

Debt Politics and New Dependencies: A Political Economic Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asia

Angelina Aprilia Putri, Al Zhafirah, Ahmad Sahide

Magister Hubungan Internasional, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta

Received: 1 July 2025

Revised: 30 October 2025

Accepted: 30 October 2025

Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the dynamics of new debt and dependency politics emerging from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project in Southeast Asia. The main focus is to see how infrastructure projects funded through the BRI create unequal relations between countries that provide and receive debt. To understand this phenomenon, this study uses an International Political Economy approach with a dependency theory framework from Andre Gunder Frank and other thinkers. This theory views that the relationship between central and peripheral countries in the global system often results in economic and political dependency through debt instruments and structural control. The method used is qualitative descriptive with literature study techniques, including analysis of cases in Laos, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The research findings show that the BRI project not only brings consequences for physical development, but also strengthens China's dominant position fiscally, technologically, and policy-wise in Southeast Asian countries. This dependency indicates the existence of a subordinate reproductive structure in the international system that is disguised through economic cooperation.

Keywords:

Belt and road; Debt Politics; Dependency Theory; Southeast Asia; International Political Economy

Introduction

Since its launch in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become China's main foreign policy instrument to expand connectivity and the most ambitious geopolitical and geoeconomic influence in the 21st century globally. This program not only focuses on infrastructure development, but is also part of a global hegemonic strategy that combines economic expansion with political interests (Amanda, 2024). Within this framework, China positions itself as an alternative to the Western development model by offering the same work scheme that is fast, flexible, but full of

Korespodensi:

Angelina Aprilia Putri, Magister Hubungan Internasional, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta
Email: aprilia.putri.psc24@mail.umy.ac.id

structural power logic. As a grand strategy that combines economic and foreign political interests, the BRI aims to build global connectivity through a network of land and maritime infrastructure connecting China with Asia, Africa, Europe, and even Latin America. This project not only reflects China's economic expansion drive, but is also a strategic instrument to strengthen its influence in the post-Western hegemonic global order. Southeast Asia, as a key region in the BRI maritime route, is an important laboratory for this dynamic.

The Southeast Asian region plays a vital role in the Maritime Silk Road due to its position as a strategic global trade hub. Countries in the region, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, and Cambodia, are major recipients of large infrastructure projects such as ports, high-speed railways, power plants, and industrial parks. Major projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, Kuantan Port in Malaysia, and dams in Laos are financed through bilateral loans or public-private partnerships (PPPs), mostly involving Chinese state-owned enterprises such as China Communications Construction Company and Exim Bank (Ibrahim, 2025). This financing scheme, although promising rapid development, is often non-transparent and creates an imbalance in the relationship between the lender and the borrower (Triristina, 2021). However, this financing model is not free from criticism, especially regarding low transparency, high fiscal risks, and potential debt-trap diplomacy. ASEAN countries welcome this investment because of the urgent need for infrastructure, but often ignore the aspects of fiscal poverty and long-term risks (Waluyo, 2021).

Criticism of the BRI cannot be separated from the issue of debt trap diplomacy—when the recipient country fails to pay its debts and is forced to provide political concessions or access to strategic assets to China (Wahyuni & Amin, 2023). The most frequently cited example is the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. International concerns about the practice of diplomacy have further increased debt after Sri Lanka lost control of the Hambantota Port which was leased to a Chinese company due to default on its debt. In Southeast Asia, Laos has begun to show signs of extreme fiscal dependence, even handing over control of its national electricity grid to a Chinese company (Zikri & Damayanti, 2025). Meanwhile, Cambodia and Myanmar are heavily dependent on BRI investment flows to support their fragile domestic economies (Paramitha, 2024). This reflects an unequal relationship, where the bargaining position of the recipient country is very weak against the dominance of foreign capital (Zhafarina Jauza Az Zahro, Faris Al-Fadhat, 2024). Amidst the limitations of fiscal institutions and immature governance, the BRI can transform from a development opportunity into a structural trap. While similar conditions have not yet occurred to such an extreme in Southeast Asia, comparable situations are emerging in Laos and Cambodia, which have high levels of debt dependence on China. On the other hand, Southeast Asian countries face a classic dilemma: the urgent need for infrastructure development to boost economic growth on the one hand, and fiscal risk dependence and erosion of national sovereignty on the other.

Most of the existing studies so far have focused more on the technical aspects of the BRI project such as logistics efficiency, investment value, and short-term economic impacts. Political economy studies that highlight the power structure and logic of long-term dependency are still very limited, especially in the context of Southeast Asia (Umniyah, 2025). On the other hand, approaches such as dependency theory by Andre Gunder Frank can help explain how the debt structure in the BRI project is not just an economic relationship, but a mechanism of political control and a symbol of the dominance of the new global system (Kusumawardhana, 2023). However, there are still

relatively few studies that analyze the BRI from an international political economy perspective, especially with a dependency theory approach. In fact, this approach is important to understand how the power relations between the central state (China) and the peripheral countries (developing countries in ASEAN) continue to be reproduced through debt instruments and foreign economic policies. This paper aims to fill this gap by critically examining the dynamics of new debt and dependency that arise from the penetration of the BRI project in Southeast Asia. Therefore, this research is important to understand the power relations behind the BRI project which looks like ordinary economic cooperation.

Literature Review

The author conducted a number of literature reviews on similar topics in this study to obtain scientific data and sources, which were then used as guidelines in the literature review. The first literature review from (Wahyuni & Amin, 2023) in their article 'One Belt One Road and China's Regional Hegemony Efforts in Southeast Asia' describes the BRI as China's hegemonic strategy in forming a new political-economic order in the Southeast Asian region. They explain that infrastructure projects driven through the BRI are not only focused on physical development, but also become a tool of economic diplomacy to expand China's influence amidst increasingly sharp global competition. The approach used is important to regional power relations, showing that dependence on capital, technology, and expertise from China is slowly forming a pattern of subordination of small countries in ASEAN. Their key argument shows that the BRI reproduces a structure of domination, where developing countries find it increasingly difficult to get out of the orbit of donor countries' power.

Furthermore, the discussion of the literature study 'Proyek Belt and Road Initiative di Negara Malaysia' by (Triristina, 2021) in their study on the implementation of BRI in Malaysia highlights that China's massive investment in port and infrastructure projects has raised new issues related to economic coverage. They show that BRI projects are often based on bilateral agreements that are less transparent and tend to favor investor interests. This study illustrates that although the project promises economic growth, the financing structure and technical control from foreign parties create dangerous dependencies in the long term. Through the case study of Malaysia, this article shows how recipient countries face a dilemma between infrastructure needs and the risk of losing control over strategic assets.

On the other hand, in one example of a case study analysis of the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Train project as an example of BRI implementation in Indonesia (Ibrahim, 2025). The study by Raihan Ibrahim entitled 'Belt and Road Initiative Tiongkok di Indonesia: Studi Kasus Proyek Kereta Cepat Jakarta-Bandung' He said that this project shows the tendency of a new form of fiscal and technological dependence on China. Through document studies and contract reviews, the author reveals that the complex financing structure, dominance of experts from China, and minimal technology transfer have put Indonesia in a weak position in the bilateral relationship. This article also raises criticism of the low public transparency in the decision-making process and the minimal participation of national institutions, which strengthens the assumption that the BRI project is not only about economic cooperation, but also about political control and inequality in international relations.

Furthermore, there is a study on economic-political cooperation between Indonesia and China in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by (Ma'arif,

2020) which shows that this project is not only driven by economic interests alone, but is also closely related to the foreign policy strategies of both countries. The BRI initiative, which was pioneered since 2013 and is seen as a manifestation of China's rise as a multipolar power, has strengthened bilateral relations through increased investment, trade, and human mobility. In the context of Indonesia, BRI has opened up new work paths in various strategic sectors, from infrastructure to culture. However, this study also highlights that the implementation of BRI in Indonesia cannot be separated from the dynamics of the economic-political interests of both parties, which have the potential to create a double meaning: accelerating national development on the one hand, but also creating structural dependence on China on the other. Thus, BRI cooperation reflects the complexity of the interaction between development and power relations in the context of international economic-political relations.

Then in the study 'Kerja Sama Indonesia–Cina dalam Belt and Road Initiative: Analisa Peluang dan Ancaman untuk Indonesia' by (Yudilla, 2019) examines the BRI policy framework as a continuation of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) vision by involving Indonesia's involvement in the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project and its participation in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). BRI is positioned as a global mega project that not only aims to build physical connectivity, but also project China's economic and political power at the international level. In the context of Indonesia, this study examines the opportunities offered by BRI such as infrastructure development, funding, and regional integration as well as potential threats such as debt trap diplomacy and weak fiscal privacy. Using Geopolitical theory and Alliance Transition Theory, this study examines Indonesia's bargaining position in the cooperation, as well as the interdependent relationship formed between donor and recipient countries. Initial findings indicate that although there are strategic opportunities in the BRI project, Indonesia's position is not completely free from the dominance of structural risks by China.

Study by Rayhan Erba This study views the BRI as a major instrument for strengthening physical and economic connectivity in the Southeast Asian region (Erba, 2014). Through a literature review approach, this study identifies that BRI projects such as the construction of roads, ports, and railways have made a major contribution to integrating the region more closely into the global trade and investment network. The BRI is considered to provide concrete benefits in terms of increasing foreign direct investment and strengthening cooperation between countries. However, this study also notes significant challenges, especially related to environmental sustainability risks, the potential for long-term debt burdens, and increasing disparities between countries in the region. The emphasis on the benefits of connectivity and economic cooperation enriches the study of the BRI with a functional-infrastructure approach, but needs to be complemented by a critical analysis of power relations and the potential for long-term dependency that are also inherent in its financing scheme.

Previous studies have shown that studies on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asia have generally highlighted important aspects such as the expansion of Chinese hegemony (Wahyuni & Amin, 2023), the issue of economic sovereignty in bilateral projects (Triristina, 2021), and the fiscal and technological dependency created in Indonesia (Ibrahim, 2025)ibrib. Other studies have also raised the geopolitical relations between Indonesia and China in Literatures 1 and 2, and the role of the BRI in increasing economic connectivity in Southeast Asia in Literature 3. However, most of these studies tend to focus on one country or one particular dimension of the BRI, such as economic

diplomacy, bilateral relations, or infrastructure. In addition, the theoretical approaches used are still diverse and have not fully integrated the international political economy framework consistently, especially dependency theory. Therefore, this paper offers a different contribution by conducting a comparative analysis between countries, and using an explicit international political economy approach to examine how the BRI forms new structural dependency patterns in Southeast Asia. This research aims not only to describe the phenomenon, but also to critique the power relations behind seemingly neutral global infrastructure projects.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the dynamics of dependency that emerge in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Southeast Asia, this paper uses an International Political Economy approach with a focus on Dependency Theory by Andre Gunder Frank. This study uses an International Political Economy (IPE) approach that views interstate relations as an interaction of political power and global economic structures. Within this framework, Dependency Theory is used as the main analytical tool to explain how the BRI creates asymmetrical relations between China and Southeast Asian countries, especially through debt mechanisms and structural domination (Balaam & Dillman, 2019). This theory developed in the 1960s as a response to the failure of modernization theory in explaining the development inequality between developed and developing countries. Thinkers such as Andre Gunder Frank, Theotonio Dos Santos, and Immanuel Wallerstein emphasize that the underdevelopment of countries in the Third World is not a natural condition, but rather the result of exploitative relations created by the global capitalist system (Eds, 2017).

In the context of the BRI, dependency theory allows for analysis of how infrastructure projects that appear economically promising can actually create unequal structural relationships between the creditor country (China) and the recipient country (Southeast Asian countries) (Bachtiar, 2020). This dependency is not only limited to the financial aspect, but also includes dependence on technology, skilled labor, and strategic decision-making that increasingly favors the interests of the donor party. When the recipient country does not have strong fiscal capacity or equal bargaining power, the development process tends to strengthen patterns of subordination rather than independence.

Furthermore, this paper also borrows concepts from Critical Political Economy as developed by Susan Strange, which highlights how power in the global economy lies not only with the state, but also in control over structures including production, finance, knowledge, and security structures (Balaam & Dillman, 2019). In the BRI, China is not only a trading partner or investor, but also a dominant actor that regulates the regional financing, technology, and policy architecture. Thus, the BRI project can be seen as an instrument to expand China's structural hegemony in the region.

With this framework, this study aims to show that the BRI cannot be understood solely as a development cooperation project. It is also part of China's geoeconomic strategy to expand its influence structurally in Southeast Asia (Rabena, 2018). This analysis is expected to provide a more critical understanding of the direction of development in Southeast Asia and the position of developing countries in the changing global economic architecture.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to analyze the dynamics of debt politics and new dependencies in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Southeast Asian region. This approach was chosen because it is considered the most appropriate for examining in depth the power relations, economic-political interests, and long-term impacts of the involvement of Southeast Asian countries in the BRI project initiated by China. Case studies allow researchers to explore the context, strategies, and consequences of involvement in the BRI comprehensively, taking into account the characteristics of each recipient country.

Data collection was carried out through two main techniques. First, a literature review that includes research on academic literature such as scientific journals, books, international institution reports, and relevant theses and dissertations. This literature focuses on topics related to the BRI, foreign debt politics, dependency theory, and the global political economy approach. Second, secondary data analysis, obtained from sources such as news articles, official government policy reports, international cooperation documents, and mass media publications that discuss BRI projects and the responses of Southeast Asian countries to the initiative.

The data obtained were then classified into several main themes, including: BRI project financing and funding patterns, fiscal and political dependency dynamics, and national policies or strategies in dealing with potential risks of dependency on China. Data analysis was conducted using Andre Gunder Frank's dependency theory framework, in order to understand the extent to which the economic-political relationship in the BRI produces a structural balance between donor and recipient countries.

Although this study relies on secondary data, the qualitative case study approach is still considered adequate in providing an in-depth understanding of the new forms of dependency that have emerged as a result of the participation of Southeast Asian countries in the BRI. It is hoped that this study will be able to provide academic contributions in criticizing global economic relations formed through infrastructure diplomacy, as well as enriching the discourse on the conservation of developing countries' economies in an increasingly asymmetrical international order.

Results and discussion

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is evidence of China's progress in the 21st century. BRI was formerly called One Belt One Road (OBOR). But now it has changed to BRI which is a Geo-economic vision of China which is very ambitious today because BRI targets 70 countries (Cai, 2017). BRI is sometimes equated with the Marshall Plan. This is because both aim to help other countries by providing money. so this BRI is called the Chinese Marshall Plan. China does not accept being equated with the Marshall Plan because it is basically different, namely like this BRI is not a strategy but purely an initiative from China and the amount of funds in this case is different, the amount of BRI funds is 900 billion US dollars and the Marshall Plan is around 12 billion US dollars or equivalent to 130 billion US dollars in 2015 (Toohey, 2016).

BRI was initially initiated by Xi Jinping in his speech at Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan on September 7, 2013. In his speech, Xi Jinping proposed that his country and other countries establish relationships in building development projects in each country (Faraswacyen & Kurniawan, 2021). Furthermore, on October 3, 2013, while giving a speech in the Indonesian parliament, Xi Jinping conveyed the 21st century silk road like the silk road that previously existed connecting ancient trade routes from China to the west, this BRI is considered to be the latest silk road.



Figure 1. Map of Belt and Road Initiative

As shown in the picture above, the BRI route is divided into two, namely the "belt route" and the "road route" (Woon, 2017). The belt route is a land route for rail transportation while the road route is a sea route. The belt is also called the Silk Road economic belt, which is an ancient silk route connecting China to Europe via Central Asia. In the context of BRI, this is the development of infrastructure on land such as railroads, highways and toll roads, industrial areas on land. The core of the belt route is to connect the land route to the country's destination. While the road route or sea route is also called the 21st century maritime silk road where the word road here is not a land route, but a Chinese sea shipping route. The road route that connects the ports in China to Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and to Europe. This road route is also related to BRI's deep-sea projects such as seaports, port expansion and maritime logistics facilities, maritime industry cooperation, and sea trade routes. The core of this road route is the sea route and port projects.

Loans from China's BRI (Belt Road Initiative)

In 2010, less than 5% of China's total foreign loan portfolio covered countries experiencing debt distress. However, by 2022, this figure had increased significantly to 60%, reflecting a shift in Chinese policy from an initial focus on infrastructure investment a key feature of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) campaign in the early 2010s to providing financial assistance in the form of bailouts. The majority of these loans were disbursed in the last five years of the study period, between 2016 and 2021. Of the total financial assistance of USD 240 billion, around USD 170 billion was channeled through a swap line network managed by the People's Bank of China (PBOC), a form of cooperation between central banks for the purpose of exchanging currencies. Meanwhile, the remaining USD 70 billion was disbursed through loans provided by Chinese financial institutions and state-owned enterprises, including companies engaged in the oil and gas sector (Arbar, 2023).

Debt Politics and New Dependencies: A Political Economic Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asia

Table 1. List of BRI Initiatives

Country	Project	Project Value (USD)	Financing Scheme	Remarks
Indonesia	Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway	6 billion USD	China Development Bank (CDB) Loan: 75% Consortium Equity: 25%	Main loan from CDB, remainder from Indonesian SOE and Chinese consortium (Garriga, 2020)
Vietnam	Cat Linh – Ha Dong Urban Railway	868 million USD	Loan from China: 669 million (approx. 77%) Vietnam pays 95% of contract value upon completion.	Project experienced delays; 99% of work completed, commercial operation postponed 8 times.
Malaysia	East Coast Rail Link (ECRL)	10,7 billion USD	China Export-Import Bank Loan: Majority Malaysian Gov: Remainder	Project was previously postponed and contract value renegotiated.
Laos	China–Laos Railway	5.9 billion USD	China Exim Bank Loan: 70% Joint Venture Equity: 30%	Strategic project connecting Laos with the Chinese Railway network
Myanmar	Kyaukpyu Port	1.3 billion USD	Majority direct investment from China. Joint venture with Myanmar	Part of China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.
Thailand	Thai-China High-Speed Rail	5 billion USD	Soft loan from China Development Bank and joint venture.	High-speed rail project connecting Bangkok with Nakhon Ratchasima, part of the BRI corridor.
Cambodia	Phnom Penh–Sihanoukville Expressway, Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SEZ)	2 billion USD	Loan and investment by Chinese companies (Majority, >80%) Scheme: Long-term loan	Major toll road project, funded almost entirely by China; detailed tenor and interest rates not published (Menon, 2023)
Philippines	Chico River Pump Irrigation Project	62 million USD	China Exim Bank soft loan: 85% Phillipine Gov: 15%	2% interest rate, 20 years tenor, 7 years grace period (Lawrence, 2021)
Brunei	Hengyi Industrial Complex, Muara Port, Temburong Bridge	Value not published	Direct investment by Chinese companies & joint venture Scheme: Project financing & joint venture	Focus on petrochemical industry, ports, and connectivity infrastructure (Garriga, 2020)
Timor-Leste	Tibar Bay Port	490 million USD	Consortium investment (China Harbour Engineering Company & French partner) Scheme: joint venture	Largest port project in Timor-Leste, supported by Chinese investment and international partners.
Cambodia	Phnom Penh–Ho Chi Minh Expressway	1,7 billion USD	Loan and investment by Chinese companies (majority)	Cross-border expressway, part of the BRI connectivity network (Menon, 2023)
Philippines	Kaliwa Dam Project	211 million USD	China Exim Bank soft loan: majority (approx. 90%)	2% interest rate, 20 years tenor, 7 years grace period (Lawrence, 2021)

Source: Primary Data Processing Results, 2023.

From the table above, it can be seen that development projects in the framework of the Growth, Belt, and Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asian countries show a picture that relies on soft loans and direct investment from Chinese-owned institutions or companies. Soft loans are low interest and have a long tenor, which allows partner countries to carry out large projects without a very heavy fiscal burden in a short period of time. In this case, Chinese companies are very important in supporting financial projects. This company plays an important role because it is not only the main contractor, project management but also the party that ensures construction standards and the smoothness of the project's success.

In this case, there is also the role of the Chinese national elite, this is a determinant of the success of the project because the national elite plays a strategic role. The Chinese national elite is usually part of the Chinese communist party and financial institutions which are the main foundations of policy. They make BRI a geo-political and economic strategy to expand the Chinese economy, and are expected to overcome the inequality of domestic development.

Power Relations in Debt Politics

China is the main actor in this case, as the main lender, China plays a dominant role in this program. This program is supported by the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China to regulate the flow of funds, of course with several conditions. BRI loans are soft loans, but this is one of the strategies in BRI to create dependence on partner countries on China. This advantageous position gives China strong political influence to influence policies in partner countries (Saraswati, 2020).

Debt politics in BRI is not only about loans provided to support infrastructure development. But more than that, BRI debt politics is a tool of hegemony used by China to dominate and influence. Not only that, BRI debt politics is also a tool of diplomacy and political strategy. Many partner countries that receive large loans from China must adjust their domestic policies to China's interests. This then creates a structural dependency that strengthens China's position (Wahyuni & Amin, 2023).

The Role of Chinese Elites

Negotiations in the establishment of the BRI were influenced by Chinese elites such as Communist Party officials and parts of state financial institutions who were directly involved in determining the amount of loans to be given to BRI partner countries. The elites also determine project priorities and strategic diplomacy so that partner countries agree to the BRI. They are also the ones who run bilateral relations to ensure that this project is in line with China's geopolitical goals.

Inequality of State Power in the BRI

The power patterns of China and BRI partner countries are very unequal. China holds the strongest position in the BRI in stark contrast to partner countries. When viewed from a diplomatic perspective where there is bargaining before an agreement is formed. From a BRI diplomacy perspective, China also has a much stronger bargaining position.

The main reason for this inequality is that China owns the BRI Program, the next reason is that China has a greater financial capacity, has full control over loan resources and project management. This is the reason that makes partner countries weak so that they are forced to accept the conditions given by China in order to obtain debt loans.

In addition to bilateral negotiations, the BRI Program also involves international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund which are funding and project management institutions. Although involving international institutions, these institutions are still controlled by the Chinese elite which is certainly intended to strengthen the management of the BRI Program.

Dependence between Metropolis and Satellite Countries in the BRI Case

In Andre Gunder Frank's dependency theory, there are two types of countries, namely metropolis and satellite countries. A metropolis is a central country that plays a major role in other countries, while a satellite country is a peripheral country that depends on the satellite country. In the case of BRI, the central country is China and the satellite country is the recipient country of the BRI loan. There are several factors underlying this dependency pattern

Asymmetric financing pattern

Chinese loans through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or multilateral development banks have an interest rate of 3-6%, higher than multilateral loans. As well as projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Train (75% Chinese financing) and the East Coast Rail Link Malaysia (85%) force recipient countries to pledge strategic assets as collateral (L.Gaol, 2020).

The Role of Chinese State-Owned Enterprises and Local Elites

China Railway Group or China's state-owned enterprises dominate construction, while national elites form joint ventures to secure political-economic benefits, for example the Morowali Industrial Park Project (Indonesia) involving PT Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park and Tsingshan Group (China), with the support of high-level politicians (L.Gaol, 2020).

Debt Trap Diplomacy

60% of China's loan portfolio is now a bailout for countries that are having difficulty paying, such as Pakistan with a loan of 48 billion dollars and Laos 5.9 billion. Using Andre Gunder Frank's dependency theory, the dependency between metropolitan and satellite countries can take the form of dependency or the impacts caused and this dependency can also affect politics and economic sovereignty.

Economic dependence and debt

BRI projects in Southeast Asia such as in Laos, Indonesia, Vietnam and other countries are largely funded for land and sea infrastructure using soft loans as happened in Laos showing that dependence on China causes the threat of foreign debt, but Laos' domestic social and economic weaknesses remain high. Today shows that dependence on partner countries is difficult to escape from the cycle of debt and dependence on China. In the future, if this dependence continues, it will greatly weaken economic independence in

partner countries and will increasingly strengthen China.

Development gaps and internal inequality

Although BRI provides benefits in the form of infrastructure development and improving regional relations, this dependence does not automatically reduce socio-economic disparities in partner countries. On the contrary, this dependence actually strengthens development inequality because investment or loans usually only secure strategic areas and sectors that certainly benefit China. Therefore, the main focus of BRI is the construction of high-speed trains, port development, and industrial areas. This is none other than to provide benefits to China. So from other regions, especially remote areas and less developed areas, they often remain just as lagging behind and receive less or even no direct benefits from this project.

Political influence and domestic economic sovereignty

Financial and economic dependence on China has a direct impact on the domestic political sovereignty of partner countries. In terms of negotiations, Southeast Asian partner countries must adjust domestic policies to suit the interests of China. This strengthens China's power and influence. For example, some partner countries must provide strategic access to railways or ports or natural resources to Chinese companies as part of the BRI project agreement. This is proof that China's BRI project is not just an intention to develop the economy of other countries, but also a geopolitical tool that China uses to expand its influence in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

This study shows that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promoted by China is not just an infrastructure development project, but also part of a geo-economic strategy to expand its influence structurally in the Southeast Asian region. Through a financing scheme dominated by bilateral loans and the involvement of Chinese state-owned enterprises, BRI projects create fiscal, technological, and institutional dependency in recipient countries such as Laos and Indonesia. Complex debt structures, minimal contract transparency, and technical dominance by foreign experts weaken the capacity of these countries to maintain their economic sovereignty.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding confirms the framework of dependency theory that places developing countries in a subordinate position to the central state through unequal economic relations. The case of Laos shows a form of extreme dependency through the transfer of strategic assets, while Indonesia shows similar symptoms in the form of fiscal pressure and technological dominance. This comparison confirms that although the level of dependency may differ, the pattern of power relations that is formed still reproduces the structure of global inequality. Thus, the BRI has become an instrument of debt politics that strengthens China's dominance in the region and encourages the formation of new forms of dependency in the contemporary international system.

Daftar Pustaka

Amanda, E. S. (2024). Respons Amerika Serikat terhadap Proyek Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Tiongkok.

- Arbar, T. F. (2023). Efek Proyek BRI, China Obral Pinjaman Rp 3.610 T ke 22 Negara. CNBC Indonesia. <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20230329181410-4-425590/efek-proyek-bri-china-obral-pinjaman-rp-3610-t-ke-22-negara>
- Bachtiar, S. J. W. (2020). Lao People's Democratic Republic's Dependency on China's Infrastructure Assistance. *International Journal of East Asian Studies*, 9(1), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.22452/ijeas.vol9no1.2>
- Balaam, D. N., & Dillman, B. (2019). *International Political Economy* (7th ed.). Taylor & Francis.
- Cai, P. (2017). *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative*. Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/understanding-china-s-belt-road-initiative>
- Eds, K. I. H. S. M. D. K. U. and S. F. (2017). *Dialogues on Development Volume 1: Dependency*. In *University of York* (Vol. 1). <https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/dialogues-on-development-volume-1-dependency>
- Erba, R. (2014). Belt and Road Initiative sebagai Gerbang Konektivitas di Asia Tenggara. *Global & Policy*, 12(02), 128–150. <https://hmj-hi.umm.ac.id/id/pages/ir-fact-and-issue-2-7276/belt-and-road-initiative-sebagai-strategi-konektivitas-china-dalam-globalisasi.html>
- Faraswacyen, D. Lg., & Kurniawan, Y. (2021). Diplomasi Ekonomi Tiongkok melalui Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) di Asia Tenggara (2013-2018). *Balcony: Budi Luhur Journal of Contemporary Diplomacy*, 5(1), 1–10.
- Garriga, M. N. U. (2020a). The Philippines in China's Belt and Road Initiative: The Road So Far. *Socioeconomic Research Portal for the Philippines*. <https://serp.pids.gov.ph/publication/public/view?slug=the-philippines-in-china-s-bri-the-road-so-far>
- Garriga, M. N. U. (2020b). The Philippines in China's BRI. *Policy Brief Series*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.257>
- Ibrahim, R. (2025). Belt and Road Initiative Tiongkok di Indonesia : Studi Kasus Proyek Kereta Cepat Jakarta-Bandung. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, 7(3), 1660–1665.
- Kusumawardhana, I. (2023). Diplomasi Triangular China Terhadap Indonesia Dalam Mengantisipasi Dilema Malaka Melalui Belt Road Initiative. *TheJournalish: Social and Government*, 4(2), 173–189. <https://doi.org/10.55314/tsg.v4i2.485>
- L.Gaol, Y. K. D. F. (2020). Diplomasi Ekonomi Tiongkok melalui Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) di Asia Tenggara (2023-2018) Studi Kasus: Pembangunan Infrastruktur melalui BRI di Vietnam.
- Lawrence, I. (2021). Brunei's Response to China's Belt and Road Initiative: Embracing Asymmetry, Enhancing Authority. *Asian Perspective*; Seoul, 45(2), 397–420. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/brunei-s-response-china-belt-road-initiative/docview/2520226314/se-2>
- Ma'arif, S. Y. P. D. (2020). Kerja Sama Ekonomi-Politik Indonesia dan Cina pada Implementasi Program Belt and Road Initiative. *Jurnal Lemhannas RI*, 7(3), 53–66. <https://doi.org/10.55960/jlri.v7i3.78>

- Menon, J. (2023). Cambodia Has Benefited From BRI projects, but Must be More Strategic Going Forward. *FULCRUM: Analysis on Southeast Asia*.
- Paramitha, G. D. (2024). Kerjasama Indonesia-Tiongkok Dalam Belt and Road Initiative : Implikasi terhadap Perdagangan Dan Investasi. *Global & Policy*, 12(02). <http://ejournal.upnjatim.ac.id/index.php/jgp/article/view/4700>
- Rabena, A. J. (2018). The Complex Interdependence of China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Philippines. *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, 5(3), 683–697. <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.257>
- Saraswati, N. M. V. (2020). Menilik Perjanjian Indonesia-Cina dalam Kerangka Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) dalam Perspektif Ketahanan Nasional. *Jurnal Lemhannas RI*, 7(2), 55–72. <https://doi.org/10.55960/jlri.v7i2.72>
- Toohey, S. D. C. S. H. R. Z. L. S. M. E. M. T. F. (2016). China's Belt and Road Initiative: Motives, Scope, and Challenges. Peterson Institute for International Economics. <https://www.piie.com/publications/piie-briefings/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-motives-scope-and-challenges>
- Triristina, M. F. A. N. (2021). Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik. *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik*, 1(1).
- Umniyah, H. A. S. C. A. (2025). Pengaruh Globalisasi Terhadap Peningkatan Interdependensi Negara Berkembang Di Asia Tenggara Pada Negara Tiongkok. *POLITIKA: Jurnal Ilmu Politik*, 16(1), 15–30. <https://doi.org/10.14710/politika.16.1.2026.15-30>
- Wahyuni, A. S., & Amin, K. (2023). One Belt One Road dan Upaya Hegemoni Regional China di Asia Tenggara. *Sospol: Jurnal Sosial Politik*, 9(1), 114–128. <https://doi.org/10.22219/jurnalsospol.v9i1.25621>
- Waluyo, M. R. A. Y. E. N. T. J. (2021). Analisis Masuknya Belt and Road Initiative Tiongkok ke Asean dan Identitas yang Dipromosikan Tiongkok. *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai*, 5(3), 9213–9221. <https://jptam.org/index.php/jptam/article/view/2449>
- Woon, J. D. S. C. Y. (2017). Chinese Narratives on “One Belt, One Road” (一带一路) in Geopolitical and Imperial Contexts. *The Professional Geographer: Taylor & Francis*, 69(4). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00330124.2017.1288576?scroll=top&needAccess=true>
- Yudilla, A. (2019). Kerjasama Indonesia Cina Dalam Belt and Road Initiative Analisa Peluang Dan Ancaman Untuk Indonesia. *Journal of Diplomacy and International Studies*, 2(1), 52–65. <https://journal.uir.ac.id/index.php/jdis/article/view/4427>
- Zhafarina Jauza Az Zahro, Faris Al-Fadhat, A. P. H. (2024). Analisis Hubungan Politik Utang Indonesia dan China Untuk Menghindari Debt Trap Diplomacy. *Journal of Accounting and Finance Management (JAFM)*, 5(4), 820–830.
- Zikri, F., & Damayanti, R. (2025). Strategi Hegemoni China melalui Belt Road Initiative : Implikasi terhadap Tata Kelola Politik dan Keamanan di Asia. *Journal of Political Issues*, 7(1), 1–16.