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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE THROUGH THE PRISM OF ASIA AND AFRICA: EVIDENCE FROM COAL-POWERED ELECTRICITY IN INDONESIA AND ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia and Africa through a comparative analysis of coal-powered electricity projects in Indonesia and Zimbabwe. It challenges the prevailing narrative that the BRI represents a mutually beneficial "win-win" cooperation framework. Instead, the study argues that China employs polylateral strategies—integrating commerce, security, and diplomacy—to advance its geo-economic interests in recipient countries. These strategies are analysed through Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality. While polylateralism refers to China's use of overlapping channels of influence—including state-owned enterprises, banks, private firms, and diplomatic institutions—governmentality elucidates how these mechanisms collectively shape infrastructure priorities, normalise asymmetrical partnerships, and guide development trajectories through indirect governance. Using a qualitative approach and grounded in this dual framework, the study contends that BRI infrastructure functions less as an equitable partnership and more as a mechanism of indirect control. The findings reveal consistent patterns across both case studies: elite capture, environmental degradation, community displacement, and benefits disproportionately favouring Chinese stakeholders. Despite differing political and institutional contexts, Indonesia and Zimbabwe illustrate how BRI projects can reinforce structural dependency, exacerbate inequality, and undermine sustainable development. This article contributes to critical debates on China's evolving role in the Global South by interrogating the transformative potential of infrastructure diplomacy under the BRI.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, governmentality, coal-powered electricity, Indonesia, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's most ambitious global infrastructure and investment strategy. It seeks to enhance connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe by integrating participating countries into a transregional network of trade corridors, energy infrastructure, and digital platforms. These projects are largely underpinned by Chinese financing and corporate participation. Framed by Chinese officials as a platform for mutual benefit and economic development, the BRI simultaneously serves China's long-term strategic objectives: securing energy resources, accessing new markets, and strengthening geopolitical influence—particularly in the Global South (Callahan 2016; Yu 2017; Yuniarto 2021). As of 2025, more than 140 countries have signed agreements under the BRI umbrella, encompassing wide-ranging projects in transport, energy, communication, and industrial zones.

Scholarly debates on the BRI have expanded quickly. Some writers emphasise its promise as a new form of South–South cooperation. Yu (2017) highlights the way it provides financing and connectivity to countries left out of Western-led capital markets. Callahan (2016) and Zeng (2016) show how Beijing promotes the BRI as a global "public good", presented as mutually beneficial and central to building regional integration. This literature reflects China's official narrative of "win-win" outcomes, in which infrastructure projects are framed as pathways to prosperity and modernisation.

Alongside this optimism, critical voices point to uneven effects and risks. Brautigam (2015), Acker and Brautigam (2021) and Al-Fadhat and Prasetio (2024) document how loan arrangements lock host countries into long-term repayment obligations that limit fiscal space. Bennon and Fukuyama (2023) underline how the BRI has often created debt pressures, weak transparency, and elite capture. In Africa, Chipaike and Bischoff (2019) and Chirambwi (2022) describe how infrastructure diplomacy strengthens ruling elites while excluding citizens. In Asia, Ray (2022) and Wijaya (2022) note that environmental and social safeguards are frequently weakened to speed up projects. These accounts suggest that while the BRI delivers infrastructure, its costs and benefits are distributed in ways that reproduce dependency and marginalise communities.

Nevertheless, the literature remains fragmented. Many works focus either on high-level geopolitics or on single-country case studies, but few examine how the BRI reshapes governance structures through indirect forms of power. Reilly (2013) and Crawford (2019) highlight economic statecraft and development diplomacy, but theoretical approaches such as Foucault's concept of governmentality are rarely applied to BRI cases. Moreover, much attention has gone to high-profile transport projects, while coal-powered plants—a central component of China's overseas energy strategy—receive less systematic study (Gong and van Staden 2021). This leaves important questions unanswered about how the BRI operates not just as infrastructure, but as a mode of governance.

This article intervenes in these debates by offering a comparative analysis of BRI coal projects in Indonesia and Zimbabwe. By examining two emblematic cases in Asia and Africa, it highlights how China's engagement reshapes development pathways beyond national borders. The study advances theoretical discussion by bringing together the idea of polylateralism (Wiseman 1999) with governmentality (Foucault 1991), allowing us to see how overlapping networks of commerce, security, and diplomacy serve as indirect tools of governance. It also directs attention to coal power, a sector that reveals the deep tensions between energy security, environmental costs, and political control. In doing so, the article contributes to wider debates on China's evolving role in the Global South and the contested meaning of South–South cooperation.

Rather than treating the BRI as a neutral instrument of development, the argument here is that China advances its interests through polylateral engagement—an approach that involves a diverse constellation of actors beyond the confines of traditional state-to-state diplomacy. This strategy combines bilateral, multilateral, and informal channels of influence, mobilising Chinese state-owned enterprises, policy banks, diplomatic institutions, and private firms in a coordinated fashion. Collectively, these actors embed Chinese capital, norms, and institutional preferences within the developmental frameworks of participating countries. To interrogate the mechanisms underlying this mode of engagement, the study employs Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, which illuminates the dispersed, rationalised, and institutionalised forms of power that regulate behaviour and structure governance. While polylateralism captures the architecture of China's multi-actor, multi-level engagement, governmentality offers insight into how this architecture functions as a mode of control—shaping policy norms, institutional logics, and development rationalities in ways that align recipient states with China's strategic objectives.

MAPPING THE CONTEXT FOR BRI IN INDONESIA AND ZIMBABWE

It is important to compare the historical trajectories of Indonesia's and Zimbabwe's bilateral engagements with China. While their relations with Beijing are longstanding, their character has shifted significantly. Earlier ties were driven by ideological solidarity and anti-imperialist cooperation, particularly during decolonisation. In contrast, contemporary relations are marked by a more strategic calculus—centred on commerce, security, and diplomacy, often with China as the primary beneficiary (Schiere et al. 2011; Elisabeth 2018; Horn et al. 2021). This shift reflects China's transformation into a global economic powerhouse. Its demand for raw materials, overseas markets, and political allies has driven a renewed focus on resource-rich nations like Indonesia and Zimbabwe (Wang 2020; Tinarwo and Babu 2023). According to Fitriani (2021) and Nantulya (2021), China's engagement has evolved from a single-pillar model (political ideology, 1956 to mid-1990s) to a two-pillar framework (politics and economics, mid-1990s to 2013), and now to a three-pillar strategy integrating diplomacy and security under the BRI (2013–present).

In Zimbabwe, China is viewed as an "all-weather friend", a bond forged during the liberation war when Beijing armed and trained the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army, led by Robert Mugabe (Zhang 2014: 24; Taylor 2020: 191). This support deepened post-2000 when Mugabe turned to China following international sanctions related to land reforms and human rights violations (Alao 2007). Zimbabwe's "Look East" policy secured Chinese funding and political backing, including veto support at the UN Security Council (Hodzi et al. 2012; Chipaike and Bischoff 2019). Since the 2017 ouster of Mugabe, President Emmerson Mnangagwa has reaffirmed Zimbabwe's China alignment. In 2018, their relationship was elevated to a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" (Taylor 2020: 196). Chinese officials emphasise historical bonds of shared struggle and "common destiny" to frame this relationship (Taylor 2020: 197). Ambassador Guo (2022: 1) declared:

> China and Zimbabwe have always been partners with a shared future in weal and woe, that's why China consistently supports Zimbabwe. China and Zimbabwe have both suffered from imperialism and colonialism for a long time; both arduously struggled for independence, liberation, and prosperity of our own countries. Shared experiences, historic mission, and common ideals brought us close together. China and Zimbabwe are good friends, good partners, and good brothers with common interests and shared future.

In Indonesia, the 1995 Bandung Conference was the symbolic beginning of Sino-Indonesian solidarity against Western hegemony (Jian 2008). However, it was under President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) that the relationship gained infrastructural depth. Following his 2014 victory, Jokowi emphasised connectivity-driven development. His 2015 visit to Beijing catalysed several major BRI deals, including the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed rail. Jokowi's infrastructure agenda aligned closely with China's global ambitions. An additional dynamic is Indonesia's ethnic Chinese diaspora, comprising 3% of the population, who act as commercial and political intermediaries (Tjhin 2012; Ren and Liu 2022). This community reinforces informal networks between Chinese capital and local elites, streamlining business facilitation.

The BRI is promoted by Beijing as a geopolitical framework to reshape global connectivity. Chinese narratives frame the BRI as a "public good", "gift", or even the "path of Xi Jinping", extending a benevolent vision of China-led development (Callahan 2016: 227). In 2017, Xi Jinping described the BRI as central to building a "community of common destiny for mankind", warning that non-participating nations risk marginalisation in the emerging world order (*Xinhua News* 2017). China's investments in Indonesia and Zimbabwe have been concentrated in high-impact infrastructure sectors—notably coal power, transportation, and mining. These projects often involve resource-backed loans, collateralised repayment mechanisms, and closed procurement loops (Brautigam 2015; Acker and Brautigam 2021). While these arrangements address infrastructure gaps, they also reproduce dependency, limit technology transfer, and restrict local value addition (Bennon and Fukuyama 2023; Milko 2023; Chingono 2024).

Geostrategically, Indonesia is attractive as a maritime logistics hub, while Zimbabwe offers access to Southern Africa's land corridors. Their weak fiscal capacity and exclusion from Western capital markets make them ideal targets for BRI outreach. Both countries have signed multiple memoranda of understanding with China under BRI frameworks.

Proponents argue that China offers an alternative to neo-colonial Western lenders. In Zimbabwe, the BRI is aligned with Vision 2030, a roadmap for achieving middle-income status. President Mnangagwa has explicitly tied BRI participation to this national agenda, stating that the initiative "will contribute to genuine, all-encompassing globalisation and help Zimbabwe in particular to achieve its goal for middle-income status by 2030" (Musarurwa 2018: 1). This demonstrates how Zimbabwean officials frame the BRI as both developmental and ideological, combining practical infrastructure benefits with symbolic political alignment (Zhang and Chifamba 2019). A similar framing is evident in Indonesia, where former senior officials described China and Indonesia as "natural partners in the BRI", emphasising the synergy between Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum and China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Suoneto 2022: 2). Such narratives portray the BRI as a vehicle for sovereign development and strategic modernisation. However, critical voices challenge these portrayals. Research shows that China's engagement prioritises its own demographic and economic imperatives—particularly resource security and market access (Johnston 2023). Analysts note that China offers a "total package"—a suite of commerce, diplomacy, and security instruments—to cultivate long-term dependencies. These tools allow China to operate indirectly, but decisively, within national development ecosystems. Moreover, China's support is rarely directed at building domestic manufacturing or inclusive industries. In both Zimbabwe and Indonesia, value chains remain externally oriented, and technology transfers are minimal. Most procurement is tied to Chinese companies, reinforcing a closed-loop model that displaces local contractors.

To understand this system, China's approach under the BRI can be conceptualised as an apparatus of governmentality structured around three interlinked pillars: commerce, security, and diplomacy (as shown in Figure 1). The commerce pillar centres on development loans, corporate partnerships, and procurement schemes that are often tied to Chinese firms, thereby creating economic dependency while enabling Beijing to shape national infrastructure agendas. The security pillar involves strategic alignment with domestic political elites, where Chinese investments are embedded in elite networks that ensure contract stability, political compliance, and access to sensitive sectors without the need for overt coercion. The diplomacy pillar works through normative discourses and soft power practices that frame China's engagement as benevolent, non-interventionist, and rooted in South–South solidarity. This includes the use of scholarships, training programmes, symbolic gestures, and the construction of public goods to build goodwill and legitimise China's presence. Together, these pillars operate as mutually reinforcing logics of influence that allow China to externalise its domestic development model, embed itself in partner states' institutional ecosystems, and normalise asymmetric relations under the guise of mutual cooperation (Chirambwi 2022).

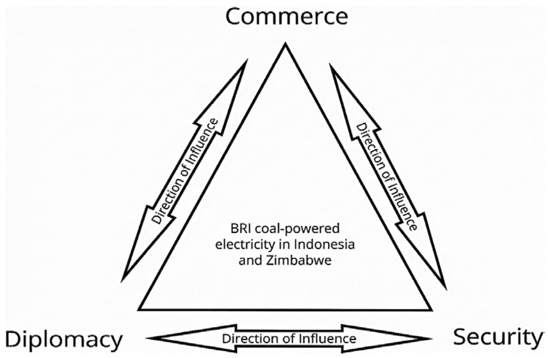

Figure 1: Governmentality structure.

In summary, China's role in Indonesia and Zimbabwe cannot be understood through bilateral relations alone. It reflects a broader governance strategy that operates through a polylateral approach—one that integrates multiple state and non-state actors, including banks, diplomatic institutions, and corporate entities. This strategy enables China to externalise its domestic development logic, embed elite partnerships, and reshape regulatory ecosystems to suit its national interests. The next section unpacks how these dynamics manifest through the conceptual lens of governmentality, illuminating how power is diffused across commercial, diplomatic, and security domains without relying on direct political control.

RESEARCH METHOD AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine China's BRI in Indonesia and Zimbabwe. The analysis relies exclusively on secondary sources, a methodological choice shaped by the limited availability of disaggregated primary data and the geopolitical sensitivities surrounding Chinese infrastructure engagement in host countries. As Creswell (2014) and Bryman (2016) have noted, secondary-source qualitative research is well-suited for investigating complex international phenomena embedded within broader socio-political contexts. This study synthesises insights from peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, policy briefs, media accounts, and official government publications. These sources were selected based on their direct relevance to the intersection of BRI implementation, commerce, diplomacy, and security in the two countries.

Document selection was guided by purposive sampling (Ahmad and Wilkins 2025), prioritising materials that addressed large-scale infrastructure investments, development diplomacy, and China's strategic partnerships. The two case studies—Java-7 in Indonesia and Hwange Thermal Power Station in Zimbabwe—were chosen for their emblematic representation of China's energy infrastructure presence across two distinct geopolitical and regulatory environments.

Using secondary data provides both opportunities and limitations. On the one hand, these materials offer a valuable entry point into the often-opaque practices of Chinese infrastructure diplomacy. On the other hand, they are shaped by institutional agendas, uneven transparency, and context-specific biases. For instance, Indonesia benefits from a more open policy environment and active civil society monitoring, while data from Zimbabwe often originates from advocacy networks or investigative media working under restrictive conditions. To address these limitations, the study employs triangulation—cross-verifying claims across diverse types of sources, including academic literature, non-governmental organisation (NGO) reports, government statements, and journalistic investigations. This approach ensures that no single narrative dominates the analysis and helps identify converging patterns or contradictions in the data.

The methodological strategy also aligns with the study's theoretical framework. Foucault's concept of governmentality emphasises how power operates through discourses, institutional rationalities, and indirect mechanisms of control. These dimensions are often more legible in documents, policy frameworks, and development strategies than in quantitative datasets or elite interviews. Thus, the reliance on documentary sources is not only a logistical adaptation but also a theoretical extension of the article's analytical orientation. Nonetheless, the limitations of this approach are acknowledged. This study cannot fully capture lived experiences, informal negotiations, or local contestations, which are crucial to understanding how BRI is experienced on the ground. Future research should consider complementing this desk-based analysis with stakeholder interviews, field-based observation, or participatory methods to provide a bottom-up perspective that remains underrepresented in this study.

Building on this methodological foundation, the study applies Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality to analyse how China governs indirectly through its BRI engagements in Indonesia and Zimbabwe. Foucault defines governmentality as a historically specific form of power that governs populations through a combination of institutions, procedures, rationalities, and technologies. Its core mechanism is the "conduct of conduct"—a strategy that operates not through coercion but through shaping the choices, behaviours, and governing logics of actors (Foucault 1991: 88). In this context, governmentality is highly relevant for understanding how the BRI functions beyond development rhetoric. It operates as an apparatus of governance—embedding Chinese priorities into the political economies of host states by cultivating dependency, controlling narratives, and realigning elite interests. Rather than exercising overt domination, China deploys institutional discourses, commercial incentives, and diplomatic gestures to guide infrastructure priorities and national development choices.

A key insight from Foucault's perspective is that power operates not merely through coercion, but through the production of knowledge, the enforcement of norms, and the structuring of institutional configurations. In the context of BRI, this form of power manifests through a carefully calibrated integration of commercial investments, security partnerships, and diplomatic narratives—what can be conceptualised as a tripartite structure of governmentality (as shown in Figure 1). Commerce shapes national priorities by directing capital, technology, and labour flows into strategic infrastructure sectors. Security stabilises regimes and pre-empts dissent, thereby ensuring project continuity and elite alignment. Diplomacy legitimises China's international role and constructs consent through narrative framing, cultural exchange, and soft power initiatives. While each of these pillars may function autonomously, they are deeply interlinked in shaping how China governs recipient states. The governmentality framework enables us to interpret these not as isolated interventions, but as components of a broader governing rationality—one that is exported through development discourse but fundamentally designed to secure China's long-term strategic influence.

China's BRI strategy is also inherently geopolitical, involving a territorial and symbolic expansion of influence. The "Belt" refers to land-based infrastructure—roads, railways, and power plants—while the "Road" refers to maritime connectivity via ports and undersea cable networks (Callahan 2016; Zeng 2016). These metaphors reflect a dual ambition: to link Asia, Africa, and Europe physically, and to embed Chinese norms and institutions within transnational governance architectures. This geopolitical logic is further reinforced by a shift in China's foreign policy doctrine. The BRI, or "One Belt, One Road", has been described as the most important project of Xi Jinping's presidency, marking a radical reorientation from traditional aid to a model that integrates infrastructure diplomacy, strategic investment, and ideological export (Chaisse and Matsushita 2018). The BRI thus functions not only as a development platform, but also as a normative instrument for shaping global governance according to Chinese priorities.

Chinese officials routinely present the BRI as a public good premised on South–South cooperation and shared prosperity. As Xi Jinping asserted at the 2023 Belt and Road Forum, the initiative is meant to "inject new impetus into the global economy…create new opportunities for global development" and serve as a platform for inclusive, people-centred, and sustainable cooperation (Xi 2023: 1). However, critics highlight how it reproduces structural inequalities and opaque conditionalities. As Biedermann (2021) argues, commercial imperatives are central to China's foreign policy, with diplomatic engagements increasingly subordinated to strategic economic interests. The result is a hybrid model of influence: part aid, part investment, and part statecraft.

Governmentality in this context is not static; it adapts to local political environments, recalibrating its methods based on institutional openness, elite cooperation, and international scrutiny. This adaptive dimension of China's BRI governance is essential for understanding how infrastructure investments are tailored to different national contexts. For example, Indonesia's relatively stronger environmental regulations compel Chinese firms to adopt cleaner coal technologies and engage in socially responsible messaging. In contrast, Zimbabwe's institutional weaknesses permit less regulated practices, often resulting in higher environmental and social costs.

Indeed, China's security logic has evolved beyond traditional defence measures. It now includes efforts to stabilise domestic politics in recipient states by supporting ruling coalitions, investing in job-generating infrastructure, and addressing demographic pressures—particularly youth unemployment (Chipaike and Bischoff 2019). As Chirambwi (2022) also argues, China's strategic advantage lies in its ability to forge close relationships with African leaders while maintaining a non-interference policy, in contrast to the conditionalities often imposed by Western donors. These actions align with China's interest in safeguarding its overseas investments and minimising political instability that could jeopardise BRI projects.

Diplomatic governance, in turn, operates through narrative-building and symbolic gestures that project China as a benevolent partner (Crawford 2019). Initiatives such as scholarship programmes, technical training, and the construction of roads, water facilities, or hospitals near project sites are presented as gifts, not transactions. These practices align with what Foucault describes as "social engineering"—governing through perception management, rather than coercion. The objective is to normalise China's presence and neutralise opposition by aligning local aspirations with Chinese development discourse.

Commerce, too, is a mechanism of indirect control. Through a polylateral strategy, Chinese actors—ranging from state-owned enterprises to private firms and banks—coordinate to shape infrastructure deals (Mattlin and Nojonen 2015; de Freitas 2023). These arrangements often exclude local stakeholders, entrench dependency through concessional loans, and limit local content or technology transfer. Commerce, in this sense, becomes an instrument for structuring development pathways in line with China's domestic needs.

Together, these three dimensions constitute what we call China's governmentality under the BRI. The BRI is not simply a collection of infrastructure projects; it is a governance model that operates through rationalised mechanisms of influence, structured partnerships, and soft coercion. China does not impose control; it governs through rules, discourses, and incentives that make recipient countries complicit in their own transformation. This form of indirect rule is especially effective in postcolonial states like Indonesia and Zimbabwe, where institutional vulnerabilities and elite brokerage structures can be co-opted into China's development rationality. By mobilising commerce, diplomacy, and security in tandem, China has constructed an infrastructure of influence—a sophisticated apparatus that governs from a distance while appearing to cooperate.

In sum, governmentality provides a powerful lens to understand the inner workings of BRI governance. It moves the analysis beyond surface-level claims of development and allows us to trace how China's infrastructure diplomacy operates as a system of indirect rule, with calibrated tools for managing political alignment, economic dependency, and ideological consent. These practices, while distinct from classical imperialism, achieve similar outcomes: structuring asymmetrical relationships through seemingly neutral forms of governance. The next section analyses how this dynamic manifest in Chinese-financed coal power projects in Indonesia and Zimbabwe, highlighting how the BRI has evolved into an apparatus of governmentality.

COMPARING PRODUCTION OF COAL-POWERED ELECTRICITY UNDER BRI IN INDONESIA AND ZIMBABWE

Despite varying national contexts, coal-powered electricity infrastructure occupies a central role in the BRI in both Indonesia and Zimbabwe. These projects underscore how energy infrastructure functions as a strategic economic and geopolitical tool within China's global development agenda. In Indonesia, China has financed the construction of the Java-7 coal-powered plant, designed to produce 2,100 MW of electricity as part of the broader 35,000 MW electrification initiative. In Zimbabwe, China has modernised the colonial-era Hwange Thermal Power Station by installing Units 7 and 8, each with a planned capacity of 300 MW (Gong and van Staden 2021). Though differing in capacity and technological sophistication, both projects reflect a similar logic: deploying large-scale coal infrastructure as a means to assert influence, extend control, and entrench interdependence under the BRI.

Construction contracts and investment flows for both projects began around 2017. In Zimbabwe, the Chinese firm Sinohydro, backed by Export-Import Bank of China (China Exim Bank), first expanded the Kariba South Hydro Station before moving to Hwange, injecting an additional 600 MW into the grid. The Hwange project is not isolated—China is also involved in the Sengwa Coal Mining and Power Plant, with investments estimated at USD3 billion and financing supported by the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and China Gezhouba Group (Matendere 2020). In Indonesia, China Development Bank funded the Java-7 project with USD1.32 billion, complemented by an additional USD481 million from China Shenhua Energy. These cases expose a pattern of Chinese ownership and revenue control. In Zimbabwe, Sinohydro retains 36% of revenue from Hwange (AidData 2025a), while in Indonesia, China National Energy Investment Group owns 70% of Java-7 (AidData 2025b). Although the ownership ratios differ, the underlying dynamic is consistent: Chinese firms maintain substantial economic control, reinforcing dependency through long-term revenue arrangements.

More striking, however, are the disparities in technological application and cost-efficiency. While Zimbabwe's expansion delivers 600 MW at a cost of USD1.2 billion, Indonesia's Java-7 produces over three times that capacity (2,100 MW) for USD1.8 billion total. Moreover, ultra-supercritical technology was used in Java-7, incorporating seawater desulphurisation to limit emissions. In contrast, the Hwange facility employed less advanced coal combustion technology, exacerbating air pollution despite Zimbabwe's high climate vulnerability.

From a governmentality perspective, this discrepancy reflects more than market logic—it represents a calculated form of technological differentiation. China tailors its infrastructure offerings to each country's regulatory environment and geopolitical visibility. Indonesia's stronger environmental standards and international scrutiny prompted Chinese firms to adopt cleaner technologies. Zimbabwe's weaker regulatory institutions and political isolation allowed lower compliance and inferior technology. Thus, China's technology choice becomes a disciplinary tool, reinforcing uneven power relations while projecting climate responsibility in higher-visibility states.

These dynamics are shaped and operationalised through what is termed China's polylateral strategy. Unlike conventional bilateral or multilateral diplomacy, the polylateral approach involves a fusion of state, quasi-state, and private actors operating simultaneously across multiple levels of engagement. In both Indonesia and Zimbabwe, Chinese state-owned enterprises, banks, contractors, and party-state institutions coordinate efforts in what appears as a seamless deployment of infrastructure diplomacy. The Chinese government negotiates contracts, policy banks provide concessional loans, state-owned enterprises carry out construction, and private suppliers from China are contracted for equipment and materials. As reinforced by Otele et al. (2022): "this is boosted not only by technical expertise but also through Beijing's financial backing through the China Development Bank and the Export-Import (Exim) Bank of China , as well as strong diplomatic support" (2). This approach creates a closed-loop procurement ecosystem, wherein financial resources, labour, and raw materials flow back to Chinese entities. Recipient countries receive infrastructure, but at the cost of limited local capacity-building, constrained technology transfer, and rising debt obligations. In effect, Chinese investments are circularised within a transnational capitalist network that consolidates commercial power within the Chinese state-corporate nexus.

While Chinese firms justify these practices as efficient and standardised, the opaque bidding processes and top-down contractual structures marginalise recipient governments and local stakeholders. Tenders are often awarded internally through Chinese channels, with limited participation from host-country institutions (Reilly 2013). This not only weakens state agency but also reinforces elite brokerage, as local actors are incorporated into the project not as planners but as facilitators and gatekeepers.

Indonesia and Zimbabwe are both complicit in these arrangements, often prioritising project speed and access to capital over long-term sustainability. In Indonesia, elite facilitation under decentralised governance has significantly accelerated coal infrastructure development. Local actors—governors, regents, and district heads—play critical roles in project licensing and land acquisition, frequently bypassing public consultation and accountability mechanisms. Projects like Java-7 and the controversial Cirebon-2 plant illustrate how environmental protests and community resistance were neutralised through regulatory exceptions granted under the 2020 Omnibus Law, which streamlined environmental assessments and curtailed legal avenues for opposition (Wijaya 2022). These reforms enabled subnational elites to fast-track Chinese-backed projects with minimal scrutiny. Chinese state-owned enterprises and financiers actively exploit this decentralised institutional landscape by partnering with local authorities who act as political and administrative brokers. In return, these elites gain access to rents, political capital, and expedited approvals, while Chinese firms secure land, permits, and project continuity. The result is a form of collaborative state-corporate governance, where infrastructure delivery is shaped not by inclusive planning, but by elite accommodation and regulatory expediency.

In Zimbabwe, elite capture is more centralised. National-level actors, including the presidency and state agencies, drive BRI negotiations and oversee land concessions, often excluding traditional leaders and community representatives. In the Dinde village eviction case, over 2,000 people were forcibly removed to make way for coal development, with little regard for compensation or resettlement rights (Nkala 2024). These governance patterns demonstrate how state-corporate alignment under BRI bypasses democratic accountability in favour of expediency, albeit through different institutional pathways—decentralised brokerage in Indonesia and centralised executive control in Zimbabwe.

These dynamics are compounded by China's use of resource-backed lending models, particularly in Zimbabwe. In 2020, Zimbabwe agreed to supply coal and coke to Chinese firms operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as partial repayment for BRI project financing. Such arrangements effectively collateralise natural resources, subordinating national development agendas to debt servicing obligations. In Indonesia, loans from China account for approximately 4.5% of total debt (Damuri et al. 2019), while in Zimbabwe, the figure is close to 24.8% (Brautigam et al. 2021). These financial dependencies expose both countries to long-term fiscal vulnerability and reduce their bargaining power. From a governmentality lens, these arrangements constitute a deliberate strategy to embed Chinese rationalities into national development planning. Infrastructure is not merely physical—it becomes an apparatus of indirect rule, shaping how host states govern space, manage dissent, and articulate development goals. Whether through fiscal entanglement, elite co-optation, or technological control, the BRI coal infrastructure projects in Indonesia and Zimbabwe exemplify how China's polylateral strategy translates power into policy.

In conclusion, BRI coal power projects represent a strategically layered form of engagement that combines infrastructure provision with institutional realignment. Indonesia and Zimbabwe illustrate how China adapts its interventions to diverse political contexts, deploying varying combinations of technology, finance, and diplomacy. The outcome is a governance regime that advances China's development model while simultaneously constraining host-country autonomy. Through a polylateral strategy anchored in governmentality, BRI projects reshape local governance structures and reconfigure the political economy of energy—embedding China's interests within enduring institutional frameworks. The next section examines how these projects—far from being universally beneficial—have generated governance challenges, exacerbated socio-economic disparities, and eroded public trust, particularly through elite capture and the marginalisation of local communities.

RISKS AND CHALLENGES

It is equally important to understand how the economic benefits of BRI projects are disproportionately distributed within local populations, particularly through elite-centric governance arrangements in countries like Zimbabwe and Indonesia. In Zimbabwe, BRI investments have primarily benefited ruling elites who negotiate deals with Chinese actors in ways that entrench their political and economic power, often sidelining community needs and exacerbating existing socio-economic inequalities (Moyo et al. 2020). Access to land, contracts, and compensation is frequently mediated through political networks, undermining democratic oversight and generating local resentment. Similarly, in Indonesia, environmental and social safeguards have been eroded under pro-investment reforms such as the 2020 Omnibus Law. This sweeping regulatory overhaul streamlines business licensing by weakening labour protections and diluting environmental review processes to attract foreign investment (Ray 2022). These reforms were officially justified as necessary for accelerating post-pandemic economic recovery. However, they have opened the door for projects like Java-7 and Cirebon-2 to bypass local opposition, contributing to growing tensions between development imperatives and grassroots rights.

Local communities in both countries have begun to demand employment opportunities and a fairer share of the benefits, threatening to disrupt China's BRI strategic plans if their grievances remain unaddressed. In regions such as Hwange in Zimbabwe and West Java in Indonesia, local residents have insisted on greater access to jobs and social investment linked to coal infrastructure (Gong and van Staden 2021). However, critics argue that these demands have largely been ignored, and that both Indonesia and Zimbabwe derive limited long-term benefit from BRI coal projects, which primarily serve to accrue debt, externalise environmental costs, and reinforce foreign control. These concerns are amplified by the widespread displacement and destruction of livelihoods that BRI projects have triggered. In both countries, tens of thousands of residents have lost access to land that once provided food security and income. In 2021, nearly 400 families were relocated from the Hwange region due to severe air pollution from the Chinese-backed power station, which emits methane, sulphur dioxide, carbon dioxide, ground-level ozone, and particulate matter (Gong and van Staden 2021). In Indonesia, emissions from coal-fired plants contributed to an estimated 10,500 premature deaths in 2022, with projected health costs of USD7.4 billion (IDR109.9 trillion). If current coal expansion policies continue, deaths could reach 16,600 per year by 2030, and annual health costs could surpass USD11.8 billion (Myllyvirta et al. 2023).

In both Indonesia and Zimbabwe, the open-cast mining methods required for coal supply—drilling, blasting, and transport—generate dust pollution that severely harms nearby communities. In addition, project development has caused flooding from clogged drainage canals, loss of farmland, and water contamination from construction debris and coal waste. These environmental impacts are not incidental; they stem from the broader logic of project-driven development, which privileges speed and scale over ecological and social sustainability.

These outcomes reflect the polylateral structure of BRI governance, where Chinese banks, contractors, and local elites operate through non-transparent and fragmented channels that hinder accountability. This dispersal of responsibility makes it difficult for communities to seek redress or demand transparency. Affected populations often lack access to information about land acquisition terms, compensation packages, or environmental remediation plans. As a result, local grievances are channelled into sporadic protests, petitions, or litigation, which have limited effectiveness due to institutional weakness and elite collusion.

In both countries, elite capture and institutional weakness interact with China's development financing model to constrain the space for democratic participation and environmental justice. As Paendong (2020) observes in the context of Indonesia's high-speed rail project under the BRI, land acquisition often involves coercion, legal ambiguity, and fragmented governance—factors that amplify public distrust in both local authorities and Chinese investors. He argues that the impact of the BRI in Indonesia is acutely felt through railways that connect coal-fired power plants, noting:

> The railway, China's landmark BRI project in Indonesia, has failed to account for its economic and social impacts, [given that] the project has turned into a nightmare, resulting in forced evictions, flooded roads, damaged houses and farmland, mass protests, and massive budget overruns—not to mention violations of at least six Indonesian laws. Despite an original May 2019 completion deadline, the Jakarta–Bandung High-Speed Rail project is still going nowhere. (Paendong 2020: 2)

In Zimbabwe, formal institutions responsible for oversight—such as environmental agencies and parliamentary committees—are under-resourced and politically compromised, further reducing checks and balances on infrastructure development (Chingono 2022). Moreover, BRI projects are embedded in longer-term governance trends that prioritise project delivery over accountability. The emphasis on speed, scale, and strategic symbolism tends to marginalise slower, more deliberative forms of governance such as community consultation and environmental review. This approach is further exacerbated by recipient governments' strategic alignment with China, which often entails adopting Chinese-style development models that prioritise infrastructural visibility over inclusive planning.

From a governmentality perspective, these risks are not incidental—they are systemic outcomes of the rationalities and institutional logics embedded in the BRI. By governing through commerce, diplomacy, and security, China reshapes national development agendas in ways that align with its geopolitical interests but undermine local sustainability. What appears as partnership is often a form of soft rule, exercised through norms, dependencies, and institutional co-option rather than formal coercion. These dynamics also suggest a recursive relationship between host-state policy and Chinese influence. For instance, the weakening of environmental regulations in Indonesia was not imposed by China but facilitated by a domestic governance environment increasingly aligned with China's project-oriented logic. Similarly, Zimbabwe's post-2017 pivot towards infrastructure-driven diplomacy reflects internal political incentives to secure Chinese support as a counterweight to Western scrutiny.

In short, BRI coal projects in Indonesia and Zimbabwe do not merely reveal project-level risks; rather, they expose deeper structural vulnerabilities in how development is conceptualised and implemented within recipient states. These vulnerabilities are rooted in a model that privileges elite negotiation, regulatory streamlining, and symbolic infrastructure delivery—often at the expense of inclusive planning and democratic accountability. As a result, the voices of local communities are systematically marginalised, and the projects generate long-term challenges for environmental sustainability, social equity, and public health. This critique resonates with broader concerns regarding the strategic incoherence and politicisation of the BRI itself. Minxin Pei, Professor of Government at Claremont McKenna College, argues that "the BRI in Africa does not make much sense, at least in its original aims. But because Xi put his personal imprimatur on it, for years it became a grab-bag. So, if you want to raise money for something, you slapped a BRI label on it" (Wilson 2020: 1). Pei's observation underscores how the BRI has often been deployed not as a cohesive development strategy, but as a flexible branding mechanism used to legitimise disparate projects under a unified geopolitical narrative. Hence, the challenges observed in Indonesia and Zimbabwe are not anomalies but rather manifestations of a broader pattern embedded within the logics of polylateral governance and strategic ambiguity that define the BRI's global expansion.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of coal-powered electricity projects in Indonesia and Zimbabwe provides insight into the complex dynamics underpinning China's BRI in the Global South. By focusing on the Java-7 power plant in Indonesia and the Hwange Thermal Power Station in Zimbabwe, the study identifies patterns of influence that transcend the rhetoric of development and modernisation typically associated with the BRI. While Chinese and host-state narratives frame these projects as "win-win" cooperation to accelerate energy access and economic growth, the evidence points to a more ambivalent reality. Both countries have received much-needed energy infrastructure through the BRI, but the costs—economic, environmental, and social—have been disproportionately borne by vulnerable populations. The very model of infrastructure-for-resources deals, while enabling rapid project delivery, also facilitates regulatory displacement, erodes local accountability, and entrenches foreign commercial control over strategic sectors.

The findings underscore that China's development strategy in the energy sector is fundamentally business-oriented. Despite varying degrees of bilateral engagement, China's approach reflects a one-size-fits-all model of infrastructure delivery—prioritising speed, cost-efficiency, and elite coordination over local adaptation, participatory planning, and environmental safeguards. While Chinese investment is tailored to suit political contexts—such as tighter regulation in Indonesia or political centralisation in Zimbabwe—the underlying logic of commercial self-interest and geopolitical positioning remains consistent.

Through the lens of governmentality, it can be seen that the BRI operates as more than an economic development initiative. It is a mode of indirect governance that deploys infrastructure as a vehicle for guiding host-country behaviour, institutional reforms, and policy alignment. China achieves this not through direct coercion but through normative influence, financial incentives, and project-based diplomacy. As Foucault (1991) emphasised, the "conduct of conduct" becomes a key tool for shaping the choices of others without overt domination. In this sense, BRI projects embed Chinese rationalities into national development agendas under the guise of technical assistance and mutual benefit.

Moreover, the deployment of a polylateral strategy—involving Chinese state-owned enterprises, policy banks, contractors, and diplomatic channels—creates a multi-layered apparatus of influence. This approach enables China to extend control without assuming formal responsibility, insulating itself from criticism while channelling profits and political leverage through a closed-loop network. Recipient governments, in turn, often function as intermediaries rather than autonomous planners, prioritising regime stability, elite interests, or foreign exchange inflows over the welfare of local communities. This model has produced uneven outcomes. While the projects have contributed to energy access and industrial development, they have also triggered forced displacement, environmental degradation, and public health crises, particularly among marginalised rural populations. In addition, both Indonesia and Zimbabwe are currently experiencing difficulties in generating sufficient revenue to service their infrastructure-related debts. As of 2022, Indonesia's debt to China stood at approximately USD20.225 billion (Rakhmat and Purnama 2023), while Zimbabwe's debt amounted to around USD2.000 billion as of 2024 (*newZWire* 2024). These outcomes also underscore the structural vulnerabilities of energy development in postcolonial states, where institutional fragility, elite brokerage, and asymmetrical financing terms converge. The BRI's infrastructure of influence capitalises on these conditions to entrench Chinese interests in enduring physical, financial, and political forms. These dynamics raise critical normative and policy questions about the future of South–South cooperation, environmental justice, and the pursuit of inclusive development.

For Indonesia and Zimbabwe, the challenge moving forward is to reclaim greater policy autonomy and developmental ownership. This requires strengthening environmental regulation, improving transparency in procurement, expanding public consultation mechanisms, and renegotiating debt and resource agreements where possible. Civil society must be empowered to monitor project implementation, and regional institutions—such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union—must advocate for more equitable terms in South–South infrastructure diplomacy. At the global level, the findings caution against uncritical enthusiasm for BRI financing as a solution to infrastructure deficits in the Global South. While Chinese capital offers alternatives to Western financing models, its implementation raises new forms of dependency and governance risks. As the climate crisis intensifies and just transitions become imperative, countries must ensure that energy investments align not only with growth targets but also with human rights, ecological sustainability, and intergenerational equity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

NOTES

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