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**Title:** China's Belt and Road Initiative and Changing Political Dynamics in Bangladesh

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**IRB Approval:** I have communicated with Miss. Jeanie Beard and received a go-ahead to proceed with my chosen research proposal. If approved by the Richter committee then I will promptly schedule a meeting with her to ensure that all IRB requirements are fulfilled. Miss. Beard is aware of the qualitative interviews this project employs, and there are no complex procedures that would require additional review.

**Safety Note:** I have received approval from the Wake Forest Overseas Crisis Management Team to travel to Bangladesh. Given my personal background, I am fully confident that Bangladesh is a safe location for me to conduct this research. I was born in Bangladesh and lived there for three years, maintaining strong cultural and familial ties that enable me to navigate both the political and social landscape with ease. Additionally, I have visited Bangladesh multiple times and am highly familiar with the area where I will be staying. I will reside in Dhaka, the capital and the country's largest urban, business, and diplomatic hub.. Many of my close relatives live in Dhaka, providing me with a strong local support system. My extended family will ensure my safety throughout my stay.. Given my deep familiarity with the country and the precautions in place, I am fully confident in the security and feasibility of my research in Bangladesh

[Attached Letter of Support From Parents](#)

**Background:** In July 2024, student demonstrations in Bangladesh resulted in over 1,000 deaths and forced Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to flee to India (Hasnat, Saif, and Martínez, 2024). India has supported Hasina's Awami League party, given its alignment with India's strategic interests. Prime Minister Hasina has utilized a 'balancing' diplomatic approach: while she wanted China's investment for infrastructure development, she also made sure not to upset India (Grare, 2024). But India's support for Sheikh Hasina has ramped up anti-India sentiment in the country.

Amid this rapidly changing political landscape, a new interim government head has been appointed. Nobel laureate Mohammad Yunus won the Nobel Prize in 2006 for pioneering Grameen Bank in 1983, which distributes micro-loans for low-income farmers to combat poverty. Grameen Bank has lent a total of over six billion dollars in housing, student, and micro-enterprise loans. After being sworn in, Chief Advisor Yunus told reporters that Bangladesh "has got a second independence," furthermore, he emphasized the importance of rebuilding the nation systematically for lasting change (Advani and Martin, 2024)(Yeung and Zulfaqar, 2024).

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was launched in 2013 is the largest infrastructure finance program in the world and it globally connects China with Africa, Russia, Europe, and all of Asia through investments in transportation, power plant, telecommunication, and energy. Bangladesh is currently the second largest recipient of BRI loans in South Asia. Bangladesh's shifting political landscape has created an opening for China to deepen its

influence in the country. In September 2024, Chief Advisor Yunus met with China's Foreign Minister who expressed interest in investing in solar panels. The foreign minister urged Chinese manufacturing companies to relocate to Bangladesh and vowed to grant zero-tariff treatment on 100 percent of taxable items from Bangladesh, showing China's commitment to forming a bilateral partnership with Bangladesh. Chief Advisor Yunus hopes for "a new chapter" to open between the two nations (Diplomatic Correspondent, 2024). According to an estimate by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the total investment from China in Bangladesh is over seven billion dollars. In the past decade, China has released over four billion dollars for 35 projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Bangladesh. China is currently investing in twenty-one bridges and twenty-seven power projects in Bangladesh. Furthermore, China is now Bangladesh's largest trading partner. The trade volume between the two countries is over twenty-five billion dollars (Noyon, 2023).

**Research Overview:** In my research project, I seek to examine if the changing political landscape and the decline of India's political influence in Bangladesh could allow China to expand its foothold in the country through BRI projects. I will conduct at least 20 semi-structured interviews with government officials, academics, and experts from the non-profit and private sectors to determine the extent to which the present dynamics in Bangladesh may favor an expanding Chinese footprint in the country. Furthermore, I will carry out an initial content analysis on speeches and public statements using the Dawn newspaper to gauge developing ties among Bangladesh, China, and India.

**Preliminary Theory and Hypothesis:** Recent scholarship on political and regional dynamics suggests that China has successfully gained a strong foothold in South Asia (Bharti, 2024). The ouster of Sheikh Hasina has provided China with increased opportunities to deepen its influence, making this research particularly timely due to the ongoing political shifts in Bangladesh. Economic research indicates that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has had a statistically significant positive effect on per capita GDP in recipient countries, with the most notable positive impact observed in the 'Belt' countries (Central Asia, West Asia, and parts of Africa), likely due to their urgent need for infrastructure development. In the context of the BRI, the 'Belt' refers to land routes, and the 'Road' refers to maritime routes. Bangladesh is categorized as both a Belt and Road country due to its geographic location between India and Myanmar, which enables trade routes connecting China to the Indian Ocean and beyond (Cao et al., 2022; Weng et al., 2021).

While Pakistan is the largest recipient of BRI-related investments in South Asia, a study by Mahmood et al. (2022) explores the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crucial component of the BRI. This study applies Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posits that social behavior is an exchange process in which groups evaluate the costs and benefits of their interactions. The success of BRI development projects depends heavily on the receptiveness of host communities. According to SET, if host communities do not perceive sufficient benefits from these initiatives, they are more likely to oppose them. The study highlights that BRI projects in Belt countries have led to long-term economic, infrastructural, and social benefits, including increased knowledge-sharing opportunities for local communities.

In particular, transportation projects under the BRI have had favorable results in boosting public sentiment toward China in recipient countries. The findings of the study emphasize the positive role of CPEC in Pakistan, noting that it has fostered economic growth, rural development, and

local knowledge-sharing. However, CPEC has also increased Pakistan's external debt, particularly to China, raising concerns about the potential for a "debt trap," where the inability to service loans could lead to heightened Chinese influence over Pakistan's economic and strategic decisions. Additionally, rapid development associated with CPEC has raised environmental concerns, particularly regarding the impact of large-scale infrastructure projects on local ecosystems (Mahmood, Ali, Menhas, and Sabir, 2022; Sun, Kapstein, and Shapiro, 2024).

***Building on these theoretical insights and empirical findings,***

*I hypothesize that the political instability resulting from Sheikh Hasina's ouster and the rising anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh will create a favorable environment for China's Belt and Road Initiative to expand its influence in the country.*

**Methods:**

**1. Interviews:** I will conduct 30–60-minute semi-structured interviews with government officials, academics, and professionals in the non-profit and private sectors. These interviews will be supplemented with content analysis from the Dawn newspaper (Schulhof, Vuuren, and Kirchherr, 2022).

Interviewees will be individuals with substantial insight into BRI projects and the changing political landscape in Bangladesh. The American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS) will assist in recruiting participants. Interviews will take place at the AIBS office or at relevant locations based on the interviewees' preferences.

Before each interview, I will distribute a questionnaire collecting basic demographic information. Additionally, I will work with Professor DeVotta to refine my questions to ensure they elicit open-ended, in-depth responses. I will continue conducting interviews until thematic saturation is reached (estimated 20 interviews).

**List of Planned Interviewees in Bangladesh (via AIBS):**

- **Academics and Researchers:**

**Liu Zongyi**, Director, Center for China Studies, University of Dhaka

**Professor Ali Riaz**, Chair, Bangladesh Constitutional Reform Commission

**Professor Delwar Hussain**, International Relations, University of Dhaka

**Dr. Fahmida Khatun**, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue

**Professor Rounaq Jahan**, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue

**Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed**, International Relations, University of Dhaka

**Dr. Ashikur Rahman**, Senior Economist, Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh (PRI)

**Dr. Syed Munir Khasru**, Chairman, Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG)

**Dr. Lailufar Yasmin**, International Relations, University of Dhaka

**Dr. Mustafizur Rahman**, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

- **Journalists:**

**David Bergman**, Journalist, Dhaka

**Abbas Udin Noyon**, Journalist, *Business Standard*

- **Industry and Infrastructure Experts:**

**Md. Shamsul Hoque**, Professor, Civil Engineering, BUET

**Faisal Khan**, CEO, Summit Power International

**Engr. Md. Abdus Sabur**, President, Bangladesh Association of Construction Industry (BACI)

**Li Guangjun**, Country Manager, China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), Bangladesh

To operationalize my independent and dependent variables, I will integrate key questions throughout my interviews, drawing on existing BRI studies and employing the Social Exchange Theory (SET) as my analytical framework. SET provides a structured approach to assessing how interactions and perceived benefits shape respondents' views on China's influence in Bangladesh. My dependent variable, Chinese BRI influence, will be evaluated through measurable indicators, including the volume of investments such as loan amounts, the number of Chinese projects, and the sectoral distribution of these investments, particularly in infrastructure and energy. By adapting interview structures from established studies, I will develop open-ended questions that assess respondents' familiarity with specific BRI projects in Bangladesh, their perspectives on how the BRI has influenced economic development, and their overall perception of China's growing role in the country. If time and conditions allow, I will also conduct a brief site visit to a nearby BRI infrastructure project, the Padma Rail Bridge in Dhaka, to observe local conditions. (Schulhof, Vuuren, and Kirchherr, 2022).

### **Developing List of Interview Questions**

**2. Content Analysis:** I will seek consent to record my interviews and subsequently transcribe them for analysis. Using MAXQDA, I will conduct a systematic content analysis by generating a frequency chart of key terms, which will then be categorized into broader thematic patterns. As more themes and patterns emerge, I will refine my coding framework to ensure a comprehensive analysis. In addition to interviews, I will apply the same methodology to analyze public speeches and official statements made within three months of my interviews, focusing particularly on those given by government officials and the head of the interim government, Mohammad Yunus. Given the volatile nature of India-Bangladesh relations, I will also examine relevant media sources and press articles to contextualize my findings. Conducting a systematic content analysis of recent media coverage and political discourse will allow me to triangulate common themes across expert responses and broader political trends, helping to mitigate potential concerns of response bias. (Schulhof, Vuuren, and Kirchherr, 2022).

**Project Importance:** This project is a crucial part of my academic and professional development. As a Politics and International Affairs major, I aim to explore Bangladesh's foreign policy and its growing relationship with China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This research will contribute significantly to my senior seminar paper and my broader goal of understanding regional dynamics in South Asia. Dr. DeVotta, is mentoring me through this project, and we plan for me to present my findings at the South Asia Conference in October 2025 in Madison, which will provide valuable exposure and feedback from experts in the field.

Moreover, this research will serve as the foundation for a potential co-authored article with Dr. DeVotta. The opportunity to publish will enhance my academic credentials and help me develop essential skills in research and writing. Ultimately, the insights I gain from this project will inform my future career goals, particularly in global strategy consulting or international relations, where understanding geopolitical and economic trends is vital.

**Backup Plan:** If I could not travel to Bangladesh, I would choose Sri Lanka, which is also a significant BRI recipient country. I would replicate the same research process and itinerary- in Sri Lanka.

<b><u>Tentative Itinerary:</u> July 1- August 1 (30 days)</b>	
July 1, 2025	Fly from TX to BD
July 2, 2025	Visit AIBS office in Bangladesh
July 3, 2025	Read newspaper articles regarding the BRI in Bangladesh
July 4, 2025	Watch/read a variety of media covering Bangladesh-India relations
July 5, 2025	Watch/read a variety of media covering Bangladesh-China relations
July 6, 2025	Compile sources and create a chart of frequently repeated words
July 7, 2025	Carry out an initial content analysis and highlight emerging thematic categories.
July 8, 2025	Interviews
July 9, 2025	Interviews
July 10, 2025	Interviews
July 11, 2025	Interviews
July 12, 2025	Compile and translate
July 13, 2025	Compile and translate

July 14, 2025	Interview
July 15, 2025	Interview
July 16, 2025	Compile and translate
July 17, 2025	Take a day to organize all the qualitative research gathered so far and triangulate each method to identify emerging themes.
July 18, 2025	Interviews
July 19, 2025	Interviews
July 20, 2025	Interviews
July 21, 2025	Interviews
July 22, 2025	Interviews
July 23, 2025	Compile/translate
July 24, 2025	Interviews
July 25, 2025	Interviews
July 26, 2025	Interviews
July 27, 2025	Interviews
July 28, 2025	Interviews
July 29, 2025	Compile/translate
July 30, 2025	Organize all research gathered and carry out content analysis of the interviews
July 31, 2025	Finish content analysis
August 1, 2025	Fly back from BD to TX

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## **Appendix:**

### **Interview Structure Overview:**

The interviews will primarily be conducted in person in the capital of Bangladesh (Dhaka). I will accommodate the participant's preference to ensure maximum convenience and accessibility. The interviews will be scheduled at a time that is mutually convenient, and I am prepared to adapt based on the availability of the participants.

Each interview is expected to last approximately 45 minutes. However, the duration may vary depending on the availability and responsiveness of the interviewees, as they are experts in the field. I anticipate that some interviews may be shorter or longer, depending on the flow of the conversation and the amount of time the respondent is willing to dedicate. Given that the respondents are relevant professionals, the discussion will focus on their insights.

The primary risks associated with participation in this study are minimal. As the interviews will primarily focus on economic development and foreign relations, there is no expectation of sensitive or deeply personal topics being discussed. The interviews will be focused on factual and professional discussions, minimizing the risk of discomfort. I will ensure that participants feel comfortable and have the option to skip any question they find uncomfortable.

At the end of the study, participants will be informed that they will have access to the final research findings, should they wish to review them. Additionally, participants will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcript for accuracy if they desire so.

The benefits of this research proposal are significant, as it will contribute to academic knowledge surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its influence on Bangladesh's economy and politics. The findings of this study can be part of a broader scholarship on the economic and political impacts of BRI projects in recipient countries as well as geopolitical dynamics.



**Ethical Protocol:**

- I will ask consent to record and transcribe the interview. The questions will be passed out in the form of a questionnaire before the interview begins.
- All questions will be framed neutrally to avoid steering or leading responses. This approach respects the autonomy of the interviewees and ensures the integrity of the data collected.
- Personal details will be kept confidential, and no identifying information will be shared without the participant's consent. Responses will only be used for academic research. Participants will also be assured of their voluntary nature of their participation.
- I will go back and adjust my codes as more themes and patterns emerge in my interviews (approximately 20 respondents) (Schulhof, Vuuren, and Kirchherr, 2022).

**Demographic Questions:**

- Age: How old are you?
- Gender: What is your gender?
- Education: What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- What is your current occupation or job title?
- Region: Which region of Bangladesh are you originally from?

**Expert Interview Questions:**

**(Note: I have tried my best to frame my questions neutrally to avoid leading responses.)**

Developing List of Questions (no more than 12 will be asked) (Mahmood, Ali, Menhas, and Sabir, 2022) (Schulhof, Vuuren, and Kirchherr, 2022)

How would you describe the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the economic development of Bangladesh?

(Optional follow-up if needed) Can you provide any examples of how specific projects may have influenced local development?

What is your perspective on India's political and economic involvement in Bangladesh in recent years?

How do you think Bangladesh's relationship with India has evolved in the past decade?

What do you think are the key opportunities and challenges that Bangladesh faces in its relationship with China?

How do you foresee the political landscape in Bangladesh changing in the next 5 to 10 years?

From your perspective, do you think Bangladesh should focus on strengthening its ties with China, or is there a preference to build stronger relations with India or other countries? Why?

What are your hopes or expectations for Bangladesh's political future in the coming years?

**Independent Variables:****Bangladesh's Changing Political Landscape:**

How do you think Bangladesh's political landscape will develop over the next few years? What factors do you think will play a significant role in this change?

**Anti-Indian Sentiment:**

How would you describe the relationship between Bangladesh and India, particularly in the political and economic areas?

In your opinion, has there been any shift in public opinion toward India in recent years?

**Dependent Variable:****China's BRI Influence on Bangladesh:**

Are you familiar with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)? If yes, what do you think about it?

What specific development projects do you associate with China's BRI in Bangladesh (e.g., roads, railways)?

What are your thoughts on the potential long-term economic impact of the BRI on Bangladesh?

**BRI Projects and Infrastructure in Bangladesh**

Can you share your thoughts on the infrastructure projects associated with the BRI in Bangladesh, such as railways or roads?

Optional follow up question if necessary- Do you have any concerns or reservations about the potential impacts of these projects, such as environmental, social, or economic effect?