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RECONFIGURING ASIA-AFRICA CONNECTIVITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND INDIA'S SAGAR STRATEGY

Dr. Muhammad Naveed Ul Hasan Shah[1], Ibrahim Ahmad Mian[*2], Zahid Ullah Khan[3]

[1]*Assistant Professor Department of Political Science & IR, University of Central Punjab, Lahore*
[*2,3]*MPhil Political Science, Department of Governance, Politics and Public Policy, Abasyn University Peshawar*

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Corresponding Author: *
Ibrahim Ahmad Mian

Abstract
The transformation of global geopolitics and the rise of multi-vector regionalism have brought Asia Africa connectivity to the centre of strategic competition and cooperation. This paper offers a comparative analysis of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) strategy, assessing how each framework remaps maritime and continental linkages between Asia and Africa. Drawing on international political economy and regionalism literatures, the study conceptualizes connectivity as both an economic public good and a site of geostrategic contestation. Using a qualitative comparative case-study design, it synthesizes official documents, policy statements, project data, and peer-reviewed literature to evaluate the institutional architectures, financing modalities, and normative claims underpinning BRI and SAGAR, and their downstream impacts on African coastal states. Findings indicate that the BRI characterized by large state-led finance, integrated land-sea corridors, and deep infrastructure investments offers scale and speed but also exposes recipient states to debt and governance risks. By contrast, SAGAR foregrounds maritime security, capacity building, and 'soft' connectivity through localized projects and multilateral maritime cooperation; it offers lower financial scale but higher political acceptability in some African littoral states. The comparative analysis reveals complementarities as well as friction: where BRI's material depth could connect continental corridors, SAGAR's maritime diplomacy can facilitate port governance and coastal resilience. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for African states, India, and China to pursue interoperability, debt-sensitive financing, and inclusive governance mechanisms that reconcile scale with sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Connectivity has moved from technocratic development discourse to the strategic foreground of international relations. Infrastructure ports, corridors, pipelines, digital links now functions as a dual instrument: an enabler of commerce and a mechanism for influence (Flint, 2019). This duality is particularly salient for Asia Africa ties, where competing visions of regional integration and maritime order intersect. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has redefined transcontinental infrastructure by mobilizing large-scale state-led investments across land and sea corridors, while India's SAGAR initiative frames maritime engagement through security cooperation, capacity building, and targeted development assistance (Schulhof, 2022; Sciences Po Observatory, 2019). Understanding the comparative strengths and limitations of these approaches is essential for African littoral states that must navigate offers of connectivity while managing debt, sovereignty, and environmental risk.

Why a Comparative Analysis Matters Now

Three contemporaneous trends make a comparative study urgent. First, BRI's rapid expansion into African ports and hinterlands has significantly altered trade routes and logistics geographies; its large-scale finance and project integration promise rapid connectivity but raise questions about debt sustainability and local governance (Atkins, 2023; Rolland, 2017). Second, India's SAGAR originally articulated as "Security and Growth for All in the Region" has evolved into a broader maritime vision combining naval diplomacy with development partnerships, and it is increasingly pitched to African and island states as an alternative model emphasizing capacity-building and norms (Sciences Po Observatory, 2019; IMPRI, 2025). Third, African responses to external connectivity initiatives are heterogeneous: some states welcome deep BRI investment for industrialization, others prefer smaller, governance-sensitive Indian engagements; many seek interoperability rather than binary choices (Kodzi, 2018). Comparative analysis helps map these choices and the institutional conditions under which connectivity produces sustainable development rather than dependency.

Conceptualizing Connectivity

This study conceptualizes connectivity as a layered phenomenon. At its most optimistic, connectivity functions as a public or club good producing network externalities lower trade costs, integrated value chains, and regional spillovers. In practice, connectivity decisions are embedded in power asymmetries that make them contested goods: actors with differential finance, technology, and diplomatic leverage can shape rules of access, standards, and governance (Kahler, 2013; Scholvin & Wiß, 2020). BRI's state-led financing model can deliver contiguous corridors across borders but may lock recipient economies into creditor relationships; SAGAR's emphasis on maritime governance and capacity may produce durable institutional gains but lacks the same capital intensity. Hence, the empirical question is not simply which approach is 'better' but under what conditions each yields inclusive, sustainable connectivity.

In the twenty-first century, connectivity has emerged as a defining feature of international politics, shaping global and regional power structures through networks of trade, infrastructure, and digital exchange (Kahler, 2013). The reconfiguration of Asia–Africa linkages once peripheral in the Cold War era has now become central to the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific and Afro-Asian maritime domain, driven largely by the transformative impact of China's *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)* and India's *Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)* strategy. Both frameworks reflect a broader contest over influence, legitimacy, and leadership in a rapidly evolving multipolar order (Narine, 2019). As global governance becomes increasingly fragmented, regional connectivity projects have transformed into instruments of strategic competition and diplomatic engagement (Scholvin & Wiß, 2020).

China's BRI, launched in 2013, is arguably the most ambitious infrastructure and development initiative in contemporary history, encompassing more than sixty countries across Asia, Europe, and Africa. It aims to promote economic integration through trade corridors, energy pipelines, and digital networks while simultaneously reinforcing China's global leadership (Rolland, 2017). The *Maritime Silk Road*, a key component of the BRI, links Chinese ports with African coastal states through critical nodes such as Gwadar, Mombasa, and Djibouti. These corridors not only facilitate commerce but also serve strategic purposes enhancing China's naval reach and securing access to vital sea lanes (Zhao, 2020).

In contrast, India's SAGAR framework, introduced in 2015, is a vision of maritime cooperation emphasizing security, inclusivity, and sustainability. Rather than focusing on large-scale financing, SAGAR seeks to strengthen institutional partnerships, build capacity among littoral states, and ensure freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean Region (Pant & Saha, 2019). It represents India's attempt to project itself as a responsible stakeholder and a regional stabilizer, particularly in the context of increasing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2021). While China's BRI is underpinned by state-capitalist financing and long-term strategic investments, India's SAGAR is guided by cooperative security norms and the promotion of a rules-based maritime order (Mukherjee, 2021).

The growing intersection between these two frameworks has intensified debates about competitive connectivity a phenomenon where infrastructure, trade, and digital projects become tools for strategic positioning rather than purely economic development (Panda, 2021). Africa, with its immense natural resources and strategic maritime chokepoints, has emerged as a key arena for this rivalry. China's BRI has financed massive projects such as the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway and Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, reshaping continental trade dynamics (Brautigam, 2020). India, through SAGAR and the *Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)*, has sought to offer an alternative model emphasizing transparency, inclusivity, and local capacity-building, particularly in Eastern Africa and island nations (Scott, 2021).

The existing literature suggests that both initiatives are part of broader efforts to institutionalize regional order through infrastructure-led diplomacy. However, most comparative studies have treated them in isolation, focusing either on BRI's financial implications or SAGAR's maritime security aspect (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018; Chaudhuri, 2020). What remains underexplored is how these frameworks interact whether through competition, complementarity, or coexistence and what implications this interaction holds for regional governance, smaller states' autonomy, and sustainable development across Asia and Africa.

This article fills that gap by offering a comparative, integrative analysis of the BRI and SAGAR frameworks, contextualized within the theoretical lens of *connectivity politics* and *international political economy*. The central argument posits that Asia–Africa connectivity is not merely a function of economic geography but a reflection of power diffusion and regional reordering in the multipolar age (Dömsö & Cooper, 2018). By examining the BRI and SAGAR as competing yet occasionally converging visions of connectivity, the study demonstrates how infrastructure projects, trade routes, and maritime engagements become arenas for strategic bargaining and coalition-building.

The research design adopts a qualitative comparative approach, relying on document analysis, policy papers, and secondary data from international organizations and academic sources. It situates BRI and SAGAR within broader debates on *regionalism*, *middle-power diplomacy*, and *geoeconomic strategy*. The analysis is structured around three interrelated questions:

1. How do BRI and SAGAR conceptualize connectivity as a strategic instrument?
2. To what extent do their economic and security dimensions overlap or diverge across Asia and Africa?
3. What are the implications of their interaction for multipolarity and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific and African contexts?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to advance the understanding of connectivity as both a cooperative and competitive process. It challenges the binary interpretation of BRI as expansionist and SAGAR as defensive, proposing instead that both frameworks embody adaptive regionalism a form of strategic engagement where states balance rivalry and cooperation to sustain autonomy (Khanna, 2022). By mapping their intersections, this research contributes to theoretical debates on geoeconomic regionalism, offers empirical insights into the Asia–Africa maritime interface, and sheds light on the emerging architecture of multipolar connectivity.

Ultimately, the analysis underscores that the future of Asia–Africa relations will be shaped not by unilateral dominance but by the negotiation of connectivity norms, where development, diplomacy, and security intersect. The evolving interplay between BRI and SAGAR represents a microcosm of the larger struggle for influence in a multipolar world one where infrastructure has become diplomacy, and connectivity, the currency of power (Singh, 2022).

Theoretical Framework: Connectivity and Regionalism in a Multipolar World

This article adopts a multi-theoretical lens that draws upon International Political Economy (IPE), Regionalism Theory, and the concept of Strategic Connectivity to analyze how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) are shaping Asia–Africa relations. The framework recognizes connectivity not merely as a physical or economic process but as a deeply political and strategic phenomenon, embedded in power relations, institutional design, and regional hierarchies (Kahler, 2013; Scholvin & Wiß, 2020).

Connectivity as a Strategic Instrument in International Political Economy

Within the IPE tradition, connectivity is viewed as a mechanism for states to enhance influence, shape trade flows, and institutionalize dependence (Baldwin, 2016). Infrastructure networks, financial corridors, and digital routes serve as structural enablers of geopolitical leverage. The BRI, in particular, exemplifies what Nye (2020) calls "economic statecraft" the strategic use of economic tools to achieve political objectives. Through state-owned enterprises, concessional loans, and long-term development financing, China has embedded connectivity within its foreign policy framework, aligning it with its dual circulation model and its aspiration to reconfigure global supply chains (Rolland, 2017).

In contrast, India's SAGAR draws from a liberal-institutionalist tradition, emphasizing cooperation, transparency, and collective security (Pant & Saha, 2019). Rather than using capital as leverage, SAGAR relies on normative diplomacy and coalition-building to promote inclusive regional governance. From an IPE perspective, the two initiatives illustrate competing approaches to global economic governance: China's hierarchical integration versus India's networked pluralism (Mukherjee, 2021).

This theoretical distinction underscores the central hypothesis that connectivity functions as both a developmental instrument and a geopolitical strategy, serving to redefine economic dependencies and strategic alignments in the Indo-Pacific and Africa (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018).

New Regionalism and the Logic of Multipolar Connectivity

The theory of New Regionalism, emerging in the post–Cold War era, provides a useful framework for understanding the political economy of connectivity in a fragmented world order (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). Unlike classical regionalism, which was driven by formal institutions, new regionalism emphasizes informal, multidimensional, and overlapping networks that involve both state and non-state actors. Connectivity projects such as BRI and SAGAR exemplify this trend they function not through binding treaties but through flexible alignments, soft institutions, and infrastructure diplomacy (Narine, 2019).

In the context of Asia–Africa relations, new regionalism helps explain why both China and India engage in multi-layered governance structures that combine economic corridors, maritime security partnerships, and regional dialogues. The BRI operates as a "hub-and-spoke" model centered on China, while SAGAR reflects a polycentric configuration of regional cooperation, engaging multiple small and middle powers (Dömsö & Cooper, 2018).

This theoretical orientation also highlights the multipolar nature of connectivity politics. Rather than unipolar domination, the emerging order is characterized by strategic pluralism, where regional actors diversify their partnerships to maximize autonomy and avoid dependence on any single great power (Panda, 2021). In this sense, both BRI and SAGAR can be viewed as strategic hedging mechanisms China seeks to secure its western and maritime peripheries, while India seeks to prevent strategic encirclement and maintain its influence in the Indian Ocean Region (Scott, 2021).

Connectivity, Power, and Regional Order

Connectivity also intersects with theories of power transition and regional order-building. As power diffuses across the global system, the contest over connectivity reflects deeper structural shifts toward multipolarity. According to Acharya (2017), regional order in Asia is increasingly "multiplex," characterized by multiple centers of authority and overlapping spheres of influence. Within this framework, the BRI represents an attempt to institutionalize a Sino-centric regional order, while SAGAR seeks to preserve pluralistic maritime governance (Brewster, 2021).

This contest is not purely material but also ideational and normative. China's discourse of a "community of shared destiny" projects BRI as a universalist model for global development, whereas India's SAGAR emphasizes "security and growth for all," reflecting an inclusive and non-hegemonic vision (Mukherjee, 2021). Both narratives seek legitimacy and moral authority in the eyes of partner states, particularly in Africa, where development and sovereignty sensitivities remain high (Brautigam, 2020).

By linking connectivity with legitimacy, the theoretical framework integrates elements of constructivism, recognizing that norms, values, and discourse play a crucial role in shaping states' preferences and alignments (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The BRI's technocratic narrative of "win-win cooperation" contrasts sharply with SAGAR's emphasis on transparency and mutual trust, illustrating how soft power and narrative framing influence the politics of infrastructure (Khanna, 2022).

Connectivity as Negotiated Order

Finally, this framework views connectivity as a negotiated order, reflecting ongoing bargaining between global, regional, and local actors. Africa's increasing engagement with both BRI and SAGAR illustrates how smaller states use connectivity initiatives to pursue strategic diversification and developmental autonomy (Zhao, 2020). Rather than passive recipients of aid or investment, these states actively mediate between competing powers, aligning projects with domestic agendas and regional frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Thus, the analytical framework of this study emphasizes agency within asymmetry the idea that even within unequal power relations, regional actors retain significant capacity to shape outcomes (Brautigam, 2020). Connectivity, therefore, is neither inherently coercive nor purely cooperative; it is contested space, where infrastructure, finance, and diplomacy converge to produce new hierarchies and opportunities.

By synthesizing perspectives from international political economy, new regionalism, and constructivism, this framework situates the BRI and SAGAR as dynamic processes through which regional order is negotiated in the Asia–Africa context. It provides a lens for understanding how connectivity operates simultaneously as a tool of power projection, a medium of cooperation, and a site of normative contestation. This theoretical grounding enables the subsequent analysis to move beyond descriptive comparisons, offering deeper insights into the structural logic of competitive and cooperative connectivity in a multipolar world.

The Empirical Puzzle and Research Gap

Scholarship on BRI is extensive examining political economy, debt diplomacy, and strategic implications (Flint, 2019; Atkins, 2023) while research on SAGAR is comparatively nascent and often dispersed across policy commentaries and security studies (Sciences Po Observatory, 2019; IMPRI, 2025). Few studies systematically compare the two frameworks in the Asia Africa corridor or analyze how their institutional architectures translate into outcomes for African port governance, logistics integration, and coastal resilience. This gap is consequential: African policymakers confront competing offers that combine finance, security, and governance conditionalities, yet lack comparative guidance on long-term trade-offs.

Literature Review

1. Connectivity as a Strategic Concept

Connectivity has evolved from a developmentalist notion into a strategic concept central to global governance, trade, and regional politics. In the post Cold War era, globalization was viewed as an integrating process that reduced barriers to trade and communication (Kahler, 2013). However, in the 21st century, connectivity is increasingly interpreted through a geoeconomic lens as both an enabler of interdependence and a source of strategic leverage (Scholvin & Wiß, 2020). The rise of mega-regional projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's SAGAR strategy demonstrates how states pursue influence by financing and structuring the physical, digital, and institutional links that bind regions.

Scholars argue that infrastructure is not only a means of economic modernization but also a geopolitical instrument for constructing zones of dependence and influence (Sørensen, 2018). Kahler (2013) noted that regionalism reflects competing visions of order, where states use connectivity to consolidate influence and manage asymmetry. Similarly, Blackwill and Harris (2016) describe geoeconomics as the "use of economic tools to achieve geopolitical objectives," emphasizing that connectivity initiatives can create both mutual benefit and strategic hierarchy.

In this context, Asia Africa connectivity spanning the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and East African coast has become a testbed of competing connectivity models. China's BRI emphasizes corridor-based integration backed by state financing and global industrial capacity, whereas India's SAGAR initiative focuses on maritime governance, security cooperation, and sustainable development. These approaches reflect differing state capacities, strategic cultures, and normative commitments.

The Belt and Road Initiative: Vision, Expansion, and Critique

Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become China's flagship global strategy, seeking to enhance policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges across more than 140 countries (Flint, 2019). Scholars interpret the BRI through multiple lenses: as a developmental project (Summers, 2016), a geopolitical strategy (Rolland, 2017), and a legitimacy tool for China's domestic and international positioning (Zeng, 2019).

Economically, the BRI leverages China's excess industrial capacity and financial reserves to build ports, railways, and energy corridors (Huang, 2016). Politically, it reflects Beijing's aspiration to shape global norms and institutions of development finance (Cai, 2020). In Africa, China's footprint has expanded through large-scale projects such as the Mombasa Nairobi Railway, Bagamoyo Port in Tanzania, and Djibouti Free Trade Zone (Atkins, 2023). These projects symbolize Beijing's capacity for rapid delivery and tangible impact, but they also raise questions about debt sustainability, transparency, and governance (Hurley et al., 2018).

Critics highlight that while the BRI contributes to connectivity and industrialization, it may reinforce dependency and asymmetry. Debt traps and elite capture undermine governance in vulnerable economies (Brautigam, 2020). Others, however, caution against overgeneralization, arguing that debt crises are often rooted in local mismanagement rather than Chinese predation (Jones & Zeng, 2019). BRI's adaptability and institutional flexibility its willingness to renegotiate loans or co-finance with multilateral lenders show that it is not a monolithic instrument but a negotiated process (Summers, 2016).

Thus, in the Asia Africa context, BRI represents a state-capital nexus where infrastructure diplomacy serves both developmental and strategic purposes. The initiative strengthens China's role as a rule-shaper in global governance but also exposes Beijing to reputational and financial risks when projects fail to deliver inclusive outcomes.

India's SAGAR Strategy: Maritime Governance and Normative Diplomacy

In contrast, India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) strategy, introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, reflects New Delhi's effort to redefine its role as a responsible maritime stakeholder (Scott, 2020). SAGAR emphasizes inclusive maritime security, disaster relief, capacity building, and economic cooperation. It complements India's Act East and Neighbourhood First policies by extending its maritime engagement to the Indian Ocean littorals and Africa's eastern coast.

While BRI relies on large-scale physical infrastructure and financing, SAGAR operates through multilateralism, partnerships, and maritime diplomacy. It has been operationalized through initiatives like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the India Africa Forum Summit, and cooperative ventures in the Blue Economy (Singh, 2021). SAGAR's strength lies in promoting rule-based connectivity, transparency, and resilience.

Scholars argue that India's maritime approach is less about material dominance and more about normative leadership (Pant & Saha, 2019). It aligns with the concept of middle-power diplomacy, where states lacking global-scale resources compensate through multilateral coalition-building and niche leadership (Narine, 2019). However, SAGAR faces challenges of limited financial capacity, bureaucratic inertia, and inconsistent implementation. Without a dedicated financing arm comparable to China's Exim Bank or AIIB, SAGAR relies on ad hoc partnerships and grants, which restricts scalability (Scott, 2020).

Despite these limitations, India's approach appeals to African and small island states wary of dependency on Chinese loans. Its emphasis on shared security, digital cooperation, and maritime sustainability positions SAGAR as a softer but credible alternative model of connectivity.

Asia-Africa Maritime Space: Intersection of BRI and SAGAR

The Indian Ocean and Africa's eastern seaboard have become arenas of overlapping engagement. China's BRI seeks to secure maritime chokepoints and supply lines linking the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the Western Indian Ocean, while India's SAGAR focuses on maintaining freedom of navigation and regional stability (Kapoor, 2022). The interplay of these initiatives produces both competitive and complementary outcomes.

Empirical studies show that some African states, such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Djibouti, actively engage both China and India, pursuing connectivity pluralism to maximize benefits (Kodzi, 2018). This reflects what Acharya (2014) calls "regionalism from below" a process driven by local agency rather than external imposition. Connectivity, therefore, becomes an arena of negotiation rather than a zero-sum contest.

China's port-building projects enhance logistical capacity but can lead to overconcentration of debt in a few states (Hurley et al., 2018). India's smaller-scale projects such as coastal surveillance systems and vocational maritime training create local ownership but lack strategic depth. Thus, both models have structural limitations: BRI faces issues of governance and transparency, while SAGAR struggles with resource constraints and institutional coherence (Flint, 2019; Scott, 2020).

Theoretical Framework: Connectivity, Regionalism, and Hedging

This study draws theoretically on international political economy, regionalism theory, and hedging behavior to explain how connectivity functions in a multipolar order. Kahler (2013) conceptualized regionalism as both cooperative and competitive reflecting the balance between market-driven integration and state-centric strategic design. Similarly, Scholvin and Wiß (2020) frame connectivity as "infrastructure embedded in strategic bargaining," where projects represent both cooperation and rivalry.

Applying these perspectives, BRI exemplifies hierarchical regionalism, where a major power institutionalizes asymmetric interdependence, while SAGAR represents horizontal regionalism, emphasizing shared governance and inclusivity. Narine (2019) extends this to middle-power diplomacy, suggesting that smaller states often hedge by engaging with multiple frameworks to preserve autonomy.

From a hedging theory standpoint, African and Indian Ocean states participate in both BRI and SAGAR to balance material gain and strategic autonomy (Kuik, 2020). This aligns with Acharya's (2014) argument that regionalism in the Global South is "adaptive and pragmatic," privileging flexibility over rigid alignment.

In sum, the theoretical synthesis situates Asia Africa connectivity within the political economy of infrastructure and the strategic logic of multipolar hedging, emphasizing that connectivity outcomes depend on how financial, institutional, and normative logics interact.

Literature Gap and Analytical Contribution

While extensive research exists on China's BRI and India's maritime diplomacy, comparative scholarship linking these initiatives within the Asia Africa framework remains limited. Most existing studies analyze them separately: BRI through macroeconomic or geopolitical lenses (Flint, 2019; Rolland, 2017), and SAGAR through regional security or policy discourse (Scott, 2020; Singh, 2021). Few systematically examine their interplay, particularly in terms of institutional architecture, governance norms, and African agency.

This paper fills that gap by offering a comparative and integrative framework, combining geopolitical, economic, and normative dimensions. It contributes three innovations:

1. **Conceptual:** It situates connectivity as a strategic instrument in a multipolar world.

2. **Empirical:** It compares financing, governance, and implementation models of BRI and SAGAR in African maritime contexts.

3. **Normative:** It explores how smaller states exercise agency through selective

engagement, plural participation, and rule-based negotiation.

Thus, the literature review positions the study within ongoing debates on geoeconomics, multipolarity, and South South cooperation, and establishes the analytical foundation for the subsequent results and discussion.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and comparative research design to examine how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) strategy influence Asia Africa connectivity in the emerging multipolar order. The research is grounded in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, emphasizing how states construct meanings, narratives, and policies around connectivity, power, and regional cooperation.

Data will be collected from secondary sources, including academic journals, policy reports, government documents, speeches, and think-tank publications from both Asian and African perspectives. Major sources include institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), and African Union Commission.

The analysis will use a comparative thematic approach, identifying patterns, divergences, and intersections in the strategic, economic, and normative dimensions of BRI and SAGAR. A content analysis technique will be applied to evaluate the language, framing, and policy orientation of official and academic texts.

The study will also incorporate insights from international political economy and regionalism theory, particularly focusing on connectivity as a tool of power projection and institutional bargaining (Kahler, 2013; Scholvin & Wiß, 2020). By situating BRI and SAGAR within broader debates on multipolarity, the research will trace how infrastructure, trade corridors, and maritime linkages serve as both developmental mechanisms and geopolitical instruments.

The sampling technique will be purposive, selecting key case studies and documents that best represent each initiative's objectives and regional impact such as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). Data interpretation will follow qualitative content analysis, using inductive reasoning to derive conceptual and empirical insights. This methodological framework ensures depth, contextual understanding, and analytical rigor, allowing the research to explain not only what BRI and SAGAR are achieving but also how and why they are redefining Asia Africa connectivity in competing ways.

Analysis and Discussion

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) represent two distinct yet overlapping visions of connectivity that are reshaping the geopolitical and geo-economic landscape between Asia and Africa. Both initiatives aim to expand maritime, economic, and infrastructural linkages, yet they differ fundamentally in scale, strategic intent, and institutional design.

From a structural perspective, BRI operates as a transcontinental grand strategy that integrates land and maritime routes to enhance trade, resource access, and geopolitical influence. Its flagship corridors such as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Maritime Silk Road symbolize China's ambition to institutionalize economic interdependence and assert leadership in global governance (Rolland, 2017). Conversely, India's SAGAR adopts a regional security-oriented approach, promoting cooperative maritime engagement, sustainable development, and blue economy partnerships across the Indian Ocean littoral states (Pant & Saha, 2019).

While BRI embodies a state-driven and capital-intensive model, SAGAR emphasizes inclusivity and multilateral coordination, aligning with India's democratic and normative diplomacy. However, both initiatives share a common objective: to redefine regional influence through infrastructure diplomacy and to secure strategic sea lanes critical to global commerce.

In Africa, China's BRI has facilitated major investments in ports, railways, and energy sectors in Kenya, Djibouti, and Tanzania, strengthening Beijing's economic foothold and maritime logistics network (Zhao, 2020). India, through SAGAR and its Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), has increased engagement with African coastal nations, promoting capacity-building, disaster management, and maritime security cooperation (Scott, 2021). These efforts represent a shift toward competitive connectivity, where both powers seek legitimacy and trust through development-oriented diplomacy.

The comparative analysis reveals that while China's BRI leverages economic inducement and infrastructure financing, India's SAGAR relies on strategic partnerships and soft-power engagement. This divergence highlights two models of regionalism authoritative integration versus consensual cooperation each carrying different implications for smaller states. Moreover, both frameworks contribute to an emerging multipolar maritime order in which economic corridors double as instruments of influence and deterrence.

For Asia Africa relations, the interplay between BRI and SAGAR signifies a dual-track connectivity paradigm one grounded in financial and logistical power, the other in strategic reassurance and institutional cooperation. The challenge for regional stability lies in balancing these competing visions to ensure that connectivity fosters mutual development rather than exclusive dominance. Ultimately, sustainable connectivity in the Asia Africa context will depend on how both China and India reconcile their ambitions within a cooperative regional governance framework (Brewster, 2021). The interplay between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the SAGAR framework also reveals a deeper layer of strategic pluralism in the emerging Indo-Pacific and Africa order. Both China and India are seeking to anchor their regional identities through connectivity, yet their approaches are informed by contrasting ideational frameworks and power trajectories. China's BRI is primarily hierarchical, structured around Beijing's financial capacity, state-owned enterprises, and bilateral agreements that consolidate dependence through debt diplomacy and resource access (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). India's SAGAR, on the other hand, is network-based, privileging partnerships, collective security, and capacity-building among equal stakeholders (Chaudhuri, 2020). These contrasting modes reflect divergent philosophies of engagement China's infrastructural realism versus India's cooperative pragmatism each producing different political and developmental outcomes across Asia and Africa.

African agency has increasingly become a defining variable in how both frameworks evolve. Many African nations, while eager for investment and connectivity, are demonstrating growing caution regarding China's financial terms and political conditionalities (Brautigam, 2020). Consequently, several states, such as Kenya and Ethiopia, have sought to diversify partnerships by engaging with India's SAGAR and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. This diversification indicates a subtle yet significant shift toward multipolar connectivity, where smaller states exercise strategic autonomy by selectively engaging with multiple powers rather than aligning with a single hegemonic actor (Panda, 2021).

Conclusion

Furthermore, the competition between BRI and SAGAR is not merely material it is also discursive and normative. China promotes the BRI as a model of "shared destiny" and "win-win cooperation," while India frames SAGAR as a moral alternative emphasizing inclusivity, transparency, and respect for sovereignty. This contestation over narrative legitimacy shapes regional alignments and institutional responses, influencing how multilateral platforms such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and African Union (AU) integrate connectivity projects into their development agendas. In this multipolar setting, maritime connectivity has emerged as a central theatre of competition and cooperation. Ports like Gwadar, Chabahar, and Mombasa have become geoeconomic nodes linking Asia to Africa, where the depth of Chinese and Indian involvement reflects broader strategic ambitions. The challenge lies in ensuring that connectivity remains development-oriented rather than dominance-driven. Regional actors such as ASEAN and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) can serve as mediators in aligning overlapping frameworks, promoting synergistic regionalism that leverages both China's capital and India's cooperative diplomacy.

Ultimately, the Asia Africa connectivity landscape represents a test case for the future of global governance in a multipolar era. Whether the BRI and SAGAR evolve toward rivalry or complementarity will determine not only the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific but also the prospects for sustainable development, equitable trade, and inclusive growth across two of the world's most dynamic regions.

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