

CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI): NEO-COLONIALISM OR STRATEGIC GLOBALIZATION?

Assignment Type:

Comparative Policy Analysis / International Political Economy Essay

Objective:

To evaluate whether the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a case of economic development through strategic globalization or a modern form of neo-colonialism, using two participating countries as case comparisons.

1. Background

Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative is China's global infrastructure strategy aimed at enhancing trade and connectivity through ports, highways, and railways. Over 150 countries have signed cooperation agreements. However, critics argue the BRI traps developing nations in debt and fosters political dependence on China.

2. Selected Countries for Analysis

- **Sri Lanka** (South Asia)
- **Kenya** (East Africa)

Both countries received major Chinese infrastructure investment and faced debt restructuring challenges, raising questions of sovereignty and long-term economic viability.

3. Key BRI Projects Reviewed

Country	Project Name	Investment Size	Strategic Asset Involved
Sri Lanka	Hambantota Port	\\$1.4 billion	Port leased to China for 99 years
Kenya	Mombasa-Nairobi SGR Railway	\\$4.7 billion	National railway with Chinese loans

4. Research Questions

- What were the terms of financing and repayment?
- Did infrastructure development yield measurable economic benefits?
- How did domestic political discourse evolve around BRI participation?
- Do these cases represent a new model of dependency?

5. Debt Sustainability Indicators

Indicator	Sri Lanka (2022)	Kenya (2022)
Total External Debt (% of GDP)	111%	69%
Chinese Debt (% of External)	~22%	~33%
Debt Service to Revenue Ratio	54%	65%

Source: World Bank, IMF, National Ministries of Finance

6. Economic Output & Usage Indicators

Project	Intended Annual Users	Actual Usage (2022)	Cost Recovery Status
Hambantota Port	10M tons cargo	1.8M tons cargo	Not self-sustaining
SGR Railway (Kenya)	1.5M passengers	800K passengers	Operating at a loss

7. Political and Sovereignty Concerns

- **Sri Lanka:** Protests over “asset handover” to China; accusations of loss of sovereignty
- **Kenya:** Opaque contracts; limited local job creation; civil society pushed for contract disclosure

8. Theoretical Framing

Lens	Application to BRI
Dependency Theory	BRI replicates patterns of core–periphery imbalance
Realist IR Perspective	China’s geostrategic interest in Indian Ocean trade

Liberal Economic Viewpoint	Infrastructure-as-a-service to boost trade flows
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9. Visuals and Tables

- **Figure 1:** Global BRI investment map (Africa and South Asia focus)
- **Figure 2:** Debt composition pie charts for Sri Lanka and Kenya
- **Table A1:** Loan terms comparison – China vs. IMF in both countries
- **Figure 3:** BRI benefit-risk matrix

10. Evaluation Summary

Dimension	Sri Lanka	Kenya
Economic Benefit	Limited (port underutilized)	Moderate (rail used but costly)
Political Fallout	High (sovereignty protest)	Moderate (civil critique)
Transparency	Low	Low
Strategic Leverage	High (China gains regional base)	High (rail + port access)

11. Strategic Takeaways for Students

- Development aid can become **strategic leverage** in international relations
- Evaluating such programs requires **multi-dimensional analysis** (economic, political, institutional)
- Understand how to apply **international political economy theories** to real-world cases
- Always ask: **Who owns the infrastructure after 10–20 years? Who benefits in the long run?**

12. Student Deliverables

- 3,500–4,000 word comparative essay
- Excel file: Debt, usage, and trade figures
- Two country-specific policy briefs (Sri Lanka and Kenya)
- Slide deck for classroom presentation

- Reference list with reports from IMF, World Bank, ADB, and academic journals

