation have emerged in China, and entire industrial sectors could become the technological monopoly of these companies in the coming years. With the consequence that effective international competition would then no longer be possible” (BWE, 2019; emphasis added by author).

The mention in the report of a "technological monopoly" (*technologisches Monopol*) and the potential erosion of "effective international competition" (*funktionierender internationaler Wettbewerb*) indicates the fears that the BRI is a project that might be of seriousness in handing over key industry influence into the hands of China. Such a prospect of monopolization went firmly against Germany's economic sovereignty and a place that considered fair competition as sacrosanct to the modern global market economy (The Economist, 2023).

However, Germany demonstrated no sign of fully closing the door with regard to the BRI. In fact, the Merkel government aimed to strike a balance between cooperation and vigilance. This approach was manifested, albeit indirectly, in Merkel's own visit to the HHLA Container Terminal in Hamburg in May 2019, where she supported Germany-China cooperation under the BRI:

“Und hier kann man verschiedene Dinge sehen, die uns an diesem Tag beschäftigen. Nämlich erstens, dass wir vernetzt sind in der Welt und dass die Fragen eines Handels, bei dem nicht Barrieren aufgebaut werden und neue protektionistische Maßnahmen ergriffen werden, sondern bei den Barrieren abgebaut werden, etwas zu tun haben mit der Beschäftigungssituation von Menschen, mit dem Handelsaustausch, mit dem Wirtschaftswachstum und schlussendlich dann auch mit dem Steuer ein. Merkel verteidigte ausdrücklich Planungen im Rahmen von Chinas Seidenstraßen-Projekt, die Zusammenarbeit zwischen beiden Seiten, nicht zuletzt in Hamburg und seinem Hafen, auszubauen” (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2019).

This can be translated as:

“And here you can see various things that concern us on this day. Firstly, that we are *interconnected in the world* and that the issues of trade, in which barriers are not erected and new protectionist measures are not taken, but in which *barriers are dismantled*, have something to do with the *employment situation* of people, with *trade exchange*, with *economic growth* and ultimately also with *tax revenue*. Merkel expressly defended the plans to expand *cooperation* between the two sides, not least in Hamburg and its port, as part of China's Belt and Road project” (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2019; emphasis added by author).

Merkel's speech highlights Germany's strategic engagement with the BRI, where the emphasis on "interconnected in the world" (*vernetzt sind in der Welt*) reflects the recognition of global economic interdependence. The references to "barriers are dismantled" (*Barrieren abgebaut*) and "expand cooperation" (*Zusammenarbeit ausbauen*) suggest a pragmatic approach that balances the opportunities for economic growth with the need to address potential risks. Merkel's use of positive collocations such as "employment situation" (*Beschäftigungssituation*)

and "economic growth" (*Wirtschaftswachstum*) underscores the importance of maintaining a cautious yet constructive relationship with China, ensuring that Germany benefits from the BRI while safeguarding its national interests (Zhang, 2021, p. 126).

Merkel's speech underlines Germany's strategic engagement with the BRI, from which the emphasis on "interconnected in the world" (*vernetzt sind in der Welt*) has coined global economic interdependence. The phrases "dismantling barriers" (*Barrieren abbauen*) and "expanding cooperation" (*Zusammenarbeit ausbauen*), however, suggest a more pragmatic approach to what has the potential to present opportunities for growth but likely also carries risk. By combining such positive Merkel's collocations with the "employment situation" (*Beschäftigungssituation*) and "economic growth" (*Wirtschaftswachstum*), the cautious yet constructive relationship extended to China can bring the German state benefits from the BRI, while adhering to national interests (Zhang, 2021, p. 126).

In other words, the strategic concerns of Germany regarding the BRI under Merkel III were a tightrope walk between utilizing the opportunities on one hand and exercising caution on the other. The German administration noted the initiative's potential risks regarding transparency, the Sino-centric nature of the project, and broader geopolitical implications. Key German leaders in this period, though, always used very deftly gauged rhetoric not to necessarily compromise Germany's economic sovereignty or strategic interests and, on the other hand, not to result in China turning adversarial towards them immediately.

Center stage in this respect was always the call to reciprocity, transparency, and adherence to shared values by Merkel and her government as the BRI was navigated through the thickets of a global strategy that underscored the need for a common European answer and alternative strategies for a balanced global order. Such an approach stresses the constant challenge facing Germany's and Europe's task of handling the challenge of China's rise within the framework of the fast-changing implications of the BRI on the world stage.

5.2.5 Stronger Opposition Yet Strategic Need for Cooperation under Merkel IV and Scholz (2020-2022)

The relationship between Germany and China throughout the Merkel IV and Scholz periods of office between 2020 and 2022 was very complex and nuanced. There were signs of growing skepticism in Germany at that time due to concerns over potential dependency and geostrategic implications. Coupled with this was the recognition of the strategic necessities and economic benefits involved in cooperating with China.

In fact, the position gradually changed during the last administration of Chancellor Angela Merkel and the leadership of Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Now, Berlin started shifting its focus toward the risks associated with the initiative, particularly the alleged debt-trap diplomacy and growing dependency on China. The idea that countries could fall hostage to unsustainable

debts and strategic influence through BRI activities by China raised concern for Germany and its partners in Europe.

In a speech on 22 November 2021, then-German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas outlined it:

“China nutzt immer intensiver wirtschaftliche Angebote, um geostrategischen Einfluss zu gewinnen... Viele Länder sind längst in eine Schuldenfalle geraten” (Maas, 2021).

This can be translated as:

“China is increasingly using economic opportunities to gain *geostrategic influence*... Many countries have long since fallen into a *debt trap*” (Maas, 2021; emphasis added by author).

This is the basis of the concerns voiced in Berlin in a broader sense, which are affected by the BRI, not only from the point of view of the parties directly concerned but also from the point of view of the global balance of power. The term "debt trap" (*Schuldenfalle*) reflects a negative perception, suggesting that the BRI is seen less as a benign development initiative and more as a strategic maneuver by China to expand its influence (Jones & Zeng, 2019). This perspective conforms to the larger skepticism that prevails in Germany: there is an increasing perception that the BRI is a vehicle for China to stake its claim of geopolitical dominance through economic means.

All these apprehensions were not exclusive to Germany; there are wider fears across the continent that the BRI is allowing China to displace European interests in areas of strategic importance. Maas openly expressed this concern by calling for alternatives to the BRI together with independent European strategies to counter China's emerging influence:

“Darum müssen wir Alternativen zur Seidenstraße auf den Weg bringen” (Maas, 2021).

This can be translated as:

“That's why we need to come up with *alternatives* to the BRI” (Maas, 2021; emphasis added by author).

"Alternatives" (*Alternativen*) here indicates a strategic exercise to reduce Berlin's concern or overreliance on China, further bringing out the cautious approach of Germany towards the BRI. The term “auf den Weg bringen” suggests proactive efforts by Germany to mitigate the risks associated with the BRI while ensuring that European interests are safeguarded.

Despite the growing concerns about the BRI, there remained a strategic need for German cooperation with China, given its deep economic interdependence with the Asian giant. In this context, the BRI offered what Germany wanted: more connectivity and new markets, which accorded well with its aspirations to retain its export-oriented economy. It is this duality—caution against dependency and strategic need for cooperation—that characterized Germany's approach during this time.

Germany reaffirmed its pragmatic position through statements made by current Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, for whom the BRI presented risks but also indicated the infrastructure project's potential. In her speech on November 22, 2022, Baerbock said:

“Usbekistan ist ein “land-locked” Staat ohne Meereszugang – und ist daher beim Erschließen neuer Exportmärkte auf offene Handelswege in seiner Nachbarschaft angewiesen. Und da ist vor allem der Weg nach Osten Richtung China. China ist entlang der alten und neuen Seidenstraße mit Investitionen schon zentral dabei, etwa in Bahnstrecken” (Baerbock, 2022).

This can be translated as:

“Uzbekistan is a ‘land-locked’ state without access to the sea – and is therefore dependent on open trade routes in its neighbourhood to open up new export markets. And this is primarily the route to the east towards China. China is already investing centrally along the old and new Silk Roads, for example, in railroad lines” (Baerbock, 2022; emphasis added by author).

Baerbock uses the phrase “investing centrally” (mit Investitionen schon zentral dabei), underscoring China's central involvement in the infrastructure projects under the BRI. The neutrality of the statement suggests that China's influence is acknowledged but not valorized or deprecated. This neutrality is reflected in Germany's pragmatic reconciliatory framework in addressing the BRI's overall importance in global trade and economic integration while managing the geopolitical entanglements.

Germany's interest in the BRI is also connected to the larger framework of globalization and the securing of supply chains. When Baerbock mentioned that Uzbekistan exports raw materials with high volume through the infrastructure built in its territory within the scope of the BRI, this indicates the degree of interdependency of global networks of trade from which Germany also inevitably depends upon. She stated:

“Und als Deutschland haben wir ein Interesse daran, dass das Kupfer und andere Materialien aus dieser Mine frei in die Welt und auch nach Europa exportiert werden” (Baerbock, 2022).

This can be translated as:

“And as Germany, we have an interest in ensuring that the copper and other materials from this mine are *freely exported* to the world and also to Europe” (Baerbock, 2022; emphasis added by author).

The word “interest” (*Interesse*) means, upon inspection, once again, proven Germany's very pragmatic point of view toward the BRI—it's an almost outright clear economic benefit in being involved in it alone. Emphasizing “freely exported” (*frei exportiert*) is illustrative of a hope for unencumbered access to resources vitally important for Germany's industrial base, providing further insight into the country's calculated stance when involving with the BRI (Dell'Aguzzo & Diodato, 2022, pp. 19-20).

The Merkel IV and Scholz governments traced a path for Germany in the BRI between 2020 and 2022, treading a path between economic engagement and geopolitical concerns. Despite the BRI representing unprecedented economic opportunities for investment in infrastructure and market access, terms under the respective governments were highly attuned to possible risks of deepening relations with China.

Whereas the government of Angela Merkel considered the economic advantages derived from the initiative, it was always advocating that there was more transparency and open competition in the awarding of projects (*transparente Ausschreibung*) so that Germany would not lose out on economic stakes and that the BRI participants do not become dependent on China (Bartsch & Wessling, 2023, p. 11, 17). Indeed, Merkel alone took forward an older tradition to protect Germany from herself growing too close to China, losing control, embarking on a strategic course, leading to long-term strategic immaturity in Germany, or possibly even endangering unity in Europe.

With Olaf Scholz's tenure beginning in December 2021, that balancing act was continued with some adjustments. With the ongoing debates in the EU over strategic autonomy and increased diversification of their trade partnerships, the Scholz administration thus moved to further urgently harmonize response to the BRI across the continent. That means a united Europe (*europäische Einheit*) in dealing with China, where the collective bargaining power of EU members would secure fair and transparent engagement with China, safeguarding European geopolitical interests (Bartsch & Wessling, 2023, pp. 68-70). As Scholz argued, the EU was to work out a strategy to secure those economic benefits from the BRI without allowing Beijing to gain inordinate influence over European policies or infrastructure.

The involvement of Germany in the BRI through the Merkel IV and Scholz administrations, especially since 2020-2022, was a test of the thin line between skepticism and strategic necessity in terms of worries of debt-trap diplomacy and dependency. Scholz, along with others like Heiko Maas, has called for a strategic outlining of self-interests to minimize concerns about the BRI, prompting a reevaluation of Europe's stance. Concurrently, Annalena

Baerbock has emphasized the economic benefits and imperatives of cooperation, advocating for a pragmatic approach that will engage in negotiations to address these issues.

It is in this epoch that the struggles of Germany and the Western countries, generally, can best be epitomized in the careful management of the opportunities and risks that China's global ambitions pose. Where potentials and risks lie, the BRI calls for strategic responses that protect national interests while taking into consideration such interconnected realities of global trade and diplomacy.

5.2.6 The Case of the Port of Hamburg

Led by the European Commission with strong advocacy from Ursula von der Leyen, the Global Gateway Initiative (GGI) represents a strategic EU response to the BRI, with Germany emerging as a prominent supporter within this collective framework. "The initiative is intended as a direct competitor to China's Belt and Road Initiative and is intended to make the EU more of an explicitly geopolitical actor" (Hildebrandt, 2023). While China is considered a partner to Germany and the EU at large, political leaders perceive its BRI as a form of rivalry intended to disrupt the world order created following the Second World War. Therefore, Germany and other EU members are wary of Chinese investments in critical infrastructure in Europe. In this regard, the purchase of a terminal in the port of Hamburg is referenced as a primary example (Li, 2023).

"Hamburg" demonstrated that the German government seeks to adopt policies that make it challenging for China to invest in sensitive sectors in Germany. Svenja Hahn, a member of the Free Democratic Party, a coalition partner in the Scholz government, said, "Viewed as a whole, it remains a serious strategic mistake to place parts of critical infrastructure in Chinese hands. After all, China has successively bought into European ports but excludes foreign ownership of ports in its own country." "This shows that cooperation with China is not a partnership of equals." (Kijewski, 2022). These sentiments suggest that Germany was opposed to certain BRI projects because it would increase China's control over important infrastructure in Germany. Accordingly, China's Cosco was denied overall ownership of shares in the port of Hamburg with a contention that it was a mistake to allow the company to control it. As a result, the shares of Cosco at the Hamburg harbor were reduced to 24% from 35% (Kijewski, 2022).

The move followed evidence that Cosco was the primary company that facilitated Chinese entry and dominance in Antwerp and Rotterdam. As a result, the German government sought to protect the monopoly of local firms by limiting China's investment and business investments within its jurisdiction. In contrast, 2016 sentiments demonstrate the contrary. As outlined above, Germany expected new opportunities as a result of the establishment of the BRI (Pencea, 2018). "Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel has welcomed the initiative as a means to secure more Chinese investments in Europe and its wider neighborhood" (Gaspers, 2016). Though, Berlin was still concerned that the Chinese would undermine economic and political order in the EU. "However, Berlin is also concerned about the initiative's potential to dilute

European Union investment rules and to erode political unity among member states vying for Chinese investment” (Gaspers, 2016).

In essence, Germany welcomed the idea of the BRI cautiously, considering that it would negatively impact businesses and political cooperation in Germany and the EU at large. Considering that China was interested in securing stakes in the port of Hamburg to facilitate its transport activities along the BRI, Germany might have perceived intense competition and limited control over its markets and infrastructure. From a realist perspective, Germany was protecting its national and economic interests. Therefore, the negative perception of the initially larger planned Cosco investment by the German government stemmed from consideration of the competition that Chinese investments in critical infrastructure would pose. Differently, the existing positive perception can also be linked to the government’s emphasis on the BRI increasing business opportunities and connectivity of the EU with Asia. The Cosco investment in the port of Hamburg thus illustrates both the concerns and opportunities Germany associates with the BRI.

6. Comparison and Discussion of the Malaysian and German Discourse

The central research question guiding this thesis is: *How and why has the perception of the BRI by the governments of Malaysia and Germany changed and developed since 2013?* This question provides a basis for examining the complex and multidimensional nature of the BRI within the context of different perceptions by two distinct states with varied geopolitical, economic, and ideological interests. By revisiting this research question, the aim is to synthesize the findings from the empirical analysis and interpret them in the context of broader theoretical frameworks, particularly Constructivism and CDA.

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the BRI represents the most ambitious infrastructure and development initiative globally. Based on China's geopolitical strategy, it is aimed at accelerating collaboration and connectivity throughout Asia and Europe and beyond. A document released by the National Development and Reform Commission in 2015 lays out the five priorities that are central to its vision: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties.

Situating Malaysia and Germany as critical actors, this study assesses how the BRI is perceived by different governments. Malaysia's geographic proximity to China and close economic ties illustrate Southeast Asian responses: a balance of initial enthusiasm alongside recalibration. Germany, as a key European leader, sheds light on the insights about the European Union's cautious attitude toward China's rise. These perspectives together uncover big divergences in framing, narrativizing and integrating or resisting the BRI in national policy discourses.

The study aimed to achieve three core objectives:

1. **Investigating changes in perceptions:** Understanding how narratives surrounding the BRI in Malaysia and Germany have shifted since its initial announcement. This includes looking at the driving forces behind changes and whether political, economic, or security related.
2. **Analyzing dominant narratives:** Identifying the prevailing discourses surrounding the BRI in each country and how these align with or diverge from China's official portrayal of the initiative. Key terms from the NDRC (2015) document, such as "win-win cooperation" and "shared prosperity," provide a benchmark for comparison.
3. **Assessing alignment with China's vision:** An analysis of how Malaysia's and Germany's narratives converge or diverge with the NDRC (2015) outlined priorities in the Chinese vision. This entails examining whether these countries embrace China's optimism regarding the BRI or view it through a more skeptical lens, arising from domestic and geopolitical concerns.

Comparing the ebbing and flowing views of the BRI in the Malaysian and German government narratives unveils divergence in patterns and priorities. CDA applied within a broader constructivist framework allows for the best explanation of such changes. By integrating textual, contextual, collocational, discursive, and framing analyses, and triangulating findings from multiple data sources, this discussion establishes a robust understanding of how the two countries have engaged with the BRI over time. KWs based on the NDRC (2015) document are embedded in this analysis, allowing for a monitoring of changes in discourse and comparison of Malaysia's and Germany's respective stances.

Textual Analysis of Key Words

The analysis of KWs in Malaysian and German governmental discourses is based on the review of nine speeches, one official report from Malaysia and nineteen speeches, two government reports, and one press release from Germany. Accordingly, seven of President Xi's speeches and one Policy Action Plan were analyzed to assess Malaysia's and Germany's alignment with China's Belt and Road vision.

The textual analysis identifies the use and frequency of key terms, providing insight into how both countries frame their perceptions of the BRI. Key terms such as "*financial integration*" (9 uses), "*win-win cooperation*" (7), "*interconnectivity*" (12)", "*mutual benefits*" (9), and "*community of shared interests*" (10) stand out as dominant concepts, reflecting their importance in the narratives of both Malaysia and Germany.

Rank	NDRC (2015) key words	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Malaysia count	Germany count	Total count
9	people-to-people bonds	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0	0
3	financial integration	investment	investment (3x) investments, investing centrally	selling sovereignty investments, debt trap	5	4	9
5	unimpeded trade	unimpeded trade, export growth trade exchange, freely exported	trade routes, market economy	N/A	2	4	6
6	facilities connectivity	connectivity development plan, connect cities, freedom of passage	operational, major project	N/A	3	2	5

8	infrastructure connectivity	infrastructure development plan	N/A	N/A	1	0	1
4	win-win cooperation	cooperation, win-win (2x), economic cooperation (2x), share of winning cooperation (2x)	N/A	N/A	5	2	7
7	shared development	development efforts, development stability, employment situation	N/A	N/A	2	2	4
1	interconnectivity	connectivity (2x), greater integration, ease of travel and communication strengthens globalization, interconnected in the world	special cooperation formats, interdependence, geo-economic and geopolitical strategy	geostrategic idea, geostrategic project, geostrategic influence	4	8	12
7	inclusive growth	collaborations, growth, poverty reduced economic growth	N/A	N/A	3	1	4
3	mutual benefits	possibilities, opportunities, economic collaborations opportunities, tax revenue	mutual understanding hope for a transparent tendering process, reciprocity	gain something for Malaysia	5	4	9
2	community of shared interests	national and regional interests, mutually complementary	Malaysian people's interests	Sino-centric project (2x), balance (2x), not a historical trade reminiscence of Marco Polo, political-economic distribution conflicts, system to shape the world in China's interests	3	7	10
7	shared prosperity	net gains, economic potential prosperity	N/A	equal basis	2	2	4

7	policy coordination	framework conditions	the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan forward-looking and supporting policies	alternative system	1	3	4
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Table 3. Key Word Frequencies in Malaysian and German Discourses (created by author)

Several keywords are shared across both countries' discourses, reflecting conceptual alignment with China's NDRC (2015) document, as seen from Table 3. The first shared key word is "*investment*" under "financial integration", which appears four times in Malaysia's discourse and three times in Germany's. In Malaysia, "investment" is linked to large-scale BRI infrastructure projects like the ECRL and the MCKIP. In Germany, "investment" is discussed within the context of FDI, but with a stronger emphasis on strategic oversight and regulatory safeguards. This is consistent with Stelzenmüller's et al. (2021) assertion that Germany's engagement with the BRI is framed within a broader agenda of maintaining strategic autonomy while balancing economic interests.

The second key word is "*trade*" under "unimpeded trade", which appears in both countries but with distinct terms. The mention of "unimpeded trade" in the context of Malaysia speaks to its priorities about trade facilitation and maritime connectivity. In Germany, terms like "trade exchange" and "trade routes" are used, emphasizing smooth trade flows, supply chain stability, and alignment with EU trade norms.

A third shared term is "*cooperation*" under "win-win cooperation", which appears as "cooperation" and "economic cooperation" (2) in Malaysia's discourse and "cooperation" (2) in Germany's. Malaysia frames cooperation in terms of economic partnerships with China, particularly in development projects. In Germany, cooperation is framed within a more strategic context, often referencing collaboration within the EU framework.

The final keyword is "*opportunities*" under "mutual benefits", appearing in both countries' discourses. Malaysia emphasizes "opportunities" as prospects for growth, employment, and connectivity. Germany, on the contrary, emphasizes "opportunities" as economic benefits, although typically with an emphasis of transparency, fair competition, and regulatory safeguards.

Contextual Analysis

Both Malaysian and German interactions with the BRI are reflective of their geopolitical realities. Malaysia's consistent use of terms like "financial integration" (5) and "win-win cooperation" (5) aligns with its developmental strategy, which views the BRI as a mechanism for

infrastructure improvement and economic growth. The ECRL serves as a key example of how Malaysia uses the BRI to achieve strategic connectivity and bolster its economic ambitions.

Germany, on the other hand, situated its engagement within the broader framework of EU policies. As a leading EU member state, Germany emphasizes “interconnectivity” (8) and “community of shared interests” (7), reflecting its concern for maintaining EU unity while balancing economic opportunities with strategic caution. Ulatowski’s (2022) analysis of Germany’s approach to the Indo-Pacific region supports this view, highlighting that Germany’s engagement with China’s BRI reflects a broader EU agenda of promoting strategic autonomy in global affairs. These concerns are especially pronounced under the Merkel and Scholz administrations, which tried to balance the dual imperatives of economic interdependence and geopolitical caution.

Collocational Analysis

The collocation of KWs reveals deeper understanding for narrative composition. In Malaysia’s discourse, the KW **"development"** co-occurs with other words to create compound expressions that highlight Malaysia’s developmentalist approach to the BRI. The two key collocations featuring "development" are: *"infrastructure and connectivity development plan"* and *"development efforts"*.

These collocations indeed highlight Malaysia's engagement with the BRI, which is centred around infrastructure and connectivity. The term “infrastructure and connectivity development plan” embodies Malaysia’s drive to use infrastructure development as a trade facilitation tool, especially by means of projects such as the ECRL. Likewise, “development efforts” reflects the broader Malaysian aims of modernization, job creation, and regional integration. By integrating "development" into compound phrases, Malaysia casts the BRI as a key tool for accomplishing its national development goals.

In Germany’s discourse, the KWs **"geostrategic"** frequently appears as part of compound terms that emphasize strategic concerns. Key collocations include: *"geostrategic idea"*, *"geostrategic project"*, *"geostrategic influence"*, *"geo-economic and geopolitical strategy"*.

These collocations highlight Germany’s framing of the BRI as a project with broader geopolitical and geo-economic implications. The frequent use of "geostrategic" in combination with "influence" and "project" suggests a view of the BRI as an instrument for advancing China's strategic influence, while the use of *"geo-economic and geopolitical strategy"* emphasizes the dual nature of economic and political considerations in Germany's approach.

Discursive Analysis

Discursively, Malaysia and Germany's BRI narratives diverge in the strategies they deploy. Malaysia portrays the BRI as a complementary initiative to the *ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan* (ACMP), seeking greater regional integration and connectivity. Former Prime Minister Mahathir highlighted that both the BRI and the ACMP serve "*national and regional interests*", presenting them as mutually reinforcing rather than competing frameworks. Indeed, Danilovich (2020) notes that Southeast Asian states—and Malaysia is no exception—are keen to associate their engagement with BRI within the broader strategy for regional growth, development, and connectivity. By framing the BRI in a larger context of ASEAN's infrastructure-driven connectivity agenda, Malaysia presents itself as a proactive regional actor. This approach supports the development of key infrastructure projects like the ECRL and the MCKIP. Aligning the BRI with the ACMP reinforces Malaysia's leadership role within ASEAN while balancing its engagement with China-led initiatives.

Germany frames the BRI as a strategic geopolitical initiative rather than a historical trade revival. It is underlined that the BRI is "not a sentimental reminder of Marco Polo" or "a historical trade reminiscence of Marco Polo," distancing it from any romanticized idea of the Silk Road. Such framing differs from previous representations of the BRI as a resurgence of long-lost ancient trade routes (Miao 2021). Instead, Gabriel defined the BRI as a "geostrategic idea" by which China establishes dominance over trade, geopolitics, and potentially security influence as well. This framing underscores the initiative's impact on world order and, ultimately, China's positioning in reshaping it. By moving away from the Marco Polo analogy, Germany is clearly insisting on transparency, regulatory oversight and EU-aligned norms, while also highlighting the risks, carried in China's geopolitical goals, and emphasizing Germany's wider intention of protecting European strategic autonomy.

Framing Analysis

Malaysia and Germany have resulted in differing priorities for the framing of the BRI. Malaysia perceives the BRI as a driver of **economic growth, infrastructure development, and regional connectivity**. As former Prime Minister Najib Razak noted, the KW "*connect cities*" portrays Malaysia's integration into the BRI's global network, expanding trade routes and access to international markets. The use of "*share of winning*" by Najib also speaks to Malaysia's initiative to gain its share of the benefits from BRI. "*Ease of travel and communication*", as the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad stressed, embodies the BRI's contribution in the sense of efficient transport, which enables more fluid cross-border movement of both goods and people, as well as reduces the bureaucratic constraints of a territory. This idea is indicative of Malaysia's coherence with ASEAN connectivity goals, as also traced in Kamal's (2022) research of Malaysia's stand as a proactive player within broader ASEAN's regional integration framework.

In contrast, counter-narratives reflect critical perspectives on BRI engagement. *"Selling sovereignty"*, which is used by Mahathir to criticize Najib's strategy, exemplifies fears that Malaysia may be giving up control over its infrastructure. This criticism resonates with broader suspicions across Southeast Asia, as, for instance, Garlick (2020) highlighted that some regional countries voiced concerns that China, through financial leverage from BRI projects, can compromise their sovereignty. Mahathir's formulation of *"gain something for Malaysia"* is stressing the need for local jobs and economic benefit instead of BRI projects only serving Chinese interests.

Germany envisions the BRI in geopolitical and geo-economic terms, noting that it holds economic opportunities but also strategic challenges. The KW *"major project"*, introduced by former Chancellor Angela Merkel, emphasizes the scale and importance of the BRI, calling for European participation to ensure reciprocity. *"Strengthens globalization"*, mentioned by former German Ambassador to China Michael Claus, highlights the BRI's potential to support global trade, though it is acknowledged as being shaped by China's interests.

"Forward-looking and supporting policies", a phrase used by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, is indicative of Germany's awareness of China's long-term strategies and its willingness to be in line with market-oriented growth. Merkel used the phrase "interdependence" in the opening comment to highlight the growing economic ties between China and the EU, but at the same time stressed the need for balanced trade relations in order to avoid asymmetric dependencies.

Germany's counter-narratives also reflect worries about China's geopolitical ambitions. The KW *"Sino-centric project"*, used by Claus and former Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, frames the BRI as a unilateral initiative with the purpose of promoting Chinese interests. It indicates Germany's skepticism toward China's attempts to use formats like 16+1 to divide the EU. The KW *"system to shape the world in China's interests,"* introduced by former Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, portrays the BRI as an effort to establish a Beijing-centered alternative world order. Gabriel emphasizes that the BRI challenges Western ideals of freedom, democracy, and human rights, an indication of Germany's larger geopolitical worries about China's emerging role in world governance. This view is consistent with Callahan's (2016) observation that China's BRI represents a revisionist strategy aimed at embedding new norms into the global order. While Stelzenmüller et al. (2021) emphasized Germany's economic pragmatism in engaging with China, the focus on "Sino-centric" control suggests a shift in Germany's narrative towards greater emphasis on the geopolitical implications of the BRI, signaling a broader shift from economic logic to geopolitical caution.

Evolution of the narratives

The results indicate that Malaysia and Germany have different and context-specific approaches to the BRI, while demonstrating their own political, economic and geopolitical interests. Malaysia's changing perception went from initial enthusiasm to pragmatic recalibration; at the same time, Germany's response reflects a more cautious and regulatory approach. These transformations are propelled by changes in political leadership, shifting economic priorities, and emerging geopolitical pressures.

Malaysia: Pragmatism, Shifting Perceptions, and Developmental Priorities

Malaysia views the BRI through the lens of economic pragmatism, the need for infrastructure development, and, at certain points, shifts in leadership-driven policy recalibrations. Each Prime Minister changes the terms for BRI discourse in a way that differs from the predecessor. This pattern exemplifies wider political strategy, as freshly elected leaders try to prove their authority and differentiate their policy style by reassessing or recalibrating Malaysia's BRI entanglement.

Under Najib Razak (2009–2018), Malaysia framed the BRI as an opportunity for *"financial integration"*, *"win-win cooperation"*, and *"interconnectivity"*. His administration embraced the BRI as a vehicle for large-scale infrastructure development, exemplified by flagship projects such as the ECRL and the MCKIP. The use of KWs like *"connect cities"* and *"share of winning"* highlighted Malaysia's active engagement in BRI-related connectivity and its aspiration to become a central trade hub in Southeast Asia. Najib's administration framed BRI projects as enablers of Malaysia's economic modernization, job creation, and trade facilitation.

However, Najib's time was tainted by the 1MDB corruption scandal that became a crucial factor in changing the BRI discourse in Malaysia. The accusations of embezzlement and financial mismanagement in the 1MB highlighted the risks of financial dependence on foreign partners, notably China. Some BRI efforts, such as the ECRL, critics said, served as conduits to obscure debts related to the 1MDB corruption scandal. This scandal, coupled with increasing public distrust in Najib's administration, allowed Mahathir (2018–2020) to return to power.

Under Mahathir's government, Malaysia took a more critical approach towards the BRI, with following concerns over Malaysia's debt sustainability and sovereignty. While he kept highlighting *"interconnectivity"*, he pushed back on the notion of *"mutual benefits"*, arguing that Malaysia should *"gain something"* from its participation in the initiative. Largely related to domestic political events, this KW was a notable shift from previous discourse over BRI in Malaysia, as the then Prime Minister had focused on local employment and local procurement in BRI-related projects. He then revised the ECRL contract, reducing construction costs and increasing local involvement, reflecting a more pragmatic and cautious approach to Malaysia's interactions with China. In light of the 1MDB scandal's effect on public trust, Mahathir

characterized his renegotiation push as one that aimed to protect Malaysia's sovereignty from over-reliance on Chinese capital. This is a common occurrence reflecting a hedging strategy adopted by Malaysia as a way to maneuver between cooperation and caution. Mahathir aimed to strengthen Malaysia's bargaining position and limit the reliance on Chinese financing by renegotiating the ECRL and ramping up local participation. This strategy is engaging Japan and the US, while keeping proximity with China, which is part of Malaysia's broader strategy of engaging multiple powers.

Ismail Sabri's term followed the economic recovery strategy after the COVID-19 pandemic, using BRI-linked projects to support post-pandemic Malaysia. The focus reverted to *"economic potential"*, a frequent KW mentioned by Ismail Sabri to highlight Malaysia's aspiration to foster economic expansion, stimulate employment and advance modernization. Unlike Mahathir's more cautious stance, Ismail Sabri's framing reflects a renewed optimism about the BRI's role in revitalizing Malaysia's economy.

Malaysia's perception exhibits substantial alignment with the NDRC (2015) priorities of *"financial integration"* (investment), *"win-win cooperation"* (economic) cooperation, win-win, share of winning), and *"interconnectivity"* (connectivity, greater integration, ease of travel and communication) (see Figure 7). However, Malaysia partially diverges from China's narrative on *"mutual benefits"*, as Mahathir's notion of *gaining something for Malaysia* reflects a critique of BRI-related projects perceived as one-sided or disadvantageous. Additionally, Malaysia's discourse places greater emphasis on sovereignty protection and local participation, reflecting the enduring legacy of the 1MDB scandal on Malaysia's approach to external financing and its desire to assert national control over development projects.

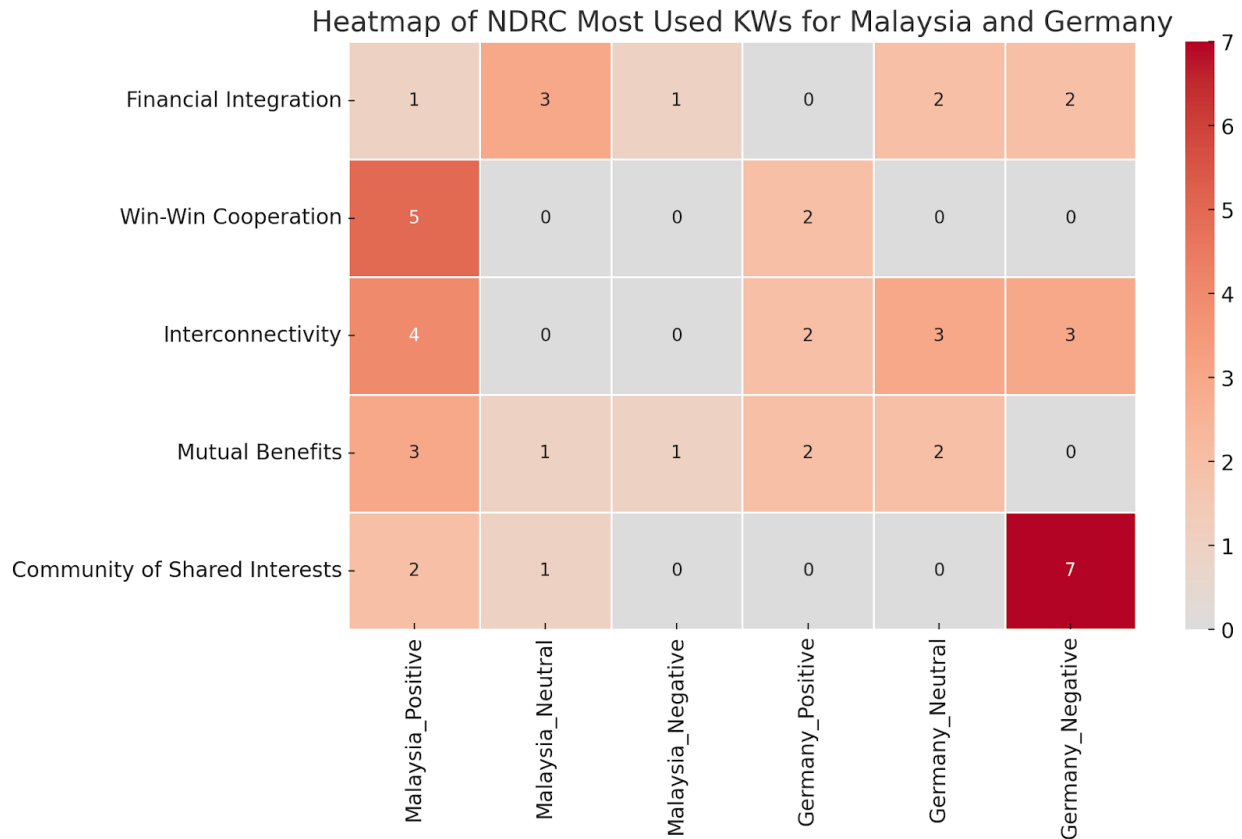


Figure 7. Heatmap of NDRC Most Used KWs for Malaysia and Germany (compiled by the author).

Germany: Balancing Economic Engagement and Strategic Autonomy

Germany's attitude toward the BRI represents a calculated balancing act between economic engagement and strategic autonomy. Merkel (2005-2021) stressed cautious engagement in her BRI discourse, reflecting the weight of the German businesses, especially in the automobile and logistics sectors. She referred to the BRI as a *"major project"* in global trade. Germany insisted on reciprocity and adherence to EU regulatory standards, which was in line with the country's compliance with fair trade and transparency.

The term *"interdependence"*, favored by Merkel, explicits Germany's recognition of the interconnected character of the EU-China trade relations. With this as background, Germany noted the need for interdependence as a precondition for global trade, however also framing this concept with caution, indicating the risks of high dependence on supply chains controlled by China. Among other KWs is *"forward-looking and supporting policies"*, used by BWE (2019), it emphasizes Germany's awareness of China's strategic planning and policy foresight.

However, this framing also highlighted Germany's criticism of China's increasing industrial dominance and the need for regulatory oversight to guarantee fair competition.

Represented by KWs, such as *"system to shape the world in China's interests"*, counter-narratives formulate Germany's critique of the geopolitical ambitions of China. For German former Foreign Ministers, including Sigmar Gabriel, the BRI framed an effort to establish a China-centric global order in opposition to the Western governance model, emphasized by democracy, human rights, and transparency. Such framing emphasises Germany's worries over the geopolitical consequences of BRI-related investments in Europe, especially with regard to port acquisitions and digital infrastructure.

Noteworthy, the German strategies, as also marked by Hemminga (2020), are not limited to the German perspective but shape the perception and strategies of the EU as a whole. As a leading power within the EU, Germany's emphasis on reciprocity, regulatory compliance, and transparency informs the EU's Connectivity Strategy and its regulatory approach to foreign investments. Germany's framing of the BRI as a "Sino-centric project" and a geopolitical challenge has prompted greater EU scrutiny of China's activities, shaping the bloc's collective stance on economic engagement with China.

Under Chancellor Olaf Scholz (2021-present), Germany's approach to the BRI has become more cautious, with a stronger emphasis on strategic autonomy and regulatory oversight.

Scholz's government is a continuation of the Merkel era, but additionally the EU-China relations are coming under increasing scrutiny. Germany's pragmatic engagement with BRI demonstrates the cautious nature of the German stance, however highlights the importance of global economic relationships due to its dependence on shifting global markets and economic ties of its business elites, especially the automotive and manufacturing businesses (e.g. VW and BMW). Key figures like Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock highlighted issues of transparency and fair competition, using KWs like *"investing centrally"* and *"freely exported"* to emphasize Germany's demand for clear and rules-based BRI participation.

Germany's perception exhibits alignment with NDRC (2015) priorities like *"unimpeded trade"* (trade exchange, freely exported, market economy), *"policy coordination"* (framework conditions, forward-looking and supporting policies), and *"mutual benefits"* (opportunities, tax revenue, reciprocity), but diverges on *"interconnectivity"* and *"community of shared interests"* (see Figure 6). While Germany supports global supply chain connectivity, it emphasizes the need for reciprocity, transparency, and regulatory compliance. The divergence is exemplified by KWs like *"geostrategic influence"* presented by former Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and *"Sino-centric project"* used by Claus, which reflect Germany's critical stance toward China's perceived geopolitical influence.

Alignment with the NDRC (2015) five key priorities

Malaysia's and Germany's perceptions of the BRI align with the five key priorities outlined in the NDRC (2015) document—policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded

trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds—to varying degrees. When analyzing the KWs in the BRI-related discourse, distinct differences in alignment, tone, and narrative is apparent. Malaysia is more closely aligned with China's vision, whereas Germany is more conservative and regulatory driven.

1. *Policy Coordination*

Malaysia: Neutral Alignment

The KW "ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan" reflects Malaysia's policy coordination. Notably, this plan indicates Malaysia's preference for regional multilateral coordination over bilateral coordination with China. Even though partly aligning with China's coordination aims via joint projects like the ECRL, Malaysia would still approach such coordination with the national interest in mind, focusing on the local participation.

Germany: Divergence

Germany expresses some alignment on policy coordination. The mention of "framework conditions" is a positive perception: it shows Germany is on board with formalized governance and transparency. Germany's acknowledgement of China's long-term strategic planning, as seen in the "forward-looking and supporting policies", represents neutral alignment. Negative alignment is reflected in the KW "alternative system", used by Gabriel, critiquing China's push for a BRI-centric system distinct from Western governance principles.

2. *Facilities Connectivity*

Malaysia: Strong Alignment

Malaysia is well-aligned with facilities connectivity, since KWs such as "connectivity development plan", "connect cities", "freedom of passage" in the respective speeches also highlight its support for BRI cross-border infrastructure. These KWs emphasize Malaysia's objectives to be the connectivity hub for the region — illustrated further by initiatives such as the ECRL. Freedom of passage, noted by Mahathir, is a manifestation of insistence on freely accessible trade corridors.

Germany: Partial Alignment

Germany takes a more cautious approach to facilities connectivity. While KWs like "operational" and "major project" indicate a recognition that the BRI indicates the future of global trade, still Germany's insistence on EU regulatory oversight reflects partial alignment.

3. Unimpeded Trade

Malaysia: Strong Alignment

Malaysia demonstrates strong alignment with unimpeded trade, reflecting this priority through KWs like "unimpeded trade" and "export growth". Malaysia's focus on trade facilitation, especially through port development and the DFTZ, aligns with China's goal of promoting smooth cross-border trade. Export growth reflects Malaysia's aim to strengthen export-oriented trade, especially in the context of its maritime trade hub strategy.

Germany: Partial Alignment

Germany aligns partially with unimpeded trade, as seen in KWs like "trade exchange", "freely exported", and "market economy". Baerbock introduced the KW "freely exported" to demand transparency and fair trade in BRI participation. Neutral alignment is seen in the KW "trade routes", reflecting Germany's recognition of global trade routes but also its insistence on rules-based competition. Germany upholds fair competition while disagreeing with the Chinese trade liberalization model.

4. Financial Integration

Malaysia: Partial Alignment

Malaysia's model of financial integration is partly aligned with China's blueprint. The use of the KW "investment" highlights Malaysia's acceptance of Chinese financing for major projects like the ECRL, reflecting positive alignment. However, the KW "investment" is framed neutrally in Malaysia's discourse when it is discussed in the context of broader economic engagement and comparative analysis of foreign direct investment. The KW "selling sovereignty" reflects negative alignment, originally stemming from Mahathir's allegations of Najib's policies, particularly regarding the BRI, were leading Malaysia into compromising its sovereignty. This concern reflected in Malaysia's shift toward financial prudence after the 1MDB scandal and efforts to reduce debt obligations.

Germany: Misalignment

Germany's financial integration vision distances from China's stance. Germany avoids reliance on Chinese loans, as seen in its critique of "debt traps" in developing countries. The KWs "investments" and "investing centrally", used by Baerbock, signal Germany's insistence on local control and transparent oversight of investments. Germany is exemplifying this critique of the financial model of BRI-related cooperation, focusing on regulations adherence and less dependency on Chinese capital.

5. People-to-People Bonds

Malaysia: N/A

Malaysia's BRI discourse does not consider people-to-people bonds to be an explicit goal. Malaysia emphasizes connectivity within the framework of the ACMP and “*ease of travel and communication*”, but this focuses on regional partnerships rather than bilateral people-to-people exchange with China. No key terms directly reference people-to-people bonds.

Germany: N/A

Germany's engagement with the BRI also demonstrates minimal emphasis on people-to-people bonds. Germany's BRI discourse centers on economic, regulatory, and strategic issues, rather than cultural or social exchange. KWs like “Sino-centric project” highlight Germany’s critique of China’s influence strategy, but no direct references to people-to-people ties were identified in Germany’s BRI-related discourse.

Contribution of this research

This study addresses several important gaps in the literature on BRI engagement by Malaysia and Germany. Prior studies often focused on the economic benefits of BRI participation, but few examined the role of leadership changes and domestic political shifts in shaping national BRI narratives. This study highlights how these changes directly impact BRI engagement, offering a leadership-centric analysis of BRI perceptions.

For Malaysia, existing literature has frequently emphasized its role as a key partner in the BRI, but it often overlooked the role of political leadership. This study demonstrates how the 1MDB scandal significantly influenced Malaysia’s BRI strategy. The shift from Najib Razak’s pro-BRI alignment to Mahathir’s renegotiation strategy highlights the role of domestic accountability in shaping BRI discourses. By foregrounding Malaysia’s calls for tangible benefits and its critiques of perceived imbalances in BRI engagements, this thesis sheds light on how domestic political transitions affect Malaysia's bargaining power with China, as argued by Gerstl (2020). This analysis contributes to the existing literature on hedging strategies employed by Southeast Asian countries as they engage with China.

For Germany, prior research often emphasizes its economic pragmatism, but this study reveals how partisan perspectives under Merkel and Scholz shaped Germany's BRI strategy. Merkel (2005-2021) promoted engagement with a focus on reciprocity and interdependence, while also emphasizing regulatory oversight to address concerns about China's growing industrial dominance. This approach was intensified under Scholz (2021-present), whose administration prioritized strategic autonomy and EU regulatory oversight. Germany’s BRI stance is shaped by economic reliance on global markets and the priorities of its business elites,

particularly in the automotive and manufacturing sectors (e.g., VW, BMW). Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock emphasized the need for transparency and fair competition, as well as to advocate for rules-based BRI engagement. These findings align with arguments made by Callahan (2016) and Stelzenmüller et al. (2021), who emphasize the EU's goal of achieving autonomy from China's influence.

Furthermore, this thesis advances the methodology of CDA by applying it to analyze China's official BRI narratives. As seen in subchapters 2.3 and 4.4, this approach used to decode China's governmental discourses by identifying and analyzing key terms to understand their primary BRI perceptions, is now extended to the discourses of Malaysia and Germany. This way, this study uniquely explores how these nations' interpretations of the BRI compare and contrast with those promoted by China, thereby enhancing our understanding of international responses to Chinese foreign policy initiatives. Malaysia's efforts to increase infrastructure connectivity reflect its alignment with China's emphasis on connectivity, yet it diverges on mutual benefits, emphasizing the need for tangible returns from its BRI engagements. In contrast, Germany aligns with the priority of unimpeded trade and promotes transparent investment standards, while also critiquing China's geopolitical influence and insisting on regulatory safeguards. This comprehensive comparison introduces novel perspectives not extensively explored in existing literature, offering fresh insights into the dynamics of BRI narratives across different national contexts.

New insights

This thesis provides several new insights, contributing to the understanding the evolution of the perceptions of the BRI in Malaysia and Germany:

1. *Leadership-driven policy shifts*: Both countries exhibit shifts in the BRI engagement based on political leadership changes. Malaysia's approach under Najib, Mahathir, and Ismail Sabri reveals distinct strategies, from pro-BRI cooperation under Najib to renegotiation and caution under Mahathir, and pragmatic recovery under Ismail Sabri. In Germany, the shift from Merkel to Scholz marked a move from pragmatic economic engagement to a stronger emphasis on regulatory caution and strategic autonomy, reflecting shifts in EU-China relations and growing scrutiny of China's influence.
2. *Hedging vs. strategic autonomy*: Malaysia's hedging strategy contrasts with Germany's focus on strategic autonomy. Malaysia seeks to maintain flexibility in its dealings with China while pursuing benefits through the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan. Germany, however, insists on EU norms and promotes a rules-based international system, as seen in its emphasis on transparency and regulatory compliance.
3. *Broader implications for understanding multipolarity*: Finally, the study offers broader implications for understanding multipolarity, positioning the BRI as a microcosm of

global geopolitical trends. Through an analysis of how Malaysia and Germany have recalibrated their narratives to respond to changing domestic and international contexts, and by using the comparative framework developed in this research, the study offers lens to examine these changing dynamics of the BRI in other countries with similar or opposing geopolitical and economic conditions.

7. Conclusion

This thesis, titled “*The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative: Perceptions of the Malaysian and German Governments (2013–2022)*”, has sought to understand how the governments of Malaysia and Germany have perceived and why they have engaged with the Belt and Road Initiative since its launch in 2013. Examining the shifting narratives in these two countries, this study has served to illustrate how national imperatives, political environments, and geopolitical realities have directly impacted their engagements with China's great infrastructure and economic development plan.

At the core of this research lies the central question:

How and why has the perception of the BRI by the governments of Malaysia and Germany changed and developed since 2013?

To deepen this investigation, several sub-questions were explored, such as:

1. Which narratives dominate in each country's discourse?
2. How have these narratives evolved since the launch of the BRI in 2013?
3. To what extent does China's vision, articulated in the official five key priorities described in the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC, 2015), align with the perceptions of Malaysia and Germany?

Through these questions, the study has highlighted how changing perceptions reflect broader geopolitical shifts, as well as how Malaysia and Germany have adjusted their policies in response to domestic and international developments.

This study applied a Constructivist analytical framework combined with CDA to explore how key actors in Malaysia and Germany frame their engagement with the BRI. The CDA approach was particularly useful for dissecting speeches, policy statements, and official government reports. By focusing on the use of KWs drawn from China's “The Vision and Proposed Actions on the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road and the Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt,” released by the NDRC in 2015, this method facilitated a comparison of Malaysia's and Germany's narratives with China's vision for the BRI. The analysis of KWs in Malaysian and German government discourses is based on a total of nine speeches, one official report from Malaysia and nineteen speeches, two government reports, and one press release from Germany. Accordingly, seven of President Xi's speeches and one Policy Action Plan have been analyzed to develop a robust comparative framework that examines the extent to which Malaysia and Germany align with China's vision of the Belt and Road Initiative. This method ensured a diverse and representative set of sources, facilitating a robust analysis of the official narratives determining each country's position on the BRI.

The methodological approach of the BRI discourses covered *textual*, *contextual*, *discursive*, and *framing* analysis, which were instrumental in discovering the actual practice of its discourses. This study applied the principle of *triangulation*, framing of various sources (e.g., speeches, government reports, and press releases) to bolster findings. This comprehensive method ensured the reliability of the results and provided a clear understanding of how and why the BRI's perception evolved in Malaysia and Germany. In addition, the findings based on the CDA approach were embedded in secondary literature on the views of Malaysia and Germany on the BRI and the relations with China in general.

The research questions can be answered as follows:

How and why has the perception of the BRI by the Malaysian and German governments changed since 2013?

The Malaysian and German governments' perceptions have shifted considerably portraying their distinct domestic stance and different reaction to the changing geopolitical reality.

Since 2013, Malaysia's perception of the BRI has shifted from initial enthusiasm under former Prime Minister Najib Razak (2009-2018) to critical recalibration under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (2018-2020), and later to pragmatic engagement under former Prime Minister Ismail Sabri (2021-2022). The BRI was marketed by Najib as a way to drive economic growth and infrastructure development, while the ECRL and the MCKIP were touted as landmark projects. Still, the 1MDB scandal exposed financial weaknesses and sparked criticism that made Mahathir adopt a more conservative tone.

Mahathir renegotiated BRI projects to reduce debt and emphasized the need for Malaysia to "*gain something for Malaysia*", reflecting a shift from dependence on Chinese financing to asserting national sovereignty. Under Ismail Sabri, the Malaysian narrative shifted once again, noting the economic potential of the BRI in terms of post-pandemic recovery, with an emphasis on employment, modernization, and growth. As all of these changes illustrate, how shifts in leadership, economic priorities, and political accountability, played a role in shaping Malaysia's BRI perception.

Germany, by contrast, has viewed the BRI more soberly, expressing its need for both economic engagement with China and the necessity for restraint. Germany took a pragmatic position under former chancellor Angela Merkel (2005-2021), focusing on trade and connectivity while expressing concerns about transparency and geopolitical risks. Merkel herself characterized the BRI as a "*major project*" which features nearly half of the world economy, while promoting fair trade and regulatory reciprocity. The tendency for cautious engagement continued under Chancellor Olaf Scholz (2021-present), where participation in the BRI must align with EU policies where states adhere to international norms.

Scholz's administration, however, placed greater emphasis on strategic autonomy, driven by growing EU concerns over China's expanding influence in European infrastructure. Germany's balancing act of maintaining economic relationships and addressing strategic security concerns is a microcosm of its broader role within European and global geopolitics, especially its leadership in promoting intra-EU regulatory processes and investment transparency.

1. and 2. Which narratives dominate in each country's discourse, and how have they evolved?

The narratives that shape the BRI discourses in Malaysia and Germany denote the broader economic and geopolitical priorities and interests of each nation, while their changing over time capture the effects of internal political dynamics and external impacts.

In Malaysia, the narrative surrounding the BRI is pragmatic: focusing on *economic growth, infrastructure development, and connectivity*. Successive governments have framed the BRI as complementary to the ACMP, emphasizing its role in promoting regional integration and trade facilitation. Under Najib, the BRI was seen as a chance to "*connect cities*" and "*share of winning*" through flagship projects like the ECRL and MCKIP.

However, after the 1MDB scandal, Mahathir expressed a much more critical attitude, emphasising the protection of sovereignty and local participation. His message to "*gain something for Malaysia*" also marked a shift in Malaysia's approach toward BRI projects in terms of greater control. Ismail Sabri took a pragmatic approach, perceiving the BRI as means for post-COVID economic recovery. This shift reflects Malaysia's pragmatic stance to engage with the outside world in a measured way that facilitates development goals while avoiding sovereignty risks as well as hedging global political risks.

Germany's BRI narrative built on economic pragmatism and strategic caution. Germany maintained trade facilitation and supply chain connectivity with the BRI under Merkel, representing it as a "*major project*" with enormous economic promise. Although Germany aligned with China's vision on "*unimpeded trade*" and "*policy coordination*", it still puts EU regulatory compliance first in terms of "*interconnectivity*". Amid increasing concerns over China's strategic ambitions, former German Ambassador to China Michael Claus and former Foreign Minister Heiko Maas characterized the BRI as a "*Sino-centric project*" motivated by gaining "*geostrategic influence*", shifting towards regulatory approach and strategic autonomy. With Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock by his side, Scholz consolidated Merkel's cautious approach, calling for openness and accountability as well as fairness in competition. The gradual transformation of Germany's geopolitical position illustrates the delicate balance between developing economic cooperation with China and protecting European strategic autonomy, serving as a key promoter of the EU Connectivity Strategy.

The narratives of both countries reflect a dynamic interplay of economic objectives and political strategies, as Malaysia pursues pragmatic cooperation for developmental purposes, while Germany adheres to a more restrained combination of economic cooperation parallel to political strategic independence.

3. How do Malaysia's and Germany's perceptions align with China's five key priorities outlined in the NDRC (2015)?

Malaysia and Germany's alignment with the NDRC (2015) BRI priorities—*policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds*—differs significantly. Malaysia demonstrates stronger alignment, particularly on *facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, and financial integration*, while Germany adopts a more cautious, regulatory-driven approach. Malaysia focuses on *policy coordination* with a role in the ACMP and projects such as ECRL, hence pursuing local interests. Germany's alignment is mixed, favouring governance frameworks but differing through critiques of China's "Sino-centric" system.

For *facilities connectivity*, Malaysia shows strong alignment, as seen in key terms like "connect cities" and "freedom of passage," emphasizing infrastructure development and trade connectivity. Germany partially aligns, recognizing the BRI's significance as a "major project" but emphasizing international norms and transparency.

Malaysia demonstrates strong alignment with *unimpeded trade*, focusing on "export growth" and "unimpeded trade" through port development and the DFTZ. Germany shows partial alignment, supporting "trade exchange" but prioritizing fair competition under EU norms. As for *financial integration*, Malaysia indicated partial consistency by accepting BRI investments, however putting an emphasis on local control after the 1MDB scandal. Germany has shown minimal alignment by opposing China's alleged debt-driven model and promoting investment transparency and local oversight. Both countries show limited engagement on *people-to-people bonds*, as Malaysia focuses on regional connectivity through the ACMP, while Germany prioritizes regulatory and strategic issues over cultural exchange.

In summary, Malaysia *aligns more closely* with China's BRI vision, especially on connectivity, trade, and finance, though it asserts sovereignty over financing terms. Germany, on the contrary, pursues a more *cautious alignment*, focusing on adherence to regional regulations and preserving its strategic autonomy rather than becoming reliant on Chinese investments or influenced by China's geopolitical ambitions.

Conclusive remarks

Despite the strengths of this study, there are some limitations related to the study's scope, data collection, and analysis, to be acknowledged. Addressing these limitations provides a

transparent evaluation of the methodological strength of the study and potential areas for future research designs improvement.

1. Data Scope and Access:

This study focuses on *governmental narratives* primarily and does not include media, public opinion and corporate actors' perspectives. Government discourses, while offering direct insight into official policies, are not able to capture the full spectrum of societal engagement with the BRI.

Additionally, access to primary sources varied across the two case studies. Malaysia's centralized system made speeches and statements from Prime Ministers more accessible, whereas Germany's decentralized governance required more extensive efforts to collect relevant discourse from multiple ministries, such as the Chancellery, Foreign Ministry, and Ministry for Economic Affairs. Germany's chancellors are less likely to make direct statements on sensitive issues like the BRI, often delegating to other officials. Even though the number of official speeches analyzed in this thesis is limited, the speeches are highly representative of the official views of the two governments.

2. Interpreting Evolving Political Discourse:

The analysis spanned a whole decade (2013–2022), requiring an insight into *changing leadership dynamics* in the two countries. Leadership shifts, including Najib Razak's to Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia and Angela Merkel's to Olaf Scholz in Germany, brought new policies and narratives that significantly shaped how the BRI was perceived. Understanding the underlying forces driving such changes—be they domestic political transitions, economic imperatives, or broader geopolitical pressures—required a careful methodological approach to trace the complex links between national leadership changes, economic priorities, and international dynamics. This evolution in Malaysia and Germany was inherently shaped by their discursive context based on the previous setting and its trajectory as the leaderships adapted their narrative to complement changing needs.

3. Language and Translation Barriers:

Language was another significant barrier, especially for Germany. The BRI-related discourses of Malaysia were more accessible in English compared to the German-language policy documents that needed to be translated and cross-referenced for consistency. As many of these German policymakers used terms that may not have direct English equivalents, semantic accuracy further added to the analytical complexity.

To address these limitations, specific **strategies** were employed to ensure the reliability, validity, and comprehensiveness of the results.

1. Triangulation of Data:

To address data limitations, the study applied *triangulation*, incorporating data from speeches, press releases, official reports, and ministerial statements. By doing so, it demonstrated the breadth of narratives from both Malaysia and Germany thus alleviating the potential risks of relying on a single source of discourse. For Germany, considering its bureaucratic structure, materials from several government agencies were included in order to reflect the position of such key actors as the Chancellor, Foreign Minister, and Ministry for Economic Affairs.

2. Systematic Approach to Discourse Analysis:

To trace the changing political discourse, the study applied an integrated CDA framework that included textual, contextual, collocational, and framing analyses designed to systematically measure changes in discourse over time. Leadership transitions, such as Najib to Mahathir in Malaysia and Merkel to Scholz in Germany, were also tracked through shifts in *KWs* such as "connect cities" and "gain something for Malaysia" (Malaysia) and "interdependence" and "strategic autonomy" (Germany). Grounding these shifts in *historical, political, and cultural* contexts, the CDA framework ensured that policy changes and rhetoric were interpreted within broader domestic and international dynamics. Through this combination of methods, the study was able to reveal the power dynamics, ideological drivers, and strategic motives that have shaped BRI narratives in each country over time. This way, changes in new policy and rhetoric were not viewed as isolated, but rather through the prism of contextual changes in leadership and geopolitics shifts.

3. Overcoming Language and Access Barriers:

Language barriers were addressed through the use of *automated translation tools* and cross-checking with *bilingual official reports*. For Germany, the search for relevant materials required targeted keyword searches using both English and German terms like "Neue Seidenstraße" (New Silk Road). The multi-source approach ensured consistency in meaning while capturing key themes in German government discourse. To mitigate differences in governance structures, the research adapted to the nature of Malaysia's Prime Minister-driven communication and Germany's consensus-based communication of the coalition government, ensuring that key discourses from both countries were captured.

While this thesis offers strong analysis on Malaysia's and Germany's perceptions towards the BRI, it also paves several avenues for **future research** that can be built on this study.

One key direction is to enhance future analyses with public opinion. Whereas this study's primary focus was on government-driven discourse, future research could potentially consider how *public perceptions* contradict or align with official state narratives, as well as whether media or civil society influence them, which would present a broader societal perspective.

Analysis of *political transitions* is another important area. New political leadership can dramatically affect the way a country engages with the BRI, as evidenced by Malaysia's pronounced shifts under Najib Razak, historic lessons of Mahathir Mohamad, and fresh changes under Ismail Sabri Yaakob. Accordingly, ruling shifts of previous leaders in Germany, from Merkel to Scholz, depict the possibility for policy recalibration. Future research could investigate how further leadership transitions would influence BRI narratives and policies, especially in light of evolving domestic and international pressures.

In addition, comparing with *other individual countries*, in Southeast Asia or Europe in particular, may shed light on regional commonalities and the role of political systems in shaping the BRI engagement. Examining countries, such as Indonesia or the Philippines, perhaps, Italy or Greece would add different perspectives on shared challenges and diverging strategic choices in BRI participation.

Lastly, future studies could evaluate the long-term effects of BRI initiatives. Since this thesis focused on government perceptions, future research could examine the BRI projects' broader economic, social, and environmental impacts. Such an analysis would assist in assessing the extent to which BRI initiatives fulfill their promoted goals of "mutual benefits" and "win-win cooperation" between China and its partner countries. Altogether, these recommendations indicate the need for a more integrated and dynamic understanding of the BRI engagement in a fast-changing geopolitical scope.

Filling these gaps would significantly enrich the perception of the BRI's global impact and its changing role in the global world.

All in all, this thesis makes an essential contribution to the scholarship on the BRI by comparing how two different countries, Malaysia and Germany, have responded to this potentially transformative initiative. This study fills a gap in the current literature and discusses the synthesis between economic interests and political and security concerns while revealing that national strategies are influenced by both domestic and international factors. Malaysia's developmentalist narrative and Germany's value-driven pragmatism offer important case studies in the complexity of the BRI. These findings emphasize the adaptability of national strategies, indicating that the BRI perceptions, as well as the BRI itself, are not static phenomena but evolve simultaneously with shifting domestic dynamics and changing global realities.

In conclusion, this work positions itself as an important resource for scholars and policymakers navigating the challenges and opportunities of the BRI. By identifying Malaysia's and Germany's nuanced perceptions, the thesis strengthens understanding of the pluralistic aspects of the BRI as an economic initiative and a geopolitical tool, providing significant implications for future research and policy-making.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. *Investments made by China and the contracts in construction for each of the BRI countries by sectors between 2014 and 2018.*

	Sector	Value (US\$ billion)
1	Energy	225.48
2	Transport	156.44
3	Real estate	59.76
4	Metals	37.72
5	Others	19.45
6	Utilities	15.24
7	Agriculture	13.5
8	Logistics	12.92
9	Technology	11.18
10	Chemical	10.06
11	Finance	8.55
12	Entertainment	8.49
13	Tourism	7.34
14	Health	2.72
	All sectors	588.85

Appendix 2. Contracts in construction and ODI for the top ten countries in the BRI project between 2014 and 2018.

Country	Contract Value	Country	ODI Value
Pakistan	31.41	Singapore	24.27
Nigeria	24.21	Malaysia	14.09
Bangladesh	17.54	Russia	10.44
Indonesia	16.77	Indonesia	9.35
Malaysia	15.8	Israel	7.88
Egypt	14.95	Pakistan	7.63
UAE	14.03	Laos	6.68
Russia	11.13	UAE	6.55
Laos	11.06	Nigeria	6.54
Iran	10.63	Bangladesh	5.3

Appendix 3. *The investments in China and the contracts in construction before (between 2005 and 2013) and after (2014 and 2018) the BRI project in the top 15 nations.*

Before		Value	After	Value
1	Russia	22.93	Pakistan	39.51
2	Kazakhstan	22.19	Nigeria	30.75
3	Saudi Arabia	21.56	Malaysia	29.89
4	Nigeria	19.21	Singapore	28.03
5	Indonesia	16.6	Indonesia	26.12
6	Ethiopia	16.57	Russia	24.25
7	Vietnam	16.49	Bangladesh	22.84
8	India	16.17	UAE	21.22
9	Malaysia	15.77	Laos	17.86
10	Angola	14.92	Israel	16.67
11	Iraq	14.71	Egypt	15.69
12	Iran	12.97	Saudi Arabia	13.83
13	Pakistan	12.44	Iran	12.97
14	Singapore	11.51	India	10.93
15	Turkey	10.85	Kazakhstan	10.44

Appendix 4. Growth in China's contracts in construction in terms of the accomplished turnover, value of the contracts, and the number of contracts.

