frontiers in Political Science

TYPE Editorial
PUBLISHED 07 May 2026
DOI 10.3389/fpos.2026.1848664

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OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 06 April 2026
REVISED 06 April 2026
ACCEPTED 21 April 2026
PUBLISHED 07 May 2026

CITATION
Mendes C, Alves AC, Santos TB and Gasparyan A (2026) Editorial: China's Belt and Road Initiative: strategic dynamics in the global South.
Front. Polit. Sci. 8:1848664.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2026.1848664

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Editorial: China's Belt and Road Initiative: strategic dynamics in the global South

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KEYWORDS
asymmetric interdependence, BRI, China, development, geopolitics, global South, infrastructure

Editorial on the Research Topic
China's Belt and Road Initiative: strategic dynamics in the global South

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, stands as a monumental global infrastructure and investment endeavor aimed at revitalizing ancient trade routes and enhancing economic collaboration across Asia, Europe, and Africa. By 2026, nearly 150 countries had signed cooperation agreements under the BRI, spanning global South and North countries, making it one of the most consequential projects shaping contemporary global economic and political landscape. Having emerged as a broad idea with no clear contours, the BRI has fueled since its inception a growing stream of studies trying to unpack its drivers and operational logics. In this literature, the BRI is often portrayed as rooted in domestic politico-economic logics (Jones and Zeng, 2020; Ye, 2020), a vehicle for south-south cooperation and development (Dunford and Liu, 2019; Johnston, 2019), a tool of geopolitical influence (Jasmin et al., 2025; Rolland, 2017; Tudoroiu, 2023), or a combination of these (Clarke, 2017; Huang, 2016; Wang, 2016; Yu, 2024). Yet much of the discussion remains polarized with perspectives privileging one of these drivers. Similarly, the impacts of the BRI in partner countries remain highly contested, with the literature pointing to both positive outcomes and negative or unintended consequences across development and strategic dimensions (Voon and Xu, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2024). This Research Topic seeks to move beyond such debates by conceptualizing the BRI as a multidimensional and dynamic process, whose outcomes are context-dependent and shaped not only by domestic conditions in host countries, but also by regional dynamics, and broader patterns of global competition. By bridging diverse empirical and conceptual contributions spanning multiple regions, this Research Topic highlights how the BRI generates differentiated forms of cooperation and interdependence, producing varied domestic and strategic dynamics across the Global South.

1 Economic cooperation is deeply entangled with geopolitics

Collectively, the articles reveal several important patterns regarding the strategic dynamics of the BRI. First, and across the board, the contributions highlight the deep intertwine between economic cooperation and geopolitical dynamics in the global South and beyond. Downes and Lai demonstrate how in the post-COVID19 context, EU China relations shifted from economic pragmatic engagement to a de-risking strategy as interdependence became increasingly a security concern in a context of growing geopolitical tensions. In similar lines, Santos and Costa show how the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) functions simultaneously as a development tool and a strategic vector for China's westward expansion while at the same time reducing its strategic maritime trade vulnerabilities (Malacca, Hormuz and Aden straits). The synergies between economic and strategic logics are also apparent in Central Asia, where Sarybayev et al. demonstrate how China's expanding security cooperation (ranging from border management to joint military exercises) is closely linked to the protection of infrastructure investments, and how development initiatives are undertaken in pursuit of regional stabilization.

2 Outcomes are context-dependent and geopolitically embedded

Second, the contributions underscore the varied and context-dependent nature of BRI outcomes, while also highlighting how these outcomes are shaped by, and in turn reshape, domestic, regional and global geopolitical dynamics. Rather than producing a uniform pattern of development and influence, the BRI produces differentiated and multifaceted impacts. Gao's analysis of the Hualong-1 nuclear project in Argentina illustrates how domestic vulnerabilities, namely economic and political fragilities and public opposition, interact with external pressures, such as cooperation trade-offs (technological dependency) and US-China rivalry, limiting its policy space and constraining development outcomes. Similarly, Silva study on Pakistan energy sector shows how Chinese investment, while enhancing power generation capacity, can deepen structural dependency while simultaneously altering regional power dynamics, particularly in relation to India, as infrastructure projects become embedded in broader logics of strategic competition, exposing Pakistan to instrumentalization in geopolitical rivalries. This is further highlighted by Sarybayev et al. In central Asia, where China's expanding security role both complements and challenges existing arrangements historically dominated by Russia, producing a fragmented security landscape. Zhang's analysis of the BRI-East Asian Economic Union relationship shows that regional dynamics do not necessarily lead to confrontation, as cooperation between Russia and China economic platforms emerged where interests and mutual dependence converged. However, its depth (e.g., prospects for an FTA) remains limited given persistent strategic concerns over deeper interdependencies. Collectively, these studies suggest that BRI outcomes cannot be understood solely through domestic or bilateral lenses, but must be situated within evolving regional and global dynamics in which multiple actors negotiate, contest or accommodate China's growing engagement.

3 Dynamics reveal persistent asymmetries and dependency risks

Third, the contributions to special topic complicate conventional assumptions about South-South cooperation by highlighting the asymmetries in the relationships and the persistent risk of dependency with BRI engagements. While outcomes vary across cases, several contributions point to structural dynamics that may entrench unequal partnerships. Silva offers one of the clearest illustrations of this dynamic, showing how China's position as the principal foreign partnership in infrastructure development limits the participations of alternative partners and marginalizes local suppliers, creating a pattern of dependence that raises concerns about long-term strategic autonomy. Similar dynamics are observable in Central Asia, where enhanced connectivity with China reinforce asymmetrical interdependence, namely through trade imbalances and rising debt exposure. As Zhang points out, while the BRI may reduce the region's historical reliance on Russia, it risks substituting one dependency for another, reflecting a broader reconfiguration rather than a pathway to end structural asymmetries. At the same time Gao's study cautions against viewing dependency as a uniform or deterministic outcome. His study of the Hualong-1 nuclear project demonstrates how Argentina's technological dependency from China resulted from a complex interplay of domestic vulnerabilities, external pressures and constrained strategic choices. Jointly the findings suggest that while the BRI carries potential to generate new forms of dependency for the GS, these outcomes are contingent, relational and shaped by the interaction of domestic conditions, regional dynamics, and broader power structures.

4 Public attitudes shape the legitimacy of BRI engagements

Finally, the special topic highlights the importance of public attitudes in shaping narratives and the legitimacy of BRI engagements. Liu and Thomas demonstrate that public perceptions in China are generally more favorable toward BRI partners than non-partners, while perceptions remain mediated by broader political contexts, including bilateral tensions (e.g., India) and central government narratives. In BRI recipient countries, however, several contributions point to a division between elite and public perceptions, and more ambivalent and critical attitudes toward China and the BRI. In Pakistan, as Silva shows, while political elites emphasize the economic benefits, local communities often perceive BRI projects as disproportionally serving Chinese strategic interests with limited benefits for local populations. Similar patterns emerge in Central Asia, where Sarybayev et al. note that, although elites welcome China's growing role in security and infrastructure, public

opinion is more cautious, shaped by concerns over surveillance technologies and the potential erosion of sovereignty. At the same time, public perceptions are not uniformly negative and can shift in response to visible economic gains. Santos and Costa highlight how Chinese investments in Afghanistan have contributed to favorable views of the BRI as infrastructure delivered immediate and tangible benefits to a country devasted by decades of war. Zhang points to mixed attitudes toward the BRI in Central Asia, where it is recognized to contribute to economic growth and regional integration even as criticisms, often amplified in western discourse, persist regarding debt sustainability and long-term risks. Collectively, the findings suggests that public attitudes toward the BRI are uneven and largely shaped by perceived material benefits, levels of inclusion and transparency, and broader concerns about sovereignty and dependency. Public attitudes thus emerge as a critical, although often underexplored, dimension influencing legitimacy and sustainability of BRI across the global South.

In a nutshell, the contributions to this special topic suggest that the BRI is best understood not as a coherent or uniform model of South-South cooperation, but as a complex, multidimensional, and context-dependent process. Across the cases examined, the BRI emerges as a project that simultaneously advances economic connectivity and strategic objectives and generates a wide spectrum of outcomes ranging from mutual beneficial cooperation and coordination to constraint and dependency, mediated by domestic conditions, regional dynamics, and broader patterns of great power competition. Future research should pay closer attention to how these dynamics evolve over time, particularly in light of shifting geopolitical alignments, changing domestic conditions, and the growing importance of local perceptions for legitimacy.

Author contributions

CM: Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. AA: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Supervision. TS: Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. AG: Writing – review & editing, Project administration.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. This project has received funding from the European Union and the FCT in Portugal, through the project DOIs: https://doi.org/10.54499/PRT/BD/154448/2023.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI; model GPT-5.3) was used in the preparation of this editorial to assist with language refinement, structuring, and clarity of expression. All substantive arguments, interpretations, and analyses were developed by the author(s), who takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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