

# CHINA'S ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY THROUGH THE BELT ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) TO INCREASE CHINA'S HEGEMONY IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN REGION

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## ABSTRACT

Through the Belt and Road Initiative strategy in the reign of President Xi Jinping, China is currently working toward the goal of becoming a new global power. As part of this effort, China is currently offering a significant amount of investment support to nations in Southeast Asia. Providing this money so that China can establish its dominance in the Southeast Asian region. The purpose of this research is to investigate China's economic diplomacy in the Southeast Asian Region through the policy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The writers of this study took a qualitative approach and used descriptive methodologies in their research. According to the findings of this study, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was initiated by China and has contributed in some way, shape, or form through its rapid funding, encouraging infrastructure connectivity on multiple levels (local, regional, and intercontinental), and encouraging economic, monetary, and trade cooperation in the Southeast Asian region. However, via this cooperation, China will be able to establish its hegemony in that country and will be able to alter the course of other countries who were before cautious and defensive toward the BRI.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade China has become one of the countries with the largest economic power, this has made China considered as a major power in Asia and even in the world (Shambaugh, 2018). After the success of economic reforms in the past that started in the Deng Xiaoping era, China then entered a new era called the Rising of China. With economic growth touching 6.8% per year (2017), China has become a new world economic power, even an economic power that is almost equal to a superpower of the caliber of the United States. Along with the change in leadership, China under the leadership of President Xi Jinping actually experienced rapid progress, even their economic and monetary acceleration became stronger & more dominant (Morrison, 2019). As a result, China was able to initiate a number of economic initiatives, carry out massive infrastructure development. Their investment abroad also increased, and the climax was when China initiated "One Belt One Road" (Esteban & Otero-Iglesias, 2015).

The "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) initiative is widely regarded as one of the most ambitious and comprehensive development schemes ever conceived anywhere in the world in the annals of recent history. Land development will begin in Beijing, and the project's ultimate goal is to connect less developed countries and regions to Europe via Central Asia (Gabuev, 2016). The Silk Road Economic Belt refers to this route, which places an emphasis on land connection and bears its name. The construction of a "21st Century Marine Silk Road" that places a greater emphasis on maritime connectivity is the second component of President Xi Jinping's strategy. connecting the mainland of China with Southeast Asia through a network of railways and ports, and South Asia with the African continent by maritime transportation (Blanchard, 2017).

If all goes according to plan, the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative will be the most audacious undertaking ever undertaken by a single government in the modern era. This is due to the fact that it will involve a total of 65 countries spread across three continents, with a combined population of approximately 4.4 billion people (Kurniawan, 2016). Later on, institutional improvements were made to the "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) plan, and the initiative became known as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). The Belt Road Initiative is working toward the goal of expanding global networks between rich countries and poor countries. BRI focuses on strengthening the network that facilitates the flow of free trade to be efficient and

productive as well as further integration in international markets, both physically and digitally ( Yuniarto, 2017).

The goal that President Xi Jinping wants to achieve through the BRI policy is to revive the glory days that China has achieved through the silk route in the past. Not only that, through BRI, President Xi Jinping also wants to bring China's rise to a strong country compared to other countries in the future according to his dream as stated in the Chinese Dream (Gow, 2015). The Belt Road Initiative program is currently directed to the Southeast Asian region, in this region China is trying to build its hegemony and also trying to win the sympathy of Southeast Asian countries from its competitor, namely the United States (Ramadan, 2018).

In Mearsheimer's view he said that there are two types of hegemon in the international system, namely Global Hegemon and Regional Hegemon. Mearsheimer believes that there is almost no Global Hegemon unless there is a state that has gained a clear nuclear advantage and that advantage is defined as the ability to destroy its rivals. Meanwhile, Regional Hegemon is defined as the most powerful state in the regional system and has the means to exercise dominance over its system which is the best guarantee for survival in international anarchy (Mearsheimer, 2007).

Then the concept of hegemony is also used in this study. The concept of hegemony itself believes that there are two forces that become a reference in carrying out hegemonic efforts by a country. This power is called direct power and indirect power. Direct power itself is defined as the hegemon's state efforts by presenting aspects of the hegemon's ability to influence actors to achieve the results desired by the hegemon. Direct power refers to using the military to exert coercive force or using economic resources to acquire and enrich its military weapons. Then, indirect power cannot be measured because it takes the form of the ability to attract actors using the ideas presented by the hegemon and those ideas can change to everyone's preferences. This indirect power can be interpreted by the efforts and cooperation offered by the hegemon country to attract other countries (Ikenbery & Kupchan, 1990).

To achieve its objective of connecting the Chinese coast to South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe via the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) relies heavily on the cooperation of the Southeast Asian region. Southeast Asia has great economic potential, with potential market power, even though it is mostly inhabited by developing countries, but Southeast Asia has a market potential with high purchasing power, thus making cheap commodity products from China quite popular. Modern, efficient and massive connectivity is needed by China to accommodate all economic and trade activities as well as distribute their export-import commodities (Toai et al, 2018)

The Belt and Road Initiative is one of China's soft power strategies in the Southeast Asian region. This strategy is used in order to compete with a big country like the United States which has already established its hegemony in the Southeast Asian region. China is currently trying to eliminate the stigma of a communist country in the Southeast Asian region by reconstructing it by establishing good relations with Southeast Asian countries towards China using its economic diplomacy (Deyer, 2018).

The main argument of this research is that China's economic diplomacy through the BRI will cause China to become the hegemon country in Asia and even the world. And in the process of becoming a hegemon, China uses the two forces that exist in the concept of hegemony, namely direct power and indirect power. This strength is related to the increase in the economic and military fields carried out through the BRI scheme which is a cover so that China can become the hegemon country in the Asian region.

## 2. METHODS

In addressing this problem, researchers employ qualitative research with analytic descriptive techniques, specifically the scientific method, which entails observing and recording the behavior of the subject without changing it. Qualitative research emphasizes the investigation of inductive reasoning processes that have to do with the dynamics of the link between observable events, and always employs scientific logic. The objective of qualitative techniques is to build the notion of sensitivity to encountered difficulties, explain the reality associated to grounded theory tracing, and establish a knowledge of one or more of the encountered phenomena (Gunawan, 2022). This study adds analysis with theoretical tools or frameworks from the results of observing the events that occurred. This research will analyze the problems since the start of China's Economic Diplomacy through OBOR in Beijing in 2015 to 2018 and then refined with BRI. In this study, researchers will use data collection techniques through books, journals, news reports and relevant and credible internet sites.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Economic Diplomacy

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Economic Diplomacy is an important activity for a country to achieve its interests. In its development, diplomacy is a negotiation in political and economic relations. Now diplomacy in the economic field is increasingly being developed because economic aspects can influence politics directly or indirectly (Saner & Yiu, 2003). Economic diplomacy is comprehensively described as an effort to achieve goals through diplomatic means and an efficient framework of institutional cooperation in order to achieve economic promotion goals abroad (Mionel & Radulescu, 2016). In addition, economic diplomacy is considered as a function that links foreign policy efforts and the economic well-being of citizens of a country. Economic diplomacy can involve various actors, both state and non-state actors or is referred to as Polylateralism.

In addition, economic diplomacy is also an official diplomatic activity that focuses on efforts to increase exports, attract foreign investment, and work participation in various international economic organizations as a country's national interest. In the era of globalization, these national interests can be achieved if state and non-state actors work in harmony (Baranay, 2009).

According to Lee & Hocking (2010) globalization has also made types of economic diplomacy develop such as:

- a) Commercial Diplomacy focuses on constructing a network of diplomats and business groups to promote trade, investment, and business advocacy.
- b) Trade diplomacy refers to discussions and decision-making in trade relations and bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, since it considers intergovernmental negotiations to be a zero-sum game centered on the logical pursuit of the greatest concessions from others with the fewest losses. Trade diplomacy is also required to address the growing number of bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements between nations, which contribute to the network of Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs).
- c) Financial Diplomacy, namely the government's efforts to establish stability in the international trade regime, as well as a larger understanding of the role of non-traditional diplomatic players such as the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank, and the banking sector; as well as
- d) Consular Visa Services are a diplomatic instrument for bolstering national security, given that, in the era of globalization, population movement has facilitated the rise of global and transnational risks, such as the transmission of infectious illnesses, terrorism, and other organized crimes.

## **B. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).**

The Belt and Road Initiative was first initiated by President Xi Jinping in 2011, this program was a big ambition during his leadership era. The aim of this program is to jointly strengthen infrastructure, trade and investment networks between China and other developing countries, especially the continents of Europe and Asia (Eurasia) and  $\frac{3}{4}$  energy sources with a target of 4.4 billion of 30% of global GDP, 63% of total global population (Khairani et al, 2019).

The phrase belt refers to a network of land highways, pipelines, railroads, and other infrastructure extending from Central Asia to Europe. The word Road, meanwhile, refers to a series of ports and maritime trade routes that penetrate from the China Sea and the Indian Ocean to the Middle East, the east coast of Africa, and so on until they reach the European continent (Shatz, 2020). The People's Republic of China's Belt and Road Initiative policy is founded on historical, empirical, and pragmatic foundations. Based on the history of China's establishment, this trading route has existed for centuries. President Xi Jinping desires to revive the Silk Road with this approach.

President Xi Jinping emphasized that this program would become the focal point of China's foreign policy and economic diplomacy during his era of leadership (Didier, 2018), indicating that this policy would be used as a tool of soft power in China's foreign policy towards Asian countries in the coming years. China's Belt and Road Initiative has two land trade lines named the New Silk Road Economic Belt and a marine trade route dubbed the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. In 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the concept of the New Silk Road Economic Belt during his first state visit to Kazakhstan. This land trade route starts from the Xi'an region in China, mainland Central Asia, Russia and reaches Germany.

President Xi Jinping launched the concept of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road during a visit to Indonesia in October 2013. (Lei, 2018). This route was constructed to improve China's maritime-focused diplomacy with the South and Southeast Asia region (Wibawati, et.al, 2018). The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road will link China's southeastern coastal areas – Fuzhou and Quanzhou in Fujian Province, Guangzhou and Zhanjiang in Guangdong, Beihai in Guangxi and Haikou in Hainan – to Europe via the South China Sea and Indian Ocean on one track, and the South Pacific on another path. Vietnam travels by sea from Hanoi to the South China Sea and via the Malacca Strait to reach Kuala Lumpur. The route then passes

through Jakarta, Indonesia, Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Kolkata, India. The route then travels through Nairobi, Kenya, before continuing north to the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea to Athens, Greece, and ending in Venice (Wibawati, et.al, 2018).

BRI is not only an initiative, but also a "portal" through which China may integrate itself into the global economy, expand its economic, political, and cultural influence in the regions through which the program traverses, and simultaneously advance its national interests. Second, the implementation of the BRI program has indirectly reformed the practice of international relations by eradicating the nation-state concept and substituting tianxia in its place. The BRI program, like the Silk Road in the past, intends to facilitate global economic commerce by connecting land and marine routes in many regions of the world. Mayer & Zhang (2021) state in this context that "the old Silk Road had no territorial boundaries." This means that, like the Silk Road, the BRI does not recognize or respect national borders. Thus, the concept of the nation-state will be devalued, and China has implicitly utilized the concept of tianxia. As expressed in the context of 'all the people,' tianxia not only has a generous viewpoint, but also seeks to convert opponents into allies and to draw attention rather than to conquer. This can be witnessed in different public forums, like the 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Papua New Guinea, where President Xi succeeded in promoting BRI for Pacific countries to join, and specifically trying to convince the US as its greatest competitor. In the context of tianxia, China is attempting to make the United States its ally in order to boost BRI.

### **C. China's Economic Diplomacy Through BRI to Increase Hegemony in the Southeast Asian Region**

Today China is a leading trading nation with access to vast portions of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe via long-distance trade. China's dominant worldwide position in technology, navigation, and markets is the outcome of innovations in numerous industrial domains. China's manufacturing industry grew sustainably as a result of its modernisation, as well as its highly concentrated public investment outcomes, high profits, technological innovation, and protected domestic markets. China became one of the world's largest creditors as a result of the export policy of the dynamic Xi Jinping administration, which generated a massive trade surplus. China needs a substantial infusion of raw materials that will generate substantial foreign investment in order to maintain its vibrant industrial base. The expansion of China's global economic influence is built on the productive capacity of its trade and investment, which is guided by a policy of rigorous non-interference in its trading partners' internal affairs. China's economy has been expanding by approximately 9 percent each year, and the quality and worth of its goods and services are rising significantly (Harahap & Susiatiningsih, 2020).

Not only has China's economic capability expanded considerably, but also its military capability. China has considerably accelerated its military modernisation in recent decades by increasing the quantity of weapons and military equipment. In addition, China is reforming its military through education, undertaking naval operations in the Gulf of Aden, and increasing its involvement in peacekeeping missions. However, the expansion of China's military has heightened the fears of other nations, especially because it has occurred so rapidly and in such a short period of time. China has been an economic powerhouse since 2012, allowing it to enhance its military power, which can become extremely hazardous. With whom there are territorial disputes, China views its military prowess as a significant danger to their national security. Consequently, the region is currently seeing an arms race. Due to their tense relations with China, Japan and South Korea dramatically upped their defense budgets. China is currently the second greatest military spender in the world, after the United States.

Chinese hegemony in the Southeast Asian region is marked by the presence of BRI China. As of 2016, according to CEO of HSBC Malaysia, Mukhtar Hussain, the BRI project has spread to eight ASEAN countries with an investment value of \$1.77 billion in the form of 300 Chinese companies built in 26 economic cooperation zones (The Star China, 2017). There are several strong reasons for choosing Southeast Asia as an investment target. First, Southeast Asia is home to no less than 600 million people, about half of whom are 30 years old. For the Chinese government, economically, the Southeast Asian region is a growing market that provides cheap labor, which certainly attracts the attention of the industry in the panda country (Wibowo, 2004).

Second, the strong economic boom in recent years has helped increase the size of the middle class in Southeast Asia. China sees a great opportunity to build Southeast Asia's infrastructure because the middle class generally tends to live in urban areas which of course need good and modern transportation facilities. The development of Southeast Asia is an attraction for investment that is being developed by BRI. Third, ASEAN member governments in general have implemented several policies that focus on efforts to

improve the business climate in each country. Policies to simplify the tax system or reduce corporate taxes help ASEAN attract more investors.

The value of China's investment in Southeast Asia in 2019 touched a relatively large number, with investment in the development, transportation, energy, agriculture and mining sectors. Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore and Vietnam are the top four countries whose Chinese investment is above US\$ 1000 million. In the context of BRI until now development in various sectors continues to be carried out, starting from the development of economic corridors, infrastructure development, and trade integration. A study that was conducted in 2018 by Oxford Economics and the CIMB ASEAN Research Institute found that BRI projects in ASEAN countries total at least more than \$739 billion in United States dollars. Indonesia is the country that has received the most total investment from the BRI, which is US\$ 171 billion. This is followed by Vietnam, which is in second place with a total investment of (US\$ 152 billion), Cambodia, which has received US\$ 104 billion, Malaysia, which has received US\$ 98.5 billion, Singapore, which has received US\$ 70.1 billion, Laos, which has received US\$ 48 billion, Brunei, which has received US\$ 36 billion, Myanmar, which has received US\$ 2 (CIMB ASEAN, 2018).

With the pouring of capital from China, the Southeast Asia region, which is predominantly inhabited by developing countries, will receive development in the fields of infrastructure, economy and trade. They will also experience encouragement because with access in the form of adequate infrastructure they can easily carry out trading activities, export-import. Likewise, Thailand, with its agricultural products, also receives income from an increase in tourists, Vietnam with garment products, and products from its marine products. Likewise, China will easily distribute its commodity products to connected partner countries.

In the process, China's biggest challenge is convincing the countries in Southeast Asia to join the BRI initiative they created, this is not easy considering that China and several ASEAN countries are often caught in friction, such as in the South China Sea where China is in dispute with Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, which, if you pay attention, is also a key country in the current BRI project, not to mention the growing public narrative that dubs China's economic diplomacy as "Debt Trap Diplomacy". Then the use of Economic diplomacy by establishing cooperation within the BRI framework is one of China's strategies. With three important elements of economic diplomacy, namely the use of influence, use of assets, and carrying out synergies that produce the output of a win-win cooperation, or produce positive contributions to both parties (China as the initiator, and other countries as members). (Brautigam, 2020).

China's Economic Diplomacy Activities in Southeast Asia have produced at least a number of things, including:

- a) Infrastructure Development for a number of countries, BRI China has given birth to good connectivity that is local (city), regional (country), to Intercontinental (continent). Among them is the Cath Linh - Ha Dong urban rail project in Vietnam which was completed in 2018. A regional scale project that will physically connect mainland Southeast Asia via the Pan-Asian Railway (Singapore-Kunming Rail) which is currently under construction).
- b) More massive integration of economic corridors, with the reinitiation of "Two Corridors One Belt" between China and Vietnam, even the cooperation created in 2004 during the era of President Van Khai (Vietnam) is now integrated with the Belt and Road Initiative.
- c) Increasing Flow of Chinese Tourists to Southeast Asia, According to the Green Book - "China Tourism Development: Analysis and Forecasts (2018-2019)" by the Tourism Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. It is said that there has been a fantastic spike in Chinese tourist visits to BRI member countries, amounting to 15.5 million in 2013 to more than 27 million in 2017, which means that there has been a 77 percent jump over the last five years. These countries are countries from various regions such as Brunei, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia etc.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

After the election of President Xi Jinping as president in 2012 a series of policies were implemented, consistent China then transformed into a country with a very significant large economic power. With the vision of the Xi Jinping era government which wanted to make China the center of all world economic activity, China then implemented economic diplomacy that was so refined, with a more intense approach, prioritizing the principle of brotherhood. The OBOR policy, which was later emphasized with BRI, is a form of subtle diplomacy carried out by China to establish its hegemony in the Southeast Asian region. The goal is to change the world view and try to seize the status of a new super power in the world. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is developing as a modern multilateral cooperation because it involves many parties, both state and non-state, in one big initiative, which also involves huge funding capital. If you pay attention, China's diplomacy through BRI has succeeded in convincing other countries to then join, with the aim of

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obtaining mutual profits (beneficial for both parties). the author analyzes that the use of elements of influence, elements of asset use, and elements of synergy has been carried out by China, and then succeeded in changing the direction of several countries that were previously vigilant and defensive towards BRI so that they were finally able to establish their hegemony in that country.

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