Fragmented Power

The Reception of China's Foreign Policy Strategies in Sri Lanka

Rosendal Ebbesen, Tabita

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Abstract:

This dissertation proposes a theory concerning China's "Fragmented Power" in its foreign policy pursuits by analyzing the reception of the "Belt and Road" Initiative in Sri Lanka. The initiative has sparked intense debates and counteractions on the global stage and has become synonymous with Xi Jinping's assertive approach to foreign policy. However, many aspects of the initiative's goals, implementation, and host country reception have remained underexplored in the academic literature. Through four interrelated and mutually complementary articles, as well as an introductory chapter that ties these efforts together, this dissertation offers novel insights into China's multifaceted foreign policy strategies, actors, practices, and the perceptions of these engagements among Sri Lankans across various societal strata. Article 1 examines China's utilization of Buddhist strategic narratives to facilitate the smooth implementation of the "Belt and Road" Initiative in Sri Lanka, a Buddhist-majority country. Article 2 dives into the case of the Hambantota International Port project, where the interests and efforts of the Chinese Communist Party, Chinese state-owned enterprises, and the Sri Lankan government have converged and diverged in manifold ways. Article 3 illuminates the reception of China's political and economic efforts among Sri Lankans against the backdrop of regional great power competition, highlighting the limitations of China's current strategy. Finally, article 4 analyzes the increased party-to-party relations between the Chinese Communist Party and various Sri Lankan parties, including China's role as a regional "Authoritarian Gravity Center." Together, the dissertation contributes to several important, emerging bodies of scholarship on the linkages between Chinese domestic and foreign policy practices, including the adverse effects that this decentralization can bring, China's increasing use of religious and party diplomacy, the strategic use of narratives, and the importance of contextualized, "bottom-up" analyses showcasing local voices. Consequently, the dissertation also highlights the permeability of China's international engagements and presence – which can be referred to as "Global China" – by presenting insights on host country agency in the face of its "Fragmented Power."

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Cover image by Tabita Rosendal. The image depicts Sri Lanka's Presidential Secretariat across from the Chinese-financed Port City Colombo project, February 2023.

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*To my grandfather, "Moffe" (1936–2023),
for teaching me the importance of our family motto:
"Vi kæmper videre; aldrig gå i stå"
(We keep fighting; never stop moving).*

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Article 2: Rosendal, Tabita. 2025. "Promoting China's Development Model for the Hambantota International Port: Selling Shekou to Sri Lanka," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (March 2025), https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2025.2471523.

Article 3: Rosendal, Tabita. Unpublished manuscript. "Win-win versus the West? Investigating the reception of China's influencing efforts in Sri Lanka."

Article 4: Rosendal, Tabita. Unpublished manuscript. "Learning from China's Authoritarian Playbook: Chinese Party Diplomacy and Autocratization in Sri Lanka."

Note on Chinese Characters

This dissertation utilizes simplified Chinese characters (简体字) followed by the English translation in parentheses, e.g., "一带一路"倡议 ("Belt and Road" Initiative). Due to space considerations, *pinyin* transliteration has been omitted.

Map of Sri Lanka

This image is derived from an open-source United Nations map.

Acknowledgments

Authoring a PhD dissertation can be a solitary endeavor. From creating research questions to writing up empirical findings, the process can be protracted, spanning years of arduous and challenging work. This PhD, however, is the result of collective efforts: From beginning to end, my journey has been graced with the presence of countless inspiring and helpful colleagues, peers, experts, students, and interviewees who have taken the time to engage with me and my work. While presenting an exhaustive list of all the kindhearted and knowledgeable people who have inspired and encouraged me along my path is unfeasible, some contributions must be highlighted.

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Abbreviations

BAC	Buddhist Association of China
BRF	Belt and Road Forum
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CHEC	China Harbor Engineering Company
CMG	China Merchants Group
CMP	China Merchants Ports
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CPSL	Communist Party of Sri Lanka
CSFM	Community of Shared Future for Mankind
EU	European Union
FMPRC	Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
GCI	Global Civilization Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GG	Global Gateway
GSI	Global Security Initiative
HIP	Hambantota International Port
ID-CCP	International Department of the CCP's Central Committee
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JVP	People's Liberation Front
LIO	Liberal International Order
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MSR	21st Century Maritime Silk Road
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPP	National People's Power
PCC	Port City Colombo
PGII	Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment
PRC	People's Republic of China
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
SAGAR	Security and Growth for All in the Region
SARA	State Authority on Religious Affair
SASAC	State Assets Supervision and Administration Commission
SCIO	State Council Information Office
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization

SLCBFA	Sri Lanka-China Buddhist Friendship Association
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLPA	Sri Lanka Ports Authority
SLPP	Sri Lanka People's Front
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
SSC	South-South Cooperation
UFWD	United Front Work Department
UN	United Nations
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNP	United National Party
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. Introduction

By the time my contact from the Hambantota International Port called me, it was late evening. He had been preoccupied at the port but was now coming to meet me at the Shangri-La Hotel in Hambantota. I had been advised to stay at the hotel as it was conveniently located next to the port. However, I had also gathered that it is where most local and foreign officials come to conduct business meetings. Therefore, I had been curious to gauge the hotel's activity level and was surprised to learn I was one of few guests. While waiting for my contact, I enjoyed a scenic sunset view of the Indian Ocean, wondering how this tranquil place could be the center of such international scrutiny and consternation. I had been similarly confounded when I visited the city center – which is that of a small, sleepy fishing village – to talk to locals and former officials over cups of sweet Sri Lankan tea earlier in the day. Aside from traders and workers, the streets were primarily occupied by cows and empty tuk-tuks whose drivers were leisurely fishing or sleeping against nearby trees. This was not precisely the bustling hub of economic activity promised when China began investing in the port, nor was it the "Chinese colony" that international critics would suggest.

When my contact arrived in the outdoor hotel bar, it was dark, and only a few lights illuminated the wicker furniture. As the bar's only patron, I sipped ginger ale and chatted with the young bartender about city and port developments. Soft music played from the loudspeakers, barely drowning out the lapping sounds of the ocean waves. I shook my contact's hand, and we sat down. Before I could say anything, he waved over the bartender and asked him to turn up the music. When the blaring tunes were deafening enough to echo through the darkness, he leaned in conspiratorially and recounted his experiences and frustrations with the port's development. He told me about the Sri Lankan government's shortcomings, the mistakes of the Chinese companies involved, and the immense pressure he was under due to geopolitical competition between China, Western countries like the United States, and regional powers such as India. He shared his annoyance with Western portrayals of Sri Lanka as a hapless victim or bystander at the whims of other countries, expressing anger at the government administrations who

had squandered excellent opportunities for the people to prioritize their short-term gains. Finally, he shared his fears and hopes for the future, including his vision for the port's role in the country's economic development. The two hours we spent together felt like only a moment – albeit a defining one.

Buoyed by his sense of urgency, the sensitivity of our conversation, and his passion for representing the port's development and the country's situation in a nuanced way, I returned to Colombo the next day. On the way, I reflected on the emptiness of the highway, one of the best-maintained and most finished stretches of major roads in Sri Lanka. Built to facilitate the significant volumes of cargo that were envisioned for transportation from Hambantota to Colombo and other cities from the project's inception, it was mostly deserted and littered with elephant tracks. The drive, lasting several hours, gave me ample time to reflect on my research commitment, including my aim to understand Chinese investments in Sri Lanka from a "bottom-up" perspective, the importance of investigating the country's political and economic circumstances, and my dedication to concisely represent the voices of my interviewees through my findings. At the time, I could not have anticipated that my contact from the port would help me gain access to it just a few months later, nor that he would continue to check in with me to inquire about my progress and provide additional updates. I am forever grateful for the countless such interactions that have facilitated this research project and dissertation, and my dedication to shedding light on China's interests and political and economic influence in countries like Sri Lanka is far from over.

This summary chapter (Kappa) introduces and presents the dissertation's aims, findings, and contributions. The first section outlines the developments and research gaps that motivated the dissertation and then presents its overarching research questions. Subsequently, it details the dissertation's key theories and concepts before introducing its overarching theoretical framework. Then, it summarizes its contributions and explains the structure of the remaining summary chapter.

1.1. The Belt, the Road, and Chinese Foreign Policy

Since its inception in 2013, the "一带一路"倡议 ("Belt and Road" Initiative) (BRI) has been viewed as the flagship foreign policy project under Chinese President Xi Jinping's administration (2012–). It has also been conceptualized

as a central tool for the 中国共产党 (Chinese Communist Party) (CCP)[1] to cement the international position of the People's Republic of China (PRC).[2] At its core, the initiative – which comprises the 丝绸之路经济带 (Silk Road Economic Belt) (SREB) and the 21 世纪海上丝绸之路 (21st Century Maritime Silk Road) (MSR) – can be described as a global mega-infrastructure program (Li, 2019). By 2025, it spans between 145 and 149 countries (Nedopil, 2025).[3] From railroads in Ethiopia and Egypt to ports in Pakistan and Peru, the CCP has promoted the importance of adhering to the so-called 中国发展模式 (Chinese development model) (Feng et al., 2019).

The initiative is not only materially but also ideationally omnipresent. From the outset, it has aimed to advance China's interests on the global stage, including through the establishment of the so-called 人类命运共同体 (Community of Shared Future for Mankind) (CSFM) (Li, 2019). The CSFM's creation aims to strengthen China's legitimacy in the international system and position Beijing as a distinct governance axis and leader of an alternative "ingroup" of states (Rolland, 2017; Benabdallah, 2019). The BRI's material and ideational components are, therefore, tightly interlinked. Through its emphasis on providing pragmatic and flexible loans, the BRI has been a cornerstone of China's efforts to win the "hearts and minds" of developing countries (Garlick and Qin, 2023). This is particularly true for countries in the Global South, i.e., countries in the regions of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania.[4] Many of these developing nations have faced challenges in securing

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1 This introductory chapter uses CCP and "the Party" interchangeably for readability.

2 Henceforth, "China" is utilized to emphasize the multifaceted nature of Chinese foreign policy actors.

3 The uncertainty in numbers is due to the opaqueness of BRI Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and the limited and partially contradictory availability and nature of independent information (Nedopil, 2025).

4 The term "Global South" belongs to a family of terms including "Third World" and "Periphery," which denotes (mostly) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized regions outside Europe and North America. The term has geopolitical connotations (Dados and Connell, 2012: 12-13). The term has been criticized as a catchall term to colloquially describe a "broad swath of nations seeking to overhaul the unjust structures of the global economy, hedge their strategic bets, and promote the emergence of a more multipolar system" (Patrick and Huggins, 2023). Others contend that "Global South" remains a relevant and useful construct as an "analytic framework grounded in geopolitics above all else" since it reveals the large number of states lying outside the core of the great power system comprised of the United States, China, Russia, and their core allies. While this core maintains a sense of security, status, and economic opportunity, the remaining states attempt to "catch up" in terms of economic rise and status and remain unaligned to benefit as much as possible from great power competition (Shidore, 2024).

support due to weak governance and investment frameworks and, in some instances, authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian regimes (Faiz, 2019). It is, therefore, unsurprising that the CCP's willingness to provide aid through the BRI where other countries have hesitated, particularly due to human rights violations, has drawn support from different quarters. For example, local actors in developing countries, such as elite politicians and businessmen, have shown keenness to cooperate with China under the BRI to gain access to material and political benefits (Hodzi, 2020; Kuik and Rosli, 2023).

Consequently, the initiative has created ripple effects throughout the global, Western-led system and the Liberal International Order (LIO). From the outset, it has been heavily criticized by Western nations, regional powers such as India and Japan, and various scholars and analysts. The United States (US) and the European Union (EU), in particular, fear that China's assertiveness and influence threaten established global governance and human rights regimes (Clarke, 2017, 2020; Rolland, 2017; Doshi, 2021; Salamatin, 2021). These worries follow decades of anxiety over – and containment efforts of – the "rise of China" on the international stage (Kristof, 1993), resulting in the creation of the "China Threat" narrative and other concepts problematizing the rapid growth of China's economic, military, and political clout (Broomfield, 2003). At the core of these debates are questions related to whether China should be considered a threat or opportunity, a conservative status quo power, or a revisionist state (Callahan, 2005: 702). China has engaged in counter-narratives to mitigate these negative perceptions of its global intentions, such as by outlining its 和平崛起 (peaceful rise) (Ibid) and role as a 王道 (humane authority) (Yan, 2016).

Since the BRI's conception, an increasing number of publications have attempted to evaluate the initiative and its goals. Initially, the primary emphasis was to examine the BRI from a macropolitical perspective, particularly the initiative's role in International Relations (IR) and geopolitical or geoeconomic contestation between China and the US (see, for example, Rolland, 2017; Jones and Zeng, 2019; Doshi, 2021). In recent years, the focus has shifted towards micropolitics. Studies have examined the initiative's effects on particular countries regarding political, economic, and social influences, and many have sought to investigate the agency of local actors in negotiating and contesting specific BRI projects (see, for example, Chen, 2023; Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 2019; Calabrese and Cao, 2020; Kuik and Rosli, 2023). Scholars have also attempted to engage with and make sense of the initiative by framing it in relation to Chinese cultural or historical influences, such as the Tributary System and the concept of 天下 ("All under Heaven") (Zhao, 2018; Feng, 2019). Among Chinese scholars, similar efforts to portray

the BRI in a Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist light have often been motivated by a desire to promote it as a continuation of an imagined history of China's benevolent, harmonious regional and global engagements (Ling, 2019; Liu, 2021).

Nevertheless, due to the initiative's vague formulation, propagandistic promulgation, and the lack of transparency and opacity in policy and project documents, several persistent myths and half-truths continue to mar Xi's purported bid to achieve China's national rejuvenation. Consequently, perceptions of the BRI depend on the eyes of the beholder. From geopolitics to grand strategy, 共赢 (win-win) to a quest for hegemony, "debt trap diplomacy" to development aid, and 南南合作 (South-South Cooperation) (SSC) to "no strings attached," views on the initiative remain divided. In addition, discussions regarding China's political influence and the role of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the execution and governance of BRI projects, particularly concerning whether and how their actions align with China's global objectives, persist among local and international actors.

The dissertation contributes to this emerging field of literature by investigating the BRI's implementation in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a developing South Asian country with a strategic position in the Indian Ocean and India as its closest neighbor. It is also one of the most infamous cases of the perceived economic and political dangers that the BRI poses to countries in the Global South. In 2017, after the Chinese SOE China Merchants Group (CMG) took over the 99-year lease of Hambantota International Port (HIP), Indian analyst Brahma Chellaney argued that the Sri Lankan case was the premier example of Chinese "debt trap diplomacy" under the BRI. This term refers to the initiative's perceived ensnaring of countries in debt traps, which "leaves them vulnerable to China's influence" (Chellaney, 2017). However, as this dissertation will show, the "debt trap diplomacy" narrative – and the example of the HIP – are contested and misleading. While some studies have argued that the project's "debt trap" was the result of domestic policy decisions and facilitated by Western lending and monetary policy rather than Chinese government policies (Jones and Hameiri, 2020), others contend that the port lease deal was "originally a fire sale designed to raise money to deal with larger debt problems" (Brautigam, 2020: 10). That is, the deal was driven by domestic economic incentives as opposed to political gains, aiming to address severe balance of payment issues and improve foreign currency reserves (Moramudali and Panduwawala, 2022; Moramudali and Panduwawala, 2024). In other words, just like the overarching "debt trap" narrative fails to capture the complexity of local actor agency, Hambantota's example does not account for the intricacies of the deal or the motivations of Sri Lankan politicians and

officials. Other BRI projects in the country, such as the Port City Colombo (PCC), have faced similar criticism and remain similarly underexplored in the literature.

"Debt trap" narrative notwithstanding, Sri Lanka is marred by weak governance and investment frameworks, and despite its democratic status, it has been on an increasingly "authoritarian trend" in recent years. On the tailwinds of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sri Lanka has undergone its worst post-independence economic crisis. This resulted in the 2022 *Aragalaya* (lit. struggle) movement against the government, leading to the fall of the powerful Rajapaksa family from grace. Since 2005, the Rajapaksas have retained considerable influence in Sri Lankan politics, even when they were not in power (DeVotta, 2024), and they have "run the government as a family business" (Mashal, 2022). This "familycracy" (Anwar, 2022) includes the presidencies of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015) and his younger brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2019–2022). Before Gotabaya Rajapaksa gave up the presidency and fled the country for the Maldives under pressure from the *Aragalaya*, he appointed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as his successor. Wickremesinghe's presidency (2022–2024) was short-lived and marked by increasingly precarious attempts to balance between China, India, the US, and Japan. Finally, in September 2024, Anura Kumara Dissanayake won the presidential election. Since then, he has worked to restore the economy by engaging in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) debt restructuring process and soliciting investments from all quarters. The IMF bailout comprises a USD 3 billion loan to be disbursed over 48 months (DeVotta, 2024). This situation has created challenges and opportunities for China's interests, which will be further explored in sections 2.3 and 2.3.1. The following section details the dissertation's core problem and theoretical argument.

1.2. Charting China's "Fragmented Power"

From the beginning, this dissertation intended to engage with and investigate the BRI's goals, practices, and outcomes through a non-Western-centric approach. That is not to say that it sought to side with China or defend the CCP's propaganda; instead, it aimed to illuminate whether and how remnants of China's history, ancient culture, and domestic practices influence contemporary foreign policy and the initiative's current implementation. This approach was guided by the assumption that rather than understanding the BRI

in relation to the Tributary System, Confucianism, or Buddhism, even if this is often how it is portrayed by certain Western scholars, politicians, and media, or the CCP and its allies, the initiative should be viewed in light of domestic governance and policymaking practices originating in China's modern history.

This idea was inspired by insights from Lieberthal, Oksenberg, and Lampton, who argued in 1988 and 1992 that China's political system and bureaucracy are characterized by "fragmented authoritarianism," i.e., that decision-making processes emphasize consensus building, resulting in protracted, disjointed, and incremental policy processes (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992). The concept of China's fragmented state capacity, in turn, became the starting point for scholars like Heilmann to analyze the CCP's decentralized decision-making practices. These practices, originating in the Republican Era (1911–1949) with roots dating back to previous dynasties, take the shape of experimental policy reform processes and models (Heilmann, 2018). Eventually, alongside the BRI's international implementation, scholars began to question whether and how China's state fragmentation directly affects the initiative's progress. Some studies argue that this fragmentation leads to "state transformation" and the contestation of governance by diverse actors, meaning the CCP's control over Chinese foreign policy endeavors, such as the BRI, is complicated (Hameiri and Jones, 2016; Jones and Hameiri, 2021). Others suggest that China's international behavior is unpredictable due to its decentralized "rough-and-tumble domestic political ecosystem," characterized by diverse subnational actors and intentions that are being internationalized (Mertha, 2024: 210).

Lee's (2018) and Ye's (2019) work concerning the relationship between China's domestic and foreign policy planes has been seminal in examining the spillover effects of Chinese state fragmentation. Their work highlights the impact of domestic fragmentation on foreign policy through different yet complementary lenses. In the context of investments in Zambia's copper and construction sectors, Lee outlines the differences in imperatives of accumulation between Chinese state capital and global private capital. Chinese state-affiliated actors remain locked in an internal competition to appease Beijing while attempting to meet the ambitious goals of the Party-state, including ensuring profits, enhancing China's political and diplomatic influence, and gaining access to strategic minerals. Still, they make significant compromises to accommodate state and labor demands, while actors driven by profit-maximization interests on behalf of their shareholders do not (Lee, 2018: 4, 26). Conversely, Ye's study of the BRI shows how domestic political dynamics drive and shape the contour and magnitude of the initiative. She argues that the CCP conceptualized the BRI as a mobilization campaign to

address domestic and diplomatic challenges but has contributed to fragmentation and adverse decentralized outcomes grounded in internal actor competition and diverging goals (Ye, 2019: 696, 710). As such, there are direct linkages between Chinese domestic and foreign policymaking practices, and internal policymaking patterns have external consequences.

Recently, it has been argued that the premise of fragmentation has been oversold and that we should instead conceptualize Chinese policymaking practices as "flexible authoritarianism." In the view of Taylor and Garlick, "fragmented authoritarianism" implies an uncoordinated, dysfunctional, and incoherent decision-making process. This fails to adequately reflect the oversight and control the CCP exercises over policy decisions while allowing domestic and foreign policy actors a degree of autonomy to achieve long-term strategic goals within the "unwritten bounds of the permissible." This term implies that if the outcomes of actions align with China's strategic goals and the interests of individual actors, they are within the bounds of the permissible. Conversely, if they fail to align with the state's overarching goals, for example, by lining their own pockets, failing to follow through on promises, or damaging China's international image, they may be sanctioned or replaced (Taylor and Garlick, 2024: 2-3).

The above literature and questions about the relationship between Chinese domestic and foreign policymaking practices became the dissertation's starting point. Despite the emergence of important bodies of scholarship on China's decentralized and experimental domestic policymaking practices and the BRI's international implementation, these had never been brought into conversation with one another. To bridge this small yet significant gap, the dissertation set out to examine whether China's power is fragmented and what this means for Chinese foreign policy and the BRI's progress, including in developing countries. This is an essential query with far-reaching implications for understanding China's foreign policy practices and how specific instruments such as the BRI are received. As noted in the preceding section, Sri Lanka was selected as a representative and critical case for the BRI's international implementation, serving as the focus of the research project. Moreover, it was chosen as an example of the empirical knowledge gaps that exist regarding the "bottom-up" reception of Chinese foreign policy ventures in developing countries. Therefore, by investigating the case of the BRI's implementation in Sri Lanka, this dissertation intended to investigate a "core problem" defined as:

How has China's power been received in Sri Lanka, is this power "fragmented," and what does this mean for China's foreign policy and the BRI's progress?

Leaning on the above scholarship, outlined in more detail in section 3.2 of this introductory chapter, the dissertation hypothesized China's "Fragmented Power." In this dissertation, the term fragmentation highlights the presence of competing Chinese foreign policy actors with diverse strategies, objectives, and approaches. These actors are incorporated under the Party framework and must balance ideological and practical considerations, leading to challenges and dilemmas on the ground(s). As for the notion of power, this dissertation differentiates between China's hard (material) power, such as its military, economic, and technological capabilities, and soft (ideational) power, such as its social, normative, and political capacities, while recognizing that these spheres are often mutually constitutive and overlap in significant ways. For example, the CCP's political power can also yield hard power advantages, and economic incentives may contribute to China's positive international image.

With the notion of "Fragmented Power" in mind, the dissertation sought to answer the core problem by investigating and showcasing the different actors, motivations, and strategies forwarding the BRI in Sri Lanka. Moreover, by including the decentralized policymaking process in the equation and examining the BRI in light of China's "fragmented authoritarianism," it sought to question the extent to which the initiative can be viewed as an example of China's experimental modeling approach. In this way, it wished to contribute to studies on how the CCP's approach to policymaking, governance, IR, foreign policy practices, and pursuits is received in the global realm. Or, to put it differently, it aimed to explore and contribute to studies on the fragmented nature of "Global China." Building on Lee's (2018) work, Franceschini and Loubere conceptualize "Global China" as a broader theoretical approach to the country, its position in the world, and its international engagements (2022: 7).

Through the research process, which included data collection, analysis, and the writing up of the findings that constitute the dissertation's four articles, the hypothesis of China's "Fragmented Power" evolved into an overarching theoretical framework. This theory suggests that the premise that China's state transformation has led the CCP to face the potential loss of control over the country's foreign policy, including the BRI (Hameiri and Jones, 2016; Jones and Hameiri, 2021), requires nuance. Conversely, it aligns with the premise that the CCP grants considerable autonomy to actors involved in policy implementation while retaining ultimate control (Taylor and Garlick, 2024). However, it offers an alternative conceptualization of why this is the case. This dissertation contends that domestic fragmentation *does* exist (Lieberthal and

Oksenberg, 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992), leading to decentralization that "spills over" into foreign policy endeavors (Lee, 2018; Ye, 2019). Simultaneously, it is influenced by the idea that decentralization leads to experimental policy modeling practices (Heilmann, 2018).

Therefore, the theory of China's "Fragmented Power," as proposed in this dissertation, argues that there are direct linkages between Chinese domestic and foreign policymaking practices, that fragmentation has contributed to significant decentralization despite Xi Jinping's efforts to re-centralize, and that this is why experimental policy modeling practices are utilized. This is a deliberate strategy employed by the CCP, utilized in both domestic and foreign politics, as it is incremental and risk-minimizing. It allows the Party to benefit from policy innovation and successful implementation while mitigating backlash over failed initiatives by disassociating itself from actors who commit mistakes. Consequently, Chinese foreign policy is much more decentralized and experimental than previously assumed, and the BRI can be seen as an example of China's experimental policy modeling approach. This framework, in turn, entails a shift from thinking about Chinese foreign policy as monolithic, centrally initiated and controlled, with uniform goals and practices, to conceptualizing it as simultaneously a *product and driver* of domestic decentralized and experimental policymaking practices that remain permeable to bottom-up influences. Nevertheless, this decentralization is part and parcel of the CCP's strategy. As suggested by Taylor and Garlick, the CCP allows actors a degree of autonomous action to achieve long-term strategic goals as long as they stay within the unwritten bounds of the permissible (2024: 3). This is what Heilmann conceptualizes as "ideological deviation," which is a concept that this dissertation has attempted to investigate through the different case studies of the BRI's implementation. Moreover, because the dissertation conceptualizes the BRI as an example of China's experimental policymaking approach, it assumes that "model experiences" (Göbel, 2013: 54; Heilmann, 2018: 68-69) from the initiative's implementation are brought back into conversation with the national policy before being exported back to BRI host country localities.

This dissertation's findings directly address the core problem while providing novel and nuanced analyses of its research questions, as outlined in the section below. The dissertation comprises four complementary articles along with this introductory chapter. The articles concern the CCP's use of religious diplomacy to further the initiative's implementation; the projection and local reception of narratives related to China's economic prowess by the Party and SOEs to promote continued cooperation; the efficacy of China's influencing efforts through the BRI; and the Party's autocratic promotion and

diffusion to Sri Lankan elites through party-to-party exchanges. Hence, the dissertation contributes to several bodies of literature, including on China's fragmented state capacity and the relationship between domestic and foreign politics and governance practices. It illuminates the relationship between the CCP and various actors under the "iron triangle" framework, including different party and government departments, SOEs, and other government actors such as ambassadors and religious leaders. It further analyzes the interplay between domestic fragmentation and China's international ambitions. Finally, it provides concrete examples and new empirical insights on Chinese foreign policy and IR, including Buddhist diplomacy, the promotion of China's development model, China's political and economic power, and the spread of authoritarianism under Chinese so-called pragmatic cooperation. Altogether, the dissertation's findings underline China's "Fragmented Power." The articles showcase the fragmented nature of China's foreign policy pursuits, including the BRI, and the implications of decentralization for China's global political and economic influence. However, they also demonstrate that the CCP employs this strategy to implement the BRI incrementally, flexibly, and pragmatically, underscoring its effectiveness in enhancing China's power. In this way, the dissertation's focus has shed light on questions that range from the global to the local realm and from broad to narrow contexts. The findings and theoretical implications will be elucidated in section 6.1. The next section will clarify the research questions that facilitated the dissertation's focus on the abovementioned core problem.

1.3. Research Questions

As outlined above, this dissertation has aimed to analyze the reception of the CCP's foreign policy approach and international implementation of BRI projects in Sri Lanka to investigate China's "Fragmented Power." This includes considerations of how deliberate the decentralized policy experimentation strategy is and to what extent the central authorities, particularly the Party, remain in control of the initiative inside and outside China's borders. Therefore, as noted above, the core problem that this dissertation sought to investigate was how China's power is received in Sri Lanka, including whether this power is "fragmented" and what this means for China's foreign policy and the BRI's progress. From the beginning of the project, the dissertation's overarching research questions were formulated as follows:

• What is the extent of the decentralization of the BRI, and what does this entail for the initiative's longevity, success, and reception in countries like Sri Lanka?

• To what extent is this part of a deliberate strategy based on experimental policymaking models, such as models originating in China's modern history, and what implications does this have for the Party's strategic goals and the reception of Chinese efforts in BRI projects such as the HIP and PCC?

• To what degree are the sovereign state interests of China or the shareholder interests of China's elite, as pursued by SOEs on the ground(s), reflected in the actual implementation and reception of the BRI in Sri Lanka?

As part of these overarching questions, the dissertation has sought to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the political, economic, and social micro-processes occurring within BRI host countries from a "bottom-up" perspective. As such, the project's sub-questions concerned the role of other Party and government actors in the initiative, which diplomatic strategies the CCP utilizes to promote and implement it, and to what extent China's bid to enhance its political and economic influence has been successful. To this end, *article 1* addressed how and why Chinese investments and infrastructure projects are discussed in a Sri Lankan Buddhist setting. *Article 2* questioned how and why narratives related to the 蛇口模式 (Shekou Model) are used to "sell" the development of the HIP project and who the primary beneficiary of this strategy is. *Article 3* examined the reception of China's foreign influencing efforts by analyzing how Chinese ideational content, including its "normative power," is received in Sri Lanka. Finally, *article 4* analyzed the reception of China's party diplomacy in Sri Lanka through three interrelated questions. These concern how the ID-CCP's party diplomacy has developed in Sri Lanka, how the department forwards autocratic promotion and diffusion, and to what extent Sri Lankan elites are interested in this diffusion and learning from "China's authoritarian playbook."

1.4. Theories and Concepts

This dissertation is a PhD in Asian Studies. It is an interdisciplinary social science endeavor combining theories and concepts from political science and

area studies, particularly China studies. This distinction is essential, as the primary emphasis of this work is on China and Chinese foreign policy, with Sri Lanka serving as a case study of how the actors, strategies, and goals of the CCP's overarching approach are received in the Global South. To this end, the dissertation draws on theories and concepts associated with IR and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). This includes strategic narratives, an approach that is primarily associated with the work of Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, Roselle, and Zeng (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Miskimmon et al., 2017; Roselle et al., 2014). Strategic narrative theory provided a helpful lens for *article 1* to assess the CCP's motivations in utilizing Buddhist narratives to promote infrastructure projects in Buddhist-majority countries such as Sri Lanka, as well as the Sri Lankan government's motivations in co-opting these narratives to serve its own goals.[5] The dissertation also employs narrative analysis, as utilized by Oppermann and Spencer (2022), and policy evaluation, drawing on the work of McConnell (2010, 2015, 2016) and Bovens and 't Hart (2016). In *article 2*, the dual narrative analysis and policy evaluation approach illuminated the divergences between the stated policy goals of the CCP and SOEs in "selling" the Shekou Model and China's development model to Sri Lanka and how this policy has been received. The utility of narrative analysis will be further elucidated in section 4.2.1. At the same time, theories concerning the "fragmented authoritarianism" of China's state bureaucracy (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992) and the Chinese domestic experimental policymaking process (Heilmann, 2018) were utilized to analyze the fragmented nature of China's foreign policy. In addition to section 1.2., which discusses the dissertation's overarching theoretical approach concerning China's "fragmented power," this argument is continued in section 6.1.

Moreover, the dissertation leans on the theories of foreign influence associated with Aidt, Albornoz, and Hauk (2019) and China's political and economic influence as outlined by Goh (2014, 2016, 2020) and Ferchen and Mattlin (2023). *Article 3* investigated the reception of China's foreign political and economic influence in Sri Lanka by exploring its tandem utilization of material and ideational incentives and the agency of Sri Lankans in accepting or eschewing China's engagements. This illuminated Beijing's challenges in charting ideational content fit to contest Western "universal" norms, values, and governance patterns and underlined the importance of material benefits to support the BRI. Finally, the dissertation utilizes the "Authoritarian Gravity

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5 Novel examples of how Wickremesinghe attempted to utilize Buddhism to serve his own goals during his presidency will be detailed in a forthcoming book chapter (Rosendal, Forthcoming).

Center" (AGC) concept outlined by Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2021). *Article 4* examined China's role as a regional Authoritarian Gravity Center through the CCP's party diplomacy and how this approach has resonated in the Sri Lankan context. To this end, it zoomed in on party-to-party exchanges in Sri Lanka since 2005, showing how the party channel serves as a vehicle for autocratic promotion and diffusion. Together, these theories and concepts shed light on China's efforts to pave the way for the BRI's implementation, foster continued bilateral cooperation, and enhance its international standing. These points are elaborated in section 4.

1.5. Chapter Structure

This introductory chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the dissertation's research design, including the author's guiding paradigmatic views, methodology and materials, case study selection, and ethical considerations. Section 3 describes previous research on and identifies research gaps in studies of the relationship between China's domestic and foreign policymaking practices and how these feed into the BRI's implementation, the multifaceted diplomatic strategies and actors utilized by the CCP under the BRI framework, and China's quest to improve its political and economic influence, including by promoting ideational content to contest the LIO. Section 4 outlines the dissertation's theoretical arguments concerning strategic narratives, the dual use of narrative analysis and policy evaluation, the interplay between foreign influence and economic statecraft, and China's role as an Authoritarian Gravity Center. Section 5 summarizes the key findings and contributions of each research article. Finally, section 6 concludes the chapter by revisiting the research questions, summarizing the dissertation's primary contributions, and reflecting on further avenues of research.

2. Research Design

This section outlines the dissertation's research design. It first describes the author's research paradigm. Then, it traces the research project's methodological approach, materials, and case study selection before reflecting on ethical considerations.

2.1. Research Paradigm

From the outset, this dissertation has been guided by a critical/transformative research paradigm. Paradigm, here, refers to the author's general beliefs about the nature of the world and her theoretical and methodological considerations (Bingham, Mitchell, and Carter, 2024: 5). The critical/transformative paradigm embodies a constructivist understanding, including the belief that meaning is created from interactions between people and their surroundings. Simultaneously, knowledge is shaped by power, politics, and context, including factors such as race, gender, and class. Consequently, the paradigm contends that research should be transformative (Ibid: 6). In terms of positionality, referring to the author's individual history, values, and research choices, the author acknowledges that her background, nationality, gender, and constant presence and involvement in the research process means it can never be entirely free from bias (Ibid: 8-10). This point will be elaborated upon in practical terms in section 2.4.

Because of this paradigmatic understanding, the study has tended towards an inductive approach from the beginning. This bottom-up method has entailed starting the project by hypothesizing about China's "Fragmented Power," generating empirical data, analyzing patterns and themes, and finally, theorizing about the findings. Since the interviewees were predominantly Sri Lankan, the data focuses on their reception or perception of China's "Fragmented Power." At the same time, since the author comes from a China studies background, the study was well placed to draw some theoretical implications about Chinese foreign policy practices beyond reception. In any

case, while the author familiarized herself with different theoretical perspectives during the desk research phase to understand the reigning debates on the BRI and the analytical lenses employed in analyzing China's foreign policy efforts, these insights did not directly influence or constrain the data collection and fieldwork interviews.

Following the critical/transformative research paradigm also entails an emphasis on engaging with and showcasing marginalized voices, analyzing asymmetric power relationships, considering historical factors promoting inequality, and linking the findings to wider questions of privilege, racism, and potential avenues for social justice (Ibid: 10-11). For the dissertation, this has entailed deliberating on and highlighting asymmetries in post-colonial settings. Likewise, it has meant ensuring that the interviewees spoke for themselves, that their voices formed the data, and that the dissertation's themes emerged from this approach. Ultimately, this paradigm emphasizes the importance of sharing research findings with affected groups and broader academic and policy communities. The author has begun this work by publishing in open-access journals and Sri Lankan and international news outlets, as well as participating in local and global conferences, roundtables, and discussions to disseminate findings and increase awareness about political and economic developments beyond an academic context.

2.2. Methodology and Materials: Approaching the Field Through Written Sources

Work on this dissertation commenced in September 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodological approach was altered accordingly. During the pandemic, researchers working in or on Asia and other international contexts were barred from conducting fieldwork for various reasons related to risk and safety measures and countrywide and local lockdowns. In response to limited access, many researchers conducted digital qualitative research of documents, social media, and other online outlets to "approach the field through written sources." This is not a new phenomenon; "desk research" as a research method has been a staple in studies on or in authoritarian contexts, where access to informants can be restricted and where censorship and surveillance problematize the process of data collection and analysis (Thøgersen, 2006). Therefore, this dissertation has adopted a dual, mutually complementary approach, focusing on the interplay between desk research — i.e., collecting and analyzing documents, statements, and reports from online

archives — and fieldwork. This qualitative approach mitigated potential authenticity issues by triangulating the findings with a large body of empirical material, ensuring the dissertation's representativeness and contributions of novel empirical data.

In the project's first phase, the author gathered and analyzed official Chinese and Sri Lankan statements, such as project documents and newspaper articles. The author translated Chinese materials; materials from Sri Lanka were in English. *Article 1* relied on qualitative narrative analysis of a comprehensive body of empirical material sourced from key institution websites and news outlets. Documents were methodologically sourced from 2010 to 2022, with a particular emphasis on the period after 2013. Some texts preceding the BRI's inception were included to account for variations in the number of Buddhist narratives and statements. The empirical materials comprised over 50 Chinese government texts, including statements from the 中国佛教协会 (Buddhist Association of China, BAC) and its official publication, the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China (FMPRC), the 中共中央统一战线工作部 (United Front Work Department of the CCP Central Committee, UFWD), the Chinese embassy in Sri Lanka, and articles from Chinese government outlets. In addition, it utilized official government and news articles from Sri Lanka, such as statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Sri Lankan embassy in China, Official Government News, the Presidential Secretariat, and articles from leading English news outlets and the Sri Lanka-China Buddhist Friendship Association (SLCBFA). This material paved the way for the article to utilize strategic narrative theory to explain China's utilization of Buddhist narratives in Sri Lanka.

For *article 2*, a comprehensive body consisting of 23 texts was sourced through keyword searches from Chinese Party, government, ministerial websites, Party magazines, SOE websites and magazines, and Party and government-affiliated media outlets and newspapers. Likewise, it utilized 18 reports from the Sri Lankan parliament, pro-China think tanks, and government-owned and private news outlets. Materials were systematically sourced from the BRI's creation in 2013 to 2024. Through a dual narrative analysis and policy evaluation approach, the article dissected these statements to shed light on the utilization of narratives concerning the Shekou Model in promoting China's development model in Sri Lanka. For *articles 1* and *2*, open-access documents were stored on the author's computer and divided into subfolders depending on their origin points and contents. The author then analyzed them by drawing out their key arguments and narratives. Subsequently, the author compared the narratives used by the different actors

involved in promoting the Chinese foreign policy interests to highlight their focus and converging and diverging arguments.

From the beginning, the dissertation reflected on and attempted to mitigate the potential inherent biases of official materials (Bryman, 2016: 552-553) from the Chinese and Sri Lankan governments. Sri Lanka's government and bureaucratic structure remain opaque regarding documentation processes due to the ingrained corruption in the system. In contrast, scrutiny of Chinese official documents must contend with authoritarian practices of censorship and propaganda. Sources from both countries may, therefore, deliberately omit sensitive information or provide descriptions that attempt to favorably influence the reader's perception of a particular policy or event. Nevertheless, they constitute an essential body of empirical material, as reading between the lines by analyzing what is missing, how things are framed, and why this might be the case, illuminates each government's overt and covert guidelines, goals, and practices. In this way, the sources are also helpful for triangulation with other data. For example, while newspaper articles reflect the views and goals of the government and/or elites in China and Sri Lanka, they give insights into Sri Lankan public sentiments about China's influence and presence.

Still, it can be challenging to ascertain the authenticity of newspaper articles and news reports (Bryman, 2016: 555), especially when it comes to Sri Lankan sources. Most Chinese news outlets are government-controlled, and the central leadership approves their reports. The Sri Lankan media landscape is predominantly state-owned but remains opaque.[6] Reports from Chinese and Sri Lankan SOEs were classified as official state documents. However, while these reports adhere to strict censorship from the authorities, they also reflect the interests of private capital as opposed to state capital. For example, the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) remains firmly within the sphere of the Sri Lankan government but also the interests of elite political stakeholders. Likewise, while Chinese SOEs are firmly integrated into the "iron triangle" framework and thus promote the CCP's ideological content to some extent, they have different imperatives of accumulation. Throughout the dissertation, the intertextuality of these documents was taken into consideration (Bryman,

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6 For example, the Ministry of Mass Media manages major outlets like the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, whose staff operate under government scrutiny. Simultaneously, over half of the country's publications, including Daily News, are run by state-owned Lake House, established by the Wijewardene family. The Wijewardene family, in turn, owns the private Wijeya Newspapers Limited, which runs publications like Daily Mirror, The Sunday Times, and Daily FT. Finally, Ada Derana is run by the private Power House Limited, owned by Dilith Jayaweera and Varuni Amunugama Fernando (Reporters Without Borders, 2024; BBC. 2023).

2016: 560). Desk research secured a base understanding of Chinese foreign policy goals, the BRI and its associated projects, China's political system, considerations of the CCP's role vis-à-vis the SOEs, and Sri Lanka's political, economic, and social frameworks. From this vantage point, the dissertation conducted in-depth research on underlying topics related to the BRI's implementation and Chinese domestic and international policymaking practices. Still, fieldwork was necessary to transcend the so-called "documentary reality," i.e., that documents are written and published for specific purposes that do not always adequately reflect the lived reality or actual situation on the ground (Bryman, 2016: 561).

Therefore, in phase two of the project, after completing the first two articles of the compilation dissertation, the author carried out a preliminary "scouting trip" in February 2023 to establish networks among academics and other relevant stakeholders in Sri Lanka. During this trip, the author met and established contacts with a wide range of Sri Lankan academics, journalists, officials, and organizations. The first meeting was established with Sri Lankan researchers based on their publications on China's engagements in the country. Initial contacts among the academic environment and subsequent interviewees were introduced to the author based on snowball sampling (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, 2013). Afterwards, research and interview questions were defined and crystallized into the interview guide (*Appendix II*), and additional literature was incorporated into the project. The interview guide consisted of ten guiding initial, intermediary, and ending (but not exclusionary) questions (Bryman, 2016: 475). The questions related to the interviewee's relationship with China, whether Chinese politics impact Sri Lanka, to what extent Chinese politics are discussed in Sri Lankan media outlets, and what these views represent. They also concerned whether the interviewee felt personally affected by Chinese politics, comparisons between Chinese political influence in Sri Lanka vis-à-vis other countries, what types of norms, values, or ideals China represents, and whether any of these apply to Sri Lanka. The final questions centered on which country Sri Lanka should emulate, specifically in terms of politics, the economy, human development, and social issues, as well as what future role China is likely to play in the country compared to other great powers. The author embarked on the first one-month fieldwork trip between June and July 2023. The findings from this trip contributed to the revision of the interview guide (*Appendix III*). The revised guide was utilized during the second one-month fieldwork trip, which took place between October and November 2023. The fieldwork trips facilitated *articles 3* and *4*.

During these trips, the author conducted 35 qualitative, semi-structured interviews, two focus group interviews, five roundtable discussions, and

countless informal conversations with diverse Sri Lankan actors. This includes Sri Lankan politicians and officials (parliament members, ministers, leaders and members of the opposition, presidential advisors); employees and officials working in, with, or advising on Chinese-led port projects; former foreign secretaries, diplomats, and ambassadors; politicians, officials, and analysts from the Northern Province (with a particular emphasis on Jaffna, where Indian influence is at its highest, and where the majority of the population are Tamils); Indian journalists and analysts; independent think tanks; analysts and journalists; non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights organizations. All interviews were conducted by the author in English. The semi-structured, open-ended interview approach encouraged interviewees to share thoughts related to the research questions while allowing the author to follow up on relevant queries (Bryman, 2016: 466; Driscoll, 2021: 109). This facilitated follow-up interviews during subsequent fieldwork trips, allowing the interviews to evolve as more themes and discussions emerged (Bryman, 2016: 466-469) and as preconceived theoretical concepts or models were discarded by the interviewees (Driscoll, 2021: 110). The interview guide served as the starting point for the conversations, which took between 1 and 4 hours each.

Following Saldaña's approach to coding, the transcripts were manually cleaned up after each interview, and Initial Coding of key categories was conducted (Saldaña, 2013: 4). Codes, here, refer to words or phrases symbolically assigning a "summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" for this project's language-based data (Ibid: 3). Thus, the interview transcripts were segmented into broad categories constructed for the project's data, with "fuzzy" boundaries to allow for various converging and diverging patterns, including codes with a high degree of similarity, difference, and frequency (Ibid: 6). This underlines that coding is an imprecise and interpretative science, in the sense that codes may attempt to summarize interview contents while incorporating analytical impressions rooted in the research context, researcher positionality, theoretical assumptions, and so on (Ibid: 3-5, 7). Therefore, coding is an iterative, heuristic, and cyclical process, bringing the data into conversation with various hypotheses to narrow down its features, generate categories, themes, and concepts, and "grasp meaning" (Ibid: 7-8). In practice, this entailed that after categorization, each transcript was manually analyzed, recoded, and refined when deemed sufficiently saturated. Then, an overview of the interview data was compiled, outlining the primary and secondary codes in distinct categories (Ibid: 10-13). Finally, based on their categorization and further analytical reflections, the codes were manually divided into themes (Ibid: 11-13): *Identity and position*, denoting the

influence of Sri Lanka's history, economy, political situation, and geo-strategic location in selecting cooperation partners; *China's cooperation benefits*, referring to China's pragmatic, flexible approach to cooperation and perceptions of China's economic prowess; and *Western lecturing*, entailing the perceived hypocrisy of Western "universal" norms, values, or governance patterns and what this means for Sri Lanka's human rights framework. These themes informed the theoretical approach and analytical direction of *articles 3* and *4*.

The interviews and roundtable discussions illustrated how striking differences of opinion can be even among close colleagues or friends from the same social strata. Conversely, when in-group consensus was reached through back-and-forth fact-checking and discussions among the interviewees, the interviews confirmed key views and opinions in the data (Driscoll, 2021: 124-126). In this way, the discussions contributed nuanced insights showcasing individual actor aspirations, as presented in the articles. Moreover, smaller instances of participant observation, during which the author was exposed to events confirming hypotheses raised by interviewees, contributed to numerous informal follow-up conversations. Due to the high number of interviews undertaken and the triangulation with official statements, news articles, and secondary sources, this dissertation has achieved a high level of saturation, ensuring the representativeness of the empirical data. Throughout the project, secondary data has supplemented first-hand materials whenever possible.

2.3. Case Study Selection

As mentioned in the introduction, Sri Lanka is a developing multi-ethnic South Asian country. The country's population of around 22 million encompasses Sinhalese, constituting the majority ethnic group (74.9 percent), Sri Lankan Tamils (11.2 percent), Indian Tamils (4.2 percent), Sri Lankan Moors (9.3 percent), and other ethnic groups (1.5 percent). Sri Lanka is also multi-religious, boasting Buddhists (70.1 percent), Hindus (12.6 percent), Muslims (9.7 percent), Roman Catholics, and Christians (7.6 percent) (Minority Rights Group, 2018; Lanka Statistics, 2023). Sino-Sri Lankan relations hark back to the thriving trade and religious exchange network facilitated by the ancient Maritime Silk Route. This includes visits by Chinese Buddhist scholar Fa Xian in 410 AD and the voyages of Admiral Zheng He between 1405 and 1433. Diplomatic ties were established in 1957, following the successful 1952 "Rubber-Rice Pact." The Sino-Sri Lankan bond has tightened and loosened

over the years following the priorities of individual leaders and administrations (Embassy of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in Beijing, 2022). From 1983–2009, the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was motivated by socioeconomic inequalities and linguistic and ethnic divisions, led to the deaths of more than 100,000 people, primarily civilians from the northern and eastern provinces (Ganguly, 2024). China's role in Sri Lanka was cemented due to its support of the government with aid and armaments during the civil war. During this period, Western engagements dwindled due to human rights breaches (DeVotta, 2016).

With its geopolitically strategic position in the Indian Ocean, close to some of the world's busiest transshipment lanes, the country embodies a legacy as the center of regional contestation and engagement. In recent years, this has predominantly taken the form of what could be termed "proxy financial warfare," i.e., competing use of investments and loans to gain influence. The battle has been fought between China on one side and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (henceforth, the Quad) countries — namely, Australia, Japan, the US, and India — on the other. As Sri Lanka's closest neighbor in the Indian Ocean, India plays an especially significant role in its foreign policy. Proximity and the countries' shared cultural and social bonds have contributed to close bilateral relations. These include trade partnerships, religious exchanges, tourism, and cooperation in the development, defense, security, and governance capacity sectors. Sri Lanka also remains an essential partner in India's "Neighborhood First" policy (High Commission of India in Colombo, 2024). In recent years, Australia's development cooperation in Sri Lanka has focused on providing humanitarian assistance in response to the country's economic crisis (Australian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). However, despite the importance of the Indian Ocean as part of Australia's "immediate region," the Australian government appears to have stepped back from engagements due to the debt negotiations (Wyeth, 2022). Japan, on the other hand, has continued its development and economic cooperation with Sri Lanka, including the resumption of funding for stalled infrastructure projects (Jayasinghe, 2024). Finally, the US has announced several investments in Sri Lanka in recent years (United States Embassy in Sri Lanka, 2024B) and has emphasized the country's role in promoting a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) (United States Embassy in Sri Lanka, 2024A). These efforts will be complicated by the Trump administration's closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which is expected to significantly impact US aid provision (Alphonsus, 2025; Ada Derana, 2025). This discussion is continued in section 6.2.

Together and as part of their individual strategies, the Quad has attempted to contain or displace China's presence and power in the Indo-Pacific. This includes vying for influence in Sri Lanka to access its strategic port placement, transshipment routes, and potential for naval bases. Sri Lanka, for its part, has followed an official non-alignment policy in its foreign engagements since the Bandaranaike administrations (1956–1965) due to its strategic position, historical relationship with neighboring powers, and domestic priorities related to economic and security interests (Prasad, 1972: 271-272). Due to the aforementioned contestation and the country's weak governance, investment, and human rights framework, this strategy has shifted towards "rhetorical neutrality." According to Sri Lankan analyst Abeyagoonasekera, Gotabaya Rajapaksa's administration followed "rhetorical neutrality" in its foreign policy. This entailed allowing China to make inroads and tilting toward the CCP in political decisions and pragmatic investments (Abeyagoonasekera, 2023).

Sri Lanka was a pillar of Chinese economic engagement in South Asia well before the BRI's creation. However, China's presence in the country has increased tremendously in recent years. The initiative's scope has broadened through direct investments and state-backed policy loans, with major SOEs like China Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC) significantly expanding their portfolios. CHEC is currently involved in implementing several projects associated with the MSR, such as the Port City Colombo (PCC), the largest-ever foreign direct investment in Sri Lanka at US$1.4 billion. However, it is the Hambantota International Port (HIP) project that has captured headlines around the world. In 2016, the newly elected Maithripala Sirisena government (2015–2019) sought to privatize a majority stake in the port to raise foreign exchange and repay sovereign debt. China Merchants Port Holdings, a subsidiary of China Merchants Ports (CMP), which is under China Merchants Group (CMG), won the bid in 2017 and signed a 99-year lease agreement for US$1.12 billion. Overnight, the HIP became the most discussed example of China's use of the BRI as a tool of influence. A *New York Times* article interpreted the port deal as an example of Chinese "debt-trap diplomacy" (Abi-Habib, 2018), as mentioned in section 1.1., which brought Sri Lanka's BRI experience under international scrutiny.

By 2020, debates on the HIP had nearly subsided, and only a few studies had examined the BRI's trajectory in the country since the initial consternation. Despite this, the Sri Lankan case was still highlighted as the most apparent case of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy (Brautigam, 2020) and as the country that had suffered the largest number of "white elephant projects" under the initiative's framework. From the outset, the dissertation aimed to investigate

what had happened with the BRI in Sri Lanka since the HIP deal was struck. To this end, the dissertation emphasized investigating the "messy reality" of the promotion, implementation, and governance of the HIP and PCC projects. These are the largest BRI projects in Sri Lanka, and both ports and their related investments remain heatedly debated in political and academic circles. Furthermore, they represent mechanisms, strategies, and models utilized by the CCP and SOEs in other BRI countries. As outlined above, Sri Lanka also constitutes a fascinating case in its own right – not least due to its rapidly evolving political and economic situation. Most recently, Sri Lanka's economic crisis has complicated the already precarious situation. Presidents like Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2019–2022) and Ranil Wickremesinghe (2022–2024) have attempted to balance the influence of the Quad with that of China, aiming to maximize benefits from external actors and recover the country's economy. Due to the significant impact the crisis has had on the country's domestic and foreign politics, and consequently, on this dissertation, an overview of recent developments is warranted.

2.3.1. Recent Developments in Sri Lanka

Since 2022, Sri Lanka has been experiencing the severest economic crisis since its independence. The crisis began when the government defaulted on a foreign debt interest payment of $78 million (Perera, 2023). Aside from the US$51 billion owed by Sri Lanka to foreign creditors, the country's foreign reserves had dwindled, and the government urgently needed approximately US$75 million to secure essential imports. The situation resulted in shortages of food, fuel, medicine, and electricity, the latter of which led to widespread power cuts (Amnesty International, 2022). By its peak in September 2022, the general inflation rate had risen to around 70% (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2023).

The Sri Lankan government argued that the COVID-19 pandemic and the travel ban that impacted the country's tourism industry were the root causes of the crisis. However, analysts contend that the government's long-term economic mismanagement and the physical and economic destruction of the civil war were to blame. Due to the accumulated debts of successive governments, including issues of corruption, loss-making SOEs, and a bloated government service, the country had "long lived beyond its means" (DeVotta, 2024). For years, governments had emphasized importing goods for the domestic market rather than promoting exports (Kugelman, 2022), and various Sri Lankan elites with great influence over the country's domestic and foreign policy, such as the Rajapaksa family, had made short-term policy decisions that prioritized their own interests. In 2019, under Gotabaya Rajapaksa's

presidency, the government introduced large tax cuts, resulting in a substantial loss of revenue. Then, in 2021, the government attempted to limit the outflow of foreign currency and rebrand Sri Lanka as an "organic and sustainable" provider of agricultural products by banning the import of chemical fertilizers (Torella, 2022). This resulted in widespread crop failures, a need for additional food imports from abroad, and a decline in tea and rubber exports. External factors, such as the soaring US dollar and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, further compounded the crisis (Wong and Ma, 2022).

Throughout 2022, public outrage grew steadily due to the deteriorating situation. In April, protesters called for Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation, blocked the gate to the Presidential Secretariat, and pitched camps at Galle Face Green, which became known as *Gota Go Gama* (Gotabaya Go Village). The situation culminated on May 9, when government supporters attacked the protesters with no intervention from the Secretariat or police forces, leading to calls by international advocacy groups for the government to address its human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Amnesty International, 2024). Escalating tensions led to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's resignation on May 12, followed by the appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister. In June, Wickremesinghe announced that Sri Lanka's economy had "completely collapsed" (The Guardian, 2022). On July 9, thousands of protesters stormed Gotabaya Rajapaksa's private residence; as a result, he agreed to step down on July 13. He subsequently fled the country before resigning on July 14. Wickremesinghe was appointed acting president in Gotabaya's absence, but after protestors swarmed Wickremesinghe's residence calling for his resignation, a state of emergency was declared (Jayasinghe, Ghoshal, and Karunatilake, 2022). Finally, on July 21, Wickremesinghe was appointed President, with Dinesh Gunawardena as Prime Minister. This refueled protests, and under the state of emergency, security forces continued to carry out heavy-handed arrests and clearings of protest camps (Amnesty International, 2024).

Wickremesinghe's administration (2022–2024) was short and intense, domestically and internationally. During his rule, debt restructuring with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) continued. Simultaneously, his administration sought to secure aid from the World Bank and the country's "historic allies," primarily Japan, India, and China (Reuters, 2024). When Wickremesinghe attended the BRI's anniversary, which was held during the Third Belt and Road Forum (BRF) in Beijing in October 2023, he praised Sino-Sri Lankan cooperation. He further emphasized that Sri Lanka is neither pro-India nor pro-China but only cares about its own interests (CGTN, 2023B).

This move was motivated, in part, by the ongoing debt restructuring process, in which China is one of the major bilateral creditors.

The economic crisis exacerbated Sri Lanka's high external economic dependence, including on Chinese funds. As mentioned above, it has been argued that the CCP's willingness to grant loans and investments had already resulted in a foreign policy tilt toward China. This pragmatic approach, often referred to as "no strings attached," reflects China's emphasis on non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This means that investments are made without requiring adherence to policies or judicial provisions, such as improvements in human rights frameworks (Tudoroiu, 2023). This is in contrast to Western, Indian, and Japanese engagements, which often require the implementation of liberal or democratic instruments (Benabdallah, 2019). Consequently, there are concerns that the Sri Lankan government's delicate investment balancing act may reduce its overall democratic footprint and human rights regime and erode the country's relationship with India and Western governments (Abeyagoonasekera, 2023: 17-22). China's consistent support for and backing of the government in domestic and international crises further complicates this issue. For example, as previously mentioned, China provided armaments to Sri Lanka during the civil war and has supported the government over human rights violations in international forums like the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) over the years (Ibid). Western, Indian, and Japanese concerns over China's influence in Sri Lanka, therefore, mirror concerns over BRI projects in other countries and regions (Salamatin, 2021: 1439-1442), including China's attempts to promote alternative ideational content and governance practices in the Global South.

Finally, in September 2024, Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, People's Liberation Front, part of the National People's Power, NPP alliance) was elected President of Sri Lanka. Dissanayake's election is a notable development in Sino-Sri Lankan relations. Despite Dissanayake's Marxist roots and the JVP and CCP being "fraternal parties," relations between the two parties have been strained over the years due to ideological differences (Kuruwita, 2024). These became particularly evident during the Sino-Soviet split (1961–1989) when the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL) split into a Moscow faction and a Beijing faction (JVP, 2016). Nevertheless, the CCP has historically preferred to cooperate with left-wing administrations (Shambaugh, 2007). Starting in 2023, the CCP has emphasized building ties with Dissanayake, the JVP, and the NPP alliance, and one of Dissanayake's first state visits was conducted in China. During the trip, several agreements were signed between Xi and Dissanayake, particularly as

regards BRI projects such as infrastructure investments in HIP (Kuruwita, 2025). Dissanayake and his administration have emphasized the benefits of cooperating with China since coming to power; for example, concerning learning from China's development model (Friends of Socialist China, 2025A) and advancing cooperation in Buddhism, culture, education, tourism, and so on (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2024). Dissanayake has also emphasized that China has always been Sri Lanka's "reliable friend and partner" (Friends of Socialist China, 2025B), hinting at China's potential continued role and influence. The conclusion will expand upon these developments.

In summary, Sri Lanka's domestic and foreign politics, as well as its overall political framework, must contend with a degree of discontinuity. This includes changing elites (with differing motivations) and ensuing ruptures in governance and economic stability. This somewhat chaotic situation, where developments are often rapid and opaque, has marked China's engagements in Sri Lanka and frequently resulted in dynamic (or haphazard) changes to policies, priorities, and project implementation. These dynamics, in turn, have affected the project's fieldwork and research outcomes. Therefore, the dissertation has attempted to reflect and deliberate on these developments and their implications for Sino-Sri Lankan relations and China's investment efforts from the beginning.

2.3.2. Research Gaps

While researching the aforementioned HIP and PCC projects, the author identified several research gaps that informed the focus of the articles. The first gap emerged in an unexpected location: while the author was researching the 2020 Sri Lankan parliamentary elections to gather information on China's diplomatic strategy in the country, an article appeared that concerned China's attempts to influence the Sri Lankan Buddhist clergy (Sharma, 2020). Intrigued by the surprising connection between Buddhism and infrastructure projects, the author examined China's Buddhist diplomacy in the country. Being a Buddhist-majority country, Sri Lankan politics are heavily influenced by the *Maha Sangha*, i.e., the most powerful Buddhist sects. *Article 1*, therefore, examined the connection between Buddhism and BRI benefits. After establishing that studies on China's Buddhist or religious diplomacy had, thus far, not reviewed the case of Sri Lanka, particularly as promoted by the BRI and the UFWD, the author decided to bridge this significant research gap. Aside from shedding light on the importance of Buddhism in Sri Lankan politics and how China leveraged this importance to pave the way for the BRI's

implementation, the article also contributed to studies on the role of the UFWD and BAC in China's foreign policy. The author confirmed her hypotheses when she attended the 2023 Navam Perahera at the Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo, where she witnessed President Ranil Wickremesinghe, the *Maha Sangha*, and influential Chinese Buddhist monks from the BAC conversing during the procession.

The choice of case study for *article 2* was inspired by debates concerning the CCP's promotion of the Chinese development model and the connection between Chinese domestic and foreign policymaking practices. The author wanted to investigate how Sri Lankan actors perceive China's implementation of BRI projects, the relationship and integration between the CCP and SOE, as well as the degree to which ideological content or business decisions drive the initiative's practical implementation. Since HIP is being established and managed by CMG following the Shekou Model, an experimental policy model originating in Shenzhen, China, this became the article's point of departure. The article primarily examined how the Shekou Model has been received in Sri Lanka. Additionally, it demonstrated how the model has spread beyond China, discussed the integration between the CCP, SOEs, and government bureaus under the "iron triangle" framework, and analyzed whether the BRI is primarily driven by ideological or pragmatic economic goals.

In this way, *article 2* contributed to studies on how China's promotion of the Chinese development model under the BRI has been received in South Asia and the relationship between China's domestic decentralized, experimental policymaking practices and the BRI's international implementation. The author's hypotheses concerning the importance of the Shekou Model "brand" were confirmed when, in October 2023, during the second fieldwork trip, an invitation was extended to visit HIP in person. To the author's knowledge, she is one of the only researchers allowed to enter the port in recent years, particularly after the *New York Times* article was published (Abi-Habib, 2018). The management building, particularly the top floor, where international investors are invited to take in scenic views of the port area, is littered with posters and pictures depicting Shekou in Shenzhen and detailing CMG's economic success story. Despite this, the Shekou Model "brand" has not caught on among the public. This discussion is continued in *article 2*.

The case studies for *articles 3* and *4* were inspired by data gathered during the fieldwork and interviews. During the initial scouting trip, the author discussed China's influence with a wide range of Sri Lankan academics. An emerging theme of these conversations concerned the CCP's emphasis on promoting ideational content, such as norms, values, ideals, and governance practices, to influence Sri Lankan politicians to follow Beijing's priorities and

preferences. As such, the first fieldwork trip focused on China's ideational content in the country, which became the focus of *article 3*. This article outlined novel empirical insights on how Sri Lankan stakeholders receive and react to the CCP's ideational promotion. In this way, the article contributed to studies on Beijing's bid, through the BRI, to further China's international standing and influence in global governance schemes by enhancing its ideational power. Having concluded that China's ideational content remains limited and contingent upon the country's economic prowess and pragmatic approach to lending and investments and that China's political influence in Sri Lanka is, as such, in a precarious position, the author wanted to extend this line of analysis. Moreover, many interviewees focused on the importance of Sri Lankan election cycles and corrupt politicians in charting the trajectory of BRI projects.

Therefore, *article 4* dove deeper into China's party-to-party exchanges and autocratic promotion and diffusion targeting Sri Lankan elites since Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration (2005–2015). Aside from adding new empirical insights into how Sri Lankans perceive and evaluate China's autocratic promotion and diffusion, this article contributed to studies of the ID-CCP's aim to further Beijing's preferences under Xi Jinping. Moreover, it questioned how ethnic minorities, such as the Tamils, react to China's ideational promotion and influencing efforts. Therefore, in addition to conducting interviews with key stakeholders in Colombo, Kandy, and Hambantota, the author undertook a research trip to Jaffna to speak to various Tamil actors, including representatives of Tamil political parties.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

From the beginning, this dissertation has been mindful of the potential risks associated with researching Chinese foreign policy in Sri Lanka. This has included considerations of the fluidity of "red lines" in authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian contexts. The dissertation applied for and was granted ethical approval following Swedish rules and regulations on ethical academic conduct (*Etikprövningsmyndigheten*). This meant incorporating concerns and following "best practices" outlined in Lund University's "Guidelines for Ethical Review of Research within the HT Faculties" (Lund University, 2021), the EU "General Data Protection Regulation" (GDPR) (EU, 2016), and the Swedish "Ethical Review Act" (*Etikprövningslagen*) (Sveriges Riksdag, 2003). Since the project included research involving humans, this entailed

protecting interviewees' data during and after data collection and during data processing.

Therefore, the project, including the interview guides, was framed in a non-sensitive manner, even if some questions could lead interviewees to discuss their religious or political views. Before the interviews, the interviewees were given a consent form (*Appendix I*) for oral or written approval, along with the corresponding interview guides (*Appendices II* and *III*). They were notified that they could opt out of the interviews at any point before, during, or after the process. Moreover, the dissertation has reflected on the interrelated issues of access, censorship, and surveillance, including mitigating potential risks to interviewees (Alpermann, 2022; Tan et al., 2023). Due to these considerations, the author anonymized all interview data and made no interview recordings. All interview data were stored in physical notebooks, which were manually cleaned during the coding process. These notebooks had no keys to identify the interviewees and were locked inside the *Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies*.

Additionally, building on the considerations of positionality outlined in section 2.1., the author has continuously reflected on her position and identity in Sri Lanka, both in terms of her status as a young, female, Western researcher in a post-colonial context, and her personal background and privilege, particularly in light of the country's ongoing economic and political crisis. The author has been confronted with political and socioeconomic turmoil throughout the fieldwork. Interviewing suit-wearing politicians in colonial-era buildings, accompanied by expensive drinks and cigars, visiting human rights organizations operating out of basements, and staying with Christian converts, all while meeting with academics struggling to make ends meet for their families, has tested the author's sense of fairness and justice. The author has juggled responsibility for her interviewees throughout, sometimes in acute ethical dilemmas. While paying for meals and gas for interviewees from poorer strata has felt natural and justified, the author has continuously managed expectations concerning and often declined to participate in conferences, give lectures and interviews on national television channels, help interviewees with applications for international jobs and funding calls, and attend expensive dinners with politicians to gain insights in informal circumstances. Constantly evaluating and weighing concerns related to the safety and ethical conundrums of the author and interviewees has been necessary, though taxing. The result, however, has been worthwhile: establishing a solid foundation of trust has led to the creation of a strong network of Sri Lankan actors that the author can draw on in future research endeavors. And equally, if not more importantly, the establishment of lifelong friendships.

3. Previous Research

This section reviews previous research on the BRI and the relationship between China's domestic policymaking and foreign policy, including the BRI's international implementation. It then summarizes the literature on the CCP's multifaceted diplomatic strategies under the BRI, the actors involved in these efforts, and China's growing ideational promotion and contestation of the LIO. Moreover, it identifies the limitations of existing research, including the research gaps this dissertation has sought to fill.

3.1. Research on the BRI

The BRI was proposed by Xi Jinping in 2013 under the name "One Belt, One Road" Initiative (OBOR). The building of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), i.e., railways, roads, and other land-based infrastructure, was proposed during an official visit to Kazakhstan in September, while the establishment of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), i.e., the maritime corridors and port projects, was proposed during a visit to Indonesia in October. Aside from the SREB and MSR, the initiative encompasses several land corridors, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). At its core, the BRI is a massive investment project focusing on establishing critical infrastructure worldwide, usually in countries directly relevant to Beijing's strategic priorities. This includes the initiative's so-called "five pillars" of policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial cooperation, and people-to-people bonds. The BRI has been conceptualized and discursively promoted by the CCP as the continuation of strategies and concepts promoted by previous administrations, such as the Ancient Silk Road and the voyages of Admiral Zheng He, the 走出去战略 ("Going Global") and 西部大开发 ("Great Western Development") strategies, and the 睦邻友好政策 ("Friendly Neighborhood Policy") of the 1980s and 1990s (Li, 2019).

From the beginning, the BRI has had several overarching (and, hence, vague) "core goals:" To create the "Community of Shared Future for Mankind"

(CSFM) to ensure China's peaceful environment, essential for its continued rise; to pursue the 中国梦 ("Chinese Dream", i.e., the dream of Chinese national rejuvenation, maintaining domestic unity and stability; and to create a 新型大国关系 ("new type of great power relations"), i.e., the search for alternative means of peaceful coexistence with major powers (Li, 2019). Practically speaking, this means that the initiative has been conceptualized as an instrument for China to bolster the economy by dealing with national overcapacity, functioning as a "stimulus package in disguise;" enabling the transition to a new economic model, thus inhabiting a "shock absorber" function; and mitigating or addressing the underdevelopment of China's inner regions in contrast to the coastal areas, that is, increasing security through economic development (Rolland, 2017). More specifically, the initiative was proposed as a way to mitigate the "pivot to Asia" proposed by the US Obama administration in 2012 (Rolland, 2017; Li, 2019).

However, the initiative's goals and means have evolved significantly. Today, the overarching strategy is supplemented by "sub-branches" such as the Digital Silk Road, focusing on establishing 4G and 5G networks as well as critical digital infrastructure (Gordon and Nouwens, 2022); the Health Silk Road, which mainly involves the promotion of China as a global health provider (Lancaster, Rubin, and Rapp-Hooper, 2020); the Polar Silk Road, emphasizing China's aim to become a "near-arctic power" (Lamazhapov, Stensdal, and Heggelund, 2023); and the Green Silk Road, which focuses on establishing "lean, green, and clean" projects to bolster China's environmental footprint and public perceptions of the BRI (Caudevilla, 2024).

From its relatively humble – or at least challenged – beginnings, by the initiative's 10th anniversary in October 2023, between 146 and 151 countries had signed MoUs with China regarding BRI cooperation. As noted in the introduction, this number is slightly unclear due to the lack of official document availability and the fact that MoUs are often framed in rather general terms. Most of these countries are located in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, with the majority falling within the lower to upper middle-income tiers (Nedopil, 2025). Starting in 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the BRI's focus on hard infrastructure investments shifted due to internal and external economic constraints. Today, China emphasizes building "small and beautiful" projects that will enhance the country's overall soft power and bear fewer risks to Beijing's lending and return on investments (Nedopil, 2023). Most recently, the BRI strategy has been supported by the advent of three new global initiatives proposed by Xi Jinping. These new developments will be discussed in section 6.2.

Throughout the years, countless academic works have been published on the BRI. As noted in the introduction, scholars initially examined the BRI from a macropolitical perspective regarding its effects on the international system and broader geopolitical competition, especially between China and the US (Rolland, 2017; Jones and Zeng, 2019; Doshi, 2021). However, the focus has gradually shifted towards micropolitics, with examinations of the initiative's political, economic, and social influences on specific countries, as well as the agency of local actors in negotiating China's presence and investments BRI (see, for example, Chen, 2023; Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 2019; Calabrese and Cao, 2020; Kuik and Rosli, 2023). Generally speaking, scholarship on the BRI can be divided into three segments representing specific views on the initiative.

To start, some studies have attributed positive impressions to the initiative, arguing that it will contribute to South-South Cooperation (SSC) (Zhou and Zhang, 2018), mutual benefits and enhanced bilateral relations (Liu, 2014), and the creation of a multipolar world order facilitating greater political inclusion (Li, 2023). Others have taken a middle-ground approach, arguing that the initiative remains challenged, for example, in terms of its lack of governance and the amount of international scrutiny that it is under (Li, 2019), and that it has, therefore, not amounted to the initially proposed "win-win" benefits (Cheng, 2020; Wignaraja et al., 2020; Rana and Ji, 2020), but may still present opportunities for some regions (Chen et al., 2019; Zou, Wu, and Ye, 2020). Finally, some scholars attribute negative impressions to the initiative and its trajectory. Some studies have argued that the initiative has failed and presents no challenges to existing governance frameworks (Hameiri and Jones, 2018), mainly due to the multitude of actors implementing and governing projects in different countries and their competition (Olinga-Shannon et al., 2019; Jones, 2019; Jones and Zeng, 2019), which is part and parcel of China's overall opaque institutional landscape (Rudyak, 2020). Others have viewed the initiative as threatening the West's power and influence (Clarke, 2017, 2020; Rolland, 2017; Doshi, 2021), including the global economy (Cheng, 2018; Li and Taube, 2020; Leutert and Haver, 2020), (global) governance patterns (Wang, Cai, and Nolan, 2019) and judicial frameworks (Kämmerer, 2019), human rights, and democracy (Faiz, 2019; Salamatin, 2021; Larkin, 2023).

This dissertation falls into the micropolitics category outlined above, as it has sought to shed light on the BRI's implementation and contestation "on the ground." At the same time, it has attempted to relate local "bottom-up" experiences and insights to international trends to the greatest possible extent, for example, by outlining China's geopolitical competition in Sri Lanka and the international scrutiny that impacts perceptions of the BRI. In so doing, it

has strived to take a middle-ground approach, outlining potential benefits and pitfalls of the overall strategy and investigating concrete issues as presented in the individual case studies. The following sections will elaborate upon the primary bodies of BRI literature with which this dissertation has engaged.

3.2. Fragmentation, Experimentation, and the BRI

Since the PRC was founded in 1949, the CCP has been the country's sole ruling party. In 2024, it boasted around 98 million members. Over the years, the Party has undergone substantial reforms and transformations, including changes to the cadre recruitment process and adjustments to its institutional and ideological frameworks. The leadership, too, has changed with the times. While the idea of collective leadership associated with previous administrations has been replaced by strongman rule under Xi Jinping, the Party's top echelon remains diverse in terms of variations in ideological underpinnings, political background, professional credentials, administrative experience, and policy preferences (Li, 2024: 208-210). Since China's party and state institutions are closely intertwined, it is often referred to as a "Communist Party-state." This entails that the Party is "unequivocally in charge at all levels, and the state operates merely as the executor of decisions made by the party" (Ibid: 211).

In recent years, scholarship on China's domestic policy environment has expanded, particularly due to the changes introduced by Xi Jinping. Scholars have argued that while Xi has re-centralized the CCP's political power as part of his "top-level design," Chinese domestic policymaking practices remain fragmented (Ahlers and Schubert, 2022). As noted in section 1.2., studies on China's decentralized policymaking patterns trace back to the work of Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988) and Lieberthal and Lampton (1992), who argue that the Chinese political system is characterized by "fragmented authoritarianism." This concept suggests that China's political system and bureaucracy are fragmented, with decision-making processes emphasizing consensus building, resulting in protracted, disjointed, and incremental policy processes (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988: 3, 22; Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992: 8-9). Consequently, the CCP's governance relies on decentralized policy experimentation, and the Party tolerates "ideological deviation" from SOEs and government bureaus so long as its position is not weakened (Heilmann, 2018: 69). This means that local policymakers experiment with policy solutions outside of the central government or provincial authorities' purview

(Brown, de Brauw, and Du, 2009: 328), and that piloting and modeling practices are a mainstay in local development strategies (Ahlers and Schubert, 2013: 832).

These practices may ultimately result in so-called "model experiences" that are estimated by higher-ups in the system to contribute to overall policy development (Göbel, 2013: 54). If these experiences are successful, they are distributed to other provinces, refined, and then integrated into national policies after further revision as "tried and tested" models (Heilmann, 2018). This decentralized approach helps the CCP avoid accountability for local policy failures while gaining legitimacy for successful innovations (Heilmann, 2018: 68). This is one way for the CCP to 摸着石头过河 ("cross the river by feeling the stones"), i.e., conducting reform through an experimental trial-and-error approach while remaining in ultimate control over the models' confirmation, revision, termination, and spread. Therefore, this approach offers flexible and risk-minimizing methods for policy innovation, enabling China's modernization through rapid economic growth (Heilmann, 2018: 46, 55, 64-65).

However, China's decentralized policymaking approach remains challenged in several respects. For example, experimentation remains heterogeneous across provinces (Göbel, 2013: 54), contributing to intra-provincial competition (Donaldson, 2009; Göbel, 2013). Therefore, implementation remains relational, shaped by local-level negotiations between actors at different system levels, and results in uneven and unpredictable outcomes (Loubere and Qiu, 2018). If cadres are perceived to be experimenting sufficiently, as per the guidelines from above, their autonomy is safeguarded (Ahlers and Schubert, 2013: 847). Conversely, if they are not perceived to experiment or as being innovative enough, they may face political consequences (Heilmann, 2018: 206-211; Heffer and Schubert, 2023: 41). This "experimentation under pressure" can reduce the quality of experimental policymaking and cause cadres to emulate other provinces rather than innovate existing policies (Heffer and Schubert, 2023: 53). Still, this experimental approach has been an integral part of China's economic transformation, with an expanding cast of actors, including peripheral officials, NGOs, and the media, involved in their development (Mertha, 2009: 995). The Shekou Model, which originated in the Shekou Special Economic Zone in Shenzhen, is a prime example of China's experimental model approach (O'Donnell et al., 2017). As outlined in *article 2*, this incremental port development model is currently being exported internationally under the BRI by CMG, one of the largest Chinese SOEs.

This brings us to the so-called "iron triangle" of Party, Government, and Business: The Party, SOEs, and government bureaus remain tightly interlinked, yet under fragmented authoritarianism, their practices, motivations, and goals differ. For their part, SOEs promote and implement experimental models while staying under Party rule. The CCP appoints and promotes SOE CEOs through the *nomenklatura* and rotational system, [7] meaning that central SOE business groups, i.e., "national champions," that are placed under the State Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) possess significant economic and political clout (Brødsgaard and Beck, 2021: 53). Consequently, SOEs are driven by commercial interests and different "opportunities" than the CCP. The CCP, meanwhile, delegates governance responsibilities to SOE CEOs to function as professional managers who can ensure that economic goals are met (Ma and Peverelli, 2019).

Moving from the domestic to the international level, an emerging body of literature has examined how China's internal fragmentation is reinforced by rapid economic globalization and what this means for Chinese foreign policy tools, such as the BRI (Ye, 2019). While some studies have questioned the CCP's control of the BRI due to decentralization, fragmentation, and partial internationalization of the Party-state apparatus and their societal allies (Jones and Zeng, 2019; Jones and Hameiri, 2021), others have outlined the dangers posed by competing domestic interests and contradictory guidance and policy goals in driving the BRI's implementation (Chen et al., 2019; Ye, 2019). Not only does this complicate China's governance frameworks by rendering state divisions obsolete, but it also presents additional challenges in terms of security and diplomacy for the SOEs implementing the projects (Ye, 2019).

Therefore, previous research has primarily argued that the role of SOEs in the BRI's internationalization may present problems, for example, if they act without approval by the Party or violate BRI host country laws and policies to pursue economic interests (Jones and Zeng, 2019; Olinga-Shannon et al., 2019; Jones and Hameiri, 2021). In this way, decentralized policymaking practices may further and intensify state fragmentation, yet Chinese state capital is strengthened. National agencies that previously offered guidelines for the SOEs are less influential after the BRI, so SOEs can "directly leverage on the BRI to pursue their business abroad" (Ye, 2019: 699, 707). Therefore, an increasing number of studies have focused on the importance of distinguishing between the interests of *state capital*, which serves interests defined by the

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7 These systems ensure that high-ranking Party officials are "circulated" through the "iron triangle" framework at regular intervals, continuously enhancing their skill sets and ideological understanding (Brødsgaard and Beck, 2021).

sovereign state, and *private capital*, which serves interests defined by the shareholders (Lee, 2018: 4). Since Chinese state capital is "both centrally controlled and also capable of decentralized and local improvisation," it may be leveraged by host country actors. In this way, it may "produce uneven and contested outcomes" (Lee, 2018: 10).

These two strands of scholarship are central to understanding the relationship between China's domestic and international policymaking practices, as they underscore how Chinese foreign policy pursuits, such as the BRI, are influenced by China's "fragmented authoritarianism." However, they had not yet been brought into conversation with research on the domestic experimental model context, which is crucial in understanding the BRI's deliberately experimental practical implementation and how the relationship between the CCP and SOEs affects China's global ambitions. This was one of the research gaps the dissertation wished to address, as showcased by *article 2*. By investigating how experimental policymaking practices, originating from China's "fragmented authoritarianism" at home, have "bled in" to the BRI's internationalization through experimental models and "ideological deviation" under the SOEs, the dissertation has aimed to contribute nuanced insights into the BRI's decentralized implementation. It has also underlined the fragmentation of the actors and strategies employed in these efforts, as elaborated below.

3.3. The BRI's Multifaceted Diplomatic Strategies and Actors

Since the BRI's creation, a growing number of studies have sought to detail how the CCP utilizes religious diplomacy to promote the initiative and mitigate concerns and criticism from host countries adhering to specific religions (see, for example, Ashiwa and Wank, 2020; Borchert, 2020; Brasnett, 2021; Chung, 2022; Ngeow, 2019). These have shown that despite the CCP's strict political control over all religions, including Buddhism (Zhe, 2004; Raymond, 2020: 352), the Party increasingly utilizes religious diplomacy under the BRI to disseminate positive narratives concerning its religious policies or enhance its relations with countries identifying with specific religions (Brasnett, 2021: 41-42). This follows the CCP's general "multifaceted and flexible approach" to the international promotion of Chinese Buddhism, which differs depending on whether the receiving country is a Buddhist-majority nation or not (Ashiwa and Wank, 2020; Wang, 2020).

From the beginning, the BRI has intended to promote the creation of a "community of common destiny" to ensure China's peaceful environment and enable its continued rise (Li, 2019: 42-43). Part of this strategy has emphasized "people-to-people" exchanges to build trust with and enable long-term cooperation with host countries while enhancing perceptions of China in BRI countries, often with a distinct spiritual dimension (Ngeow, 2019: 75-76). As such, China has supplemented its foreign policy by promoting certain aspects of the country's culture, values, worldviews, and religions, such as Buddhism, to convince other countries of China's benevolent intentions without coercion. As such, studies have examined China's religious and Buddhist diplomacy by comparing instances of religious diplomacy across Asian countries (Ngeow, 2019; Ashiwa and Wank, 2020; Chung, 2022) or by focusing on the case of Mainland Southeast Asia (Raymond, 2020). Relatedly, an increasing body of scholarship has focused on the work of the UFWD as part of China's foreign policy (see, for example, Joske, 2020; Suzuki, 2019). Under Xi Jinping, the UFWD and organizations under its control, such as the BAC, have supported the BRI's implementation and progress by linking the BRI to Buddhism (Raymond, 2020: 350-353; Suzuki, 2019; Ngeow, 2019: 82). However, China's Buddhist strategy and the UFWD's practices had not been investigated in South Asia, let alone Sri Lanka. *Article 1* addressed this gap and determined that due to Buddhism's importance in Sri Lanka – and the historical Sino-Sri Lankan Buddhist ties harking back to the Chinese Buddhist monk Fa Xian – Beijing has been strategically tapping into Buddhist narratives to promote continued cooperation and the implementation of BRI projects in the country. The UFWD and the BAC have been the primary actors in these exchanges, along with various Chinese government ministries, officials, media, and religious leaders.

Therefore, for Xi Jinping, religious diplomacy has become an essential facilitator for spreading awareness of Chinese traditional culture, the end goal of which is to further the CCP's domestic and foreign policy interests like enhancing China's legitimacy and soft power (Ashiwa and Wank, 2023: 61-62). While this is not a novel approach, China's utilization of religious diplomacy, notably Buddhism, is "unprecedented in scale and scope" (Ibid: 62). Simultaneously, actors engaged in China's domestic and international religious diplomacy must contend with the same issues of fragmentation and decentralization outlined in the above section. China's state promotion of religions such as Buddhism proceeds through the state administrative system. In the case of Buddhism, this means the UFWD, the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), and the BAC. Clerics, who are "both supported by and coopted by the state" and are well-versed in CCP ideology and state policy,

work as "bridges" between religion and the Chinese state (Ibid: 62, 63-65). The UFWD coordinates this system, including creating and cultivating institutional networks linking all three actors, which ensures the consistency of internal and external messages. Members of each department are also party members, which means they are subjected to party discipline, ideological training, and potential concurrent appointments in other bureaus (Ibid: 65). While these departments collaborate, inherent tensions and overlaps exist between them, which may lead to competing interests. For example, in 2018, SARA, which was previously a part of the government, was incorporated into the UFWD and, thus, the CCP – perhaps due to SARA's lacking administrative experience in the administration of domestic religious activities (Ashiwa and Wank, 2023: 65-66).

Likewise, with growing awareness of the CCP's increasing political influence and attempts to create alternative "ingroups" among developing countries, particularly in the Global South, several publications have examined China's party diplomacy[8] under the BRI. These studies have investigated the immediate and long-term effects of the CCP's party-to-party exchanges in Southeast Asia (Yao, 2023; Kuik and Rosli, 2023; Zhou, 2021; Calabrese and Cao, 2020) and Africa (Hodzi, 2020; Eisenman, 2023; Benabdallah, 2020), and how small states exercise agency vis-à-vis China and other foreign aid donors (Chen, 2023; Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 2018). Others have investigated the CCP's influencing practices targeting Sri Lankan political elites (Tudoroiu, 2021). This literature has identified party diplomacy as an increasingly important instrument in the CCP's toolbox under Xi Jinping. This strategy aims to advance the Party's foreign policy and party-specific interests, such as enhancing China's political soft power (Li, 2023) and strengthening its international position.

More broadly, party diplomacy seeks to promote "win-win" relationships with foreign political elites (Eisenman, 2023: 2445), promote the "China story" (Gates, 2022; Li, 2023: 144), and contribute to establishing the "community of common destiny" (Sun, 2018; China Daily, 2023). More narrowly, it furthers the CCP's political, economic, and social normative subsets (Tudoroiu, 2023: 217-218). Politically, this entails promoting the Party's views on Taiwan, the South China Sea, and other "hotspot issues" (Zhou, 2021), while "correcting misunderstandings" about China's culture, diplomacy, and history (Eisenman, 2023: 2446; Benabdallah, 2020: 101). Likewise, party diplomacy is used to fend off international criticism and generate legitimacy on sensitive issues such

8 Chinese scholars define party diplomacy as the exchanges and communication between the legal political parties of different countries (Li, 2023).

as human rights violations, including in minority areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet. This means that countries are "rewarded" with a higher frequency of visits by the CCP if they, for example, cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Hackenesch and Bader, 2020: 729) or are punished by exclusion from China's "garden of states" if they refuse to conform (Hodzi, 2020: 896). Economically, the CCP utilizes party diplomacy to incentivize and attract Chinese SOEs to invest and expand their portfolios in partner countries while socially promoting the benefits of cooperating with China and lining up with the BRI (Tudoroiu, 2023: 217).

China's party diplomacy, therefore, enhances the CCP's efforts to improve China's international position vis-à-vis the West by proactively influencing international relations, including through promoting concepts and narratives and generating support for the BRI among foreign political elites (Hackenesch and Bader, 2020: 729). At the same time, some scholars argue that the CCP's party diplomacy and its related officials have assumed a more assertive voice under Xi when it comes to extolling the benefits of China's governance model. Studies have detailed how the party channel is increasingly used as a "tool of authoritarian learning and diffusion," which shares experiences of China's development model and authoritarian political system with foreign parties (Ibid: 724, 730). The CCP has refuted that it wants to export its model (Sun, 2018), arguing instead that it follows the so-called "five no" approach, i.e., no interference in other countries' development path or internal affairs, no imposition of its will, no attachment of political strings to assistance, and no selfish pursuit of political gains through investment and financing cooperation, and that its party engagements "offer" China's political system, which foreign elites can adopt if they so choose (Li, 2023: 147, 159-163; Eisenman, 2023: 2448). However, it still reflects a "different type of ideological push" that carries "profound psychological and political impact over the choices and preferences" of foreign political parties and their respective political landscapes (Sun, 2016).

Like China's Buddhist diplomacy, the CCP's party diplomacy is forwarded by specific actors. The Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China (FMPRC), which has lost influence due to internal and external pressures, conducts diplomacy at the state or governmental level (Shambaugh, 2007: 28; Eisenman, 2023: 2446). These pressures include sidestepping by Party leaders from the top, who have prioritized domestic over foreign agendas and have denied access for FMPRC heads in the CCP's top leadership; internal (horizontal) competition from other ministries, especially the military, which has become increasingly active in Chinese diplomacy; and negative public perceptions of the FMPRC's work due to "scapegoating" of the ministry over

any diplomatic mishap (Sun, 2017: 420). Instead, party diplomacy is promoted directly under the party structure. This is done through the 中共中央对外联络部 (International Department of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee) (ID-CCP), which was founded in 1951 (Shambaugh, 2007) and has continuously expanded its relations by establishing a worldwide network of over 400 parties in more than 160 countries (Hackenesch and Bader, 2020: 724; Beijing Review, 2018). In this way, the ID-CCP's work functions as a type of *Track II* diplomacy alongside official government relations, particularly in democratic contexts (Bader and Hackenesch, 2020: 228, 242). Through the party channel, the ID-CCP reaches high-level decision-makers in formal government functions and influential external political actors, enabling flexible, informal, and interpersonal exchanges (Hackenesch and Bader, 2020: 728). Additionally, the ID-CCP's work does not necessitate the announcement of outcomes, making the party channel less public and transparent (Shambaugh, 2007; Eisenman, 2023: 2446; Zhou, 2021: 457).

Studies have detailed how the ID-CCP's activities have expanded in recent years to include parties from all ideological standpoints (Benabdallah, 2020: 98), including opposition parties, power brokers operating behind the scenes, potential future leaders, and various influential state representatives (Hackenesch and Bader, 2020: 723; Bader and Hackenesch, 2020: 229). This research highlights that China is increasingly paying attention to the "volatility" of domestic politics, where changing governments may challenge the CCP's party diplomacy, as party elites are replaced by politicians less enthusiastic about following China's preferences. By simultaneously engaging ruling and opposition parties, as well as other potential influential actors, the CCP seeks to ensure stability in party relations despite changing administrations (Zhou, 2021: 457, 460-461; Shambaugh, 2007: 32; Benabdallah, 2020: 99, 103). This contradicts research arguing that the CCP has solely focused on the ruling parties and elites, including in Sri Lanka (Tudoroiu, 2021: 2). Building on documentary research, these studies have focused on China's political influence in Sri Lanka by examining the CCP's elite influencing, with a particular emphasis on China's promotion of ideational content (Tudoroiu, 2021, 2022).

Article 4 complements this research by providing in-depth, interview-based insights into the CCP's party diplomacy in Sri Lanka. It documents how the ID-CCP's work, including through the department's "Bureau I" and Chinese ambassador to Sri Lanka, Qi Zhenhong, has expanded to include opposition parties and minority groups in recent years. Additionally, it provides insights into specific party exchanges since Mahinda Rajapaksa's (2005–2015) administration and how diverse Sri Lankan actors have reacted to the ID-

CCP's emphasis on autocratic promotion and diffusion targeting Sri Lankan political parties and individual elites. Since the CCP's ideational promotion is integral to its diplomatic strategies, including religious and party diplomacy, the next section will examine what China's ideational content and contestation with the West entails.

3.4. China's Ideational Promotion and Contestation of the LIO

As noted in the introduction, the BRI is many things to many people, and perceptions of the initiative vary considerably in the international system. However, one thing is certain: Since its launch in 2013, the initiative has been a core component of the CCP's foreign policy. This has earned it a reputation as a "broad, flexible envelope" for different actors to pursue various goals while ensuring that China's strategic objectives are met (Taylor and Garlick, 2024: 2). According to the Party, one of these goals is to establish a multipolar world and oppose "ideological confrontation in the name of the so-called rules-based order" (FMPRC, 2023). China's promotion of ideational content through the BRI has been significantly strengthened to achieve this, in line with Xi's quest to enhance China's international image and standing. This has prompted international scrutiny and criticism. The initiative has been perceived as a tool enabling China's reemergence at the center of the world's political stage, resulting in concerns about the country's "Sinocentric order" (Rolland, 2017: 3, 132), which threatens Western "universal" norms, values, and governance practices (Salamatin, 2021; Larkin, 2023; Faiz, 2019; CFR, 2020).

In response to China's growing emphasis on ideational promotion, a growing body of scholarship has examined Beijing's desire to reposition its values and ideals in global governance through norm-shaping (Carrai, 2023: 35). These studies have analyzed the BRI's role in China's grand strategy to ascend to great power status (Zhou and Esteban, 2018: 496) and questioned how this affects China's contestation of the international order and its image in the Global South (Benabdallah, 2019; Kim and Kim, 2023). However, it has proven difficult for researchers to clearly define what the BRI's "fluffy" ideational concepts like CSFM (Zeng, 2016; Zhang, 2018), win-win benefits (Liu, 2014), and SSC (SCIO, 2023) mean. Consequently, studies have contended that China's ideational content remains vague and flexible for interpretation, emphasizing the country's "different" role in international politics through leaning on "traditional" Chinese values such as Confucianism

and Buddhism. At the same time, it promotes China's adherence to liberal ideals such as free trade, interdependence, and mutual benefits and underlines Beijing's emphasis on inclusivity, diversity, and multilateralism. Studies have, therefore, questioned whether China's ideational content will suffice in its global normative contestation (Yan, 2018: 5-10), engaged directly with the reception of China's ideational content by actors in BRI host countries (Tudoroiu, 2022; Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 2019), and examined whether China's dual ideational and material strategy challenges or facilitates this approach (Garlick and Qin, 2023).

This research has provided vital insights into China's contemporary influencing efforts by highlighting the CCP's intensified bid to enhance China's image through the BRI, including through ideational promotion. Aside from promoting alternative norms and ideals, this bid has included creating and promulgating alternative organizations and institutions (Rolland, 2017: 129-130; Tudoroiu, 2022: 264-265). Simultaneously branding China as a "different" great power, a developing country, and a champion of multilateralism and similar norms that resonate widely in the Global South – particularly in post-colonial contexts – has become one of the CCP's strategies for gaining legitimacy while pursuing its interests (Benabdallah, 2019: 103). China's goal of establishing an alternative "ingroup" of states that have been "badgered" or "lectured" by the West due to their authoritarian traits and human rights violations (Rolland, 2017: 140, 149) appears to be a natural continuation of this strategy.

Findings from these inquiries suggest that Global South actors have altered their behavior to some extent in response to the CCP's wishes and that China's attempts to influence through ideational promotion have achieved some success (Garlick and Qin, 2023; Kuik and Rosli, 2023). However, they also emphasize that China's ideational content remains vague and unfocused. Therefore, non-discursive (material) practices, such as trade and infrastructure projects, are crucial in convincing actors of the merits of adhering to Beijing's normative promotion. These insights, along with interviews with diverse Sri Lankan actors (detailed in section 2.2), spurred the research focus of *article 3*, which concerns the reception of China's influencing efforts in Sri Lanka from a bottom-up perspective. Aside from contributing new empirical data on how diverse actors perceive China's presence, this article critically examined the extent to which material benefits or ideational content are the deciding factors in China's influence. This query was continued in *article 4*, albeit with a different focal point: China's party-to-party exchanges with Sri Lankan political parties and its autocratic promotion and diffusion targeting political elites. It bears repeating that China's bid to establish itself as an alternative

governance pole to the US will, in no small part, depend on China's diffusion of authoritarian learning through the party channel. This diffusion, in turn, will depend on China's economic clout. These arguments will be elucidated in sections 5 and 6.

3.5. Summary

This section outlined existing literature on the interplay between China's domestic and foreign policymaking practices, which contributed to the focus of *article 2* on examining the effects and reception of "fragmented authoritarianism" between the CCP and SOEs on the BRI's experimental implementation in HIP. Likewise, it detailed the growing body of scholarship on the CCP's different diplomatic strategies and the actors involved in these practices. This included highlighting China's Buddhist diplomacy and the role of the UFWD, which was the focus of *article 1*, and the ID-CCP's party diplomacy in Sri Lanka, the focal point of *article 4*. Finally, it reviewed studies on China's increasingly assertive push to reorient the international system and influence global governance practices by sharpening the CCP's ideational promotion. This was the guiding theme in *article 3*, which evaluated the reception of China's influencing efforts in Sri Lanka. These contributions are expanded upon in section 5.

4. Theoretical Approaches

This section provides an overview of the theoretical approaches utilized in the dissertation's articles and brings these into conversation with the research questions. Since *article 1* investigated China's Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka, the concept of strategic narratives was selected as a theoretical lens to explore the CCP's promotion of narrative content and its reception by a Sri Lankan audience. *Article 2* employed a dual narrative analysis and policy evaluation approach to determine the goals of CCP and SOE narratives in HIP and assess whether they were achieved, including for the Sri Lankan government. *Article 3* focused on the reception of China's foreign political and economic influence in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the CCP's ideational and material influence efforts in relation to Sri Lanka's history, economic and political situation, and the geopolitical contestation over ideational content, such as norms, values, and governance practices. *Article 4* examined China's role as an "Authoritarian Gravity Center" for Sri Lanka, including the reception of CCP influencing attempts through party diplomacy in terms of autocratic promotion and diffusion. Finally, the section summarizes the dissertation's theoretical findings and provides some reflections.

4.1. Strategic Narratives

In *article 1*, the concept of strategic narratives was utilized to dissect the contents of the BAC's Buddhist narratives promoted by the UFWD and how Sri Lankan actors received these. The concept of strategic narratives as a field of study has been growing in recent years. Strategic narrative analysis builds upon the concept of soft power, i.e., the "ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2008: 94), because determining whether and how soft power works as a tool of influence is challenging (Roselle et al., 2014: 70). Similarly, while we know that religion (Seib, 2013: 2) and narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 4) are

essential drivers of (political) culture and, therefore, crucial to public diplomacy, studies are only beginning to assess their role in these strategies.

The contemporary emphasis on strategic narratives can primarily be attributed to an increasing recognition of the co-construction of narratives by diverse actors across various levels of the international system in the digital age. This simultaneous construction under a changing communications environment and dynamic media ecology has caused power to become diffuse, complicating efforts by leading countries, or great powers, to justify and implement strategic narratives to define the international system (Ibid: 1). Strategic narratives present a solution to this problem: they offer political actors the means to construct a "shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics" (Ibid: 2), through which they can structure the international system and shape expected actor behavior (O'Shea, 2018). Strategic narratives, therefore, aim to structure responses to developing events and have the potential to shape the interests, identity, and understanding of international relations in the short and long term. Consequently, they allow actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change their discursive environment while offering interactions between political and media organizations and the public (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 2). The three primary types of strategic narratives are identity narratives, focusing on the projection of (constantly renegotiated and contested) identities, system narratives, which concern the structure of the international system and how actors should understand international order, and issue or policy narratives, which attempt to influence the development of specific policies (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 5-7; Miskimmon et al., 2017: 8).

The CCP utilizes all types of narratives, such as identity narratives related to China's subjugation at the hands of the West, i.e., the 百年国耻 ("century of humiliation") (Liao, 2017), system narratives concerning China's rise in the international system, and issue narratives promoting specific Chinese policy goals. This is part of the Party's strategy to favorably shape perceptions of China's values and goals in the regional and international context (Lams, 2018; Hinck et al., 2018). Strategic narratives are also increasingly utilized to forward the BRI's implementation (van Noort and Colley, 2021). This includes integrating identity, system, and issue narratives with more profound and stable "master narratives," which exist in the international sphere beyond individual target states (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021: 418). A master narrative is a "dominant storyline that permeates and structures knowledge, including lower-level narratives, on a certain broad topic" (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2019: 388). One example is the master narrative concerning the dangers posed by China's rise and the need to address it, which invokes "more

deeply institutionalized master narratives about power transitions and the rise and fall of great powers" (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021: 418).

Practically speaking, the new media ecology, including the evolving online communications environment, presents both challenges and opportunities for the projection and circulation of strategic narratives. Political and non-political actors may contest narratives disseminated through online channels and platforms; however, controlling narratives that are rapidly and widely shared is challenging. Simultaneously, narratives can reach a broader range of actors, increasing transparency and interactivity (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 10-11). As argued in *article 1*, in the case of China's strategic narratives in Sri Lanka, both governments have attempted to control domestic narratives to mitigate criticism and improve China's image. At the same time, Sri Lanka's democratic, albeit opaque, media ecology enables actors to easily engage with and discuss narratives. In this way, Sri Lankan recipients of China's narratives are neither "blank slates" upon which narratives can be easily impressed nor lack agency in deciding whether to accept or reject these discourses.

Therefore, while *article 1* primarily focused on China's projection of Buddhist strategic narratives to Sri Lanka, it also analyzed how the Sri Lankan audience received, reproduced, and co-opted them. It is in this reception that "any attractiveness, engagement and scope for persuasion are located and experienced" (Skuse et al., 2011; Miskimmon et al., 2013: 75). Nevertheless, the article also assumed that the Sri Lankan side followed a degree of "narrative hedging," leaving out undesirable parts of the narratives to avoid confrontation with China (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021: 435). Finally, the article argued that since China's strategic narratives are circulated within the official Chinese Buddhist context before their projection to Sri Lanka through high-level meetings or English-language statements, including in newspapers, they serve interrelated purposes for the CCP. They disseminate knowledge of and legitimize the CCP's views on and use of religious diplomacy for Chinese elites, including officials, while ensuring the uniformity of narratives. Simultaneously, the intended audiences of narratives reproduced by the Sri Lankan government and Buddhist communities are diverse. For Sri Lanka, the statements legitimize the government's policies on Chinese investments and the BRI among the public, mitigate criticism aimed at the government and parliament, and generate support for Chinese investments and Sino-Sri Lankan cooperation among the clergy. The additional findings and theoretical insights of *article 1* are discussed in section 5.1.

4.2. Narrative Analysis and Policy Evaluation

Article 2 took a different approach to narratives. It aimed to assess how narratives influence policies and their impact on policy outcomes, employing a dual narrative analysis and policy evaluation approach. In the first step, narrative analysis outlined the contents and goals of statements by the CCP, CMG, and Sri Lankan actors in promoting the "Shekou Model" in HIP under the BRI. As the name suggests, narrative analysis examines how narratives give meaning to context, actors, and events. It argues that narratives are integral to social interactions since they enable the elaboration, justification, and explanation of actions, decisions, and behavior. In this way, narratives are "constitutive of political discourse and central to the discursive construction of social and political facts" (Oppermann and Spencer, 2022: 120), meaning that narrative analysis focuses on how the world is said to be. Consequently, narrative analysis concerning foreign policy seeks to identify and reconstruct narratives in these discourses. This analytical framework includes three core elements: The setting, which focuses on examining the context in which narratives unfold; the characters, who drive the narrative forward; temporal emplotment, concerning the order, duration, or sequence of events; and causal emplotment, i.e., the causal relationship between settings, characters, events, and actions (Oppermann and Spencer, 2022: 120-121). In the case of *article 2*, narrative analysis focused on defining what the CCP and CMG wanted to achieve by "selling" narratives concerning the Shekou Model to Sri Lanka.

However, measuring the degree of a policy's "success" – and the success of its elicited response among its target audience – is challenging. Therefore, in the second step, *article 2* employed a policy evaluation lens to analyze the reception of these narratives, including whether and for whom they had achieved their goals. This encompassed considerations of the discursive nature of successful or failed policies: Rather than being based on objective facts or evidence, policy successes or failures are constructed, declared, and argued over by stakeholders and observers in "framing contests" (Bovens and 't Hart, 2016: 654). Because values, positions, interests, time, and culture are equally crucial to observable policy attributes, policy evaluation is a normative and political exercise that is "fundamentally ambivalent" (Bovens and 't Hart, 2016: 654-5). Alternatively, because policy outcomes are caught between programmatic and political evaluation schemes, a policy's reputation does not necessarily reflect its performance (Bovens and 't Hart, 2016: 655-8). Due to this ambivalence, policy outcomes often lie somewhere between the extremes of success and failure, belonging to both categories in some respects according to facts and interpretation (McConnell, 2010, 2015, 2016). While the former is

associated with a foundationalist or rationalist perspective, the latter is associated with a constructivist or interpretivist perspective.

In any case, policy evaluation literature discerns between three primary and interlinked policy dimensions. The first is process, which concerns the government's efforts to produce policy decisions. If, for example, governments cannot gain authoritative approval for policy initiatives, this is considered a failure. The second dimension, program, refers to the production of policies aimed at achieving different goals. If a government encounters implementation difficulties, fails to meet desired outcomes or provide benefits for its intended target groups, or cannot meet specific moral, ethical, or legal criteria and attract support, its program has failed. The third and final dimension, politics, concerns the government's efforts to achieve political outcomes, and failure in this regard may constitute reputational damage, chaotic agendas, damage to core governance values, and opposition to remaining political benefits (McConnell, 2015: 232-6; McConnell, 2016: 669-70). Policy failure is temporal because policy processes are continually evaluated in terms of when they are conducted and the period being evaluated (McConnell, 2015: 232).

Based on these evaluative approaches, McConnell argues that a policy is successful if "it achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal" (McConnell, 2010: 351). If, on the other hand, the policy does not fundamentally achieve its goals despite small successes, and if opposition to the policy remains, it has failed (McConnell, 2015: 230). Consequently, policy failures are linked to issues of politics and power, contested views about the existence of failure, and the power to produce "an authoritative and accepted failure narrative" (McConnell, 2015: 222). This means that failures are rarely "unequivocal and absolute" and that benchmarks of success are subjective and opaque (McConnell, 2015: 231). The implications of these theoretical insights and the findings of *article 2* are discussed in section 5.2.

4.2.1. A Note on Narratives

As noted in the preceding sections, this dissertation has examined Chinese Buddhist strategic narratives and narratives concerning the Shekou Model, focusing on how these have been received in the Sri Lankan context. However, a few clarifications on the use of narratives are in order. This dissertation defines narratives as "discourses with a clear sequential order that connects events in a meaningful way […] and […] offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it" (Hinchman and Hinchman, 2001: xvi). Moreover, it presumes that narratives are central to human relations, shape our world, and

constrain behavior. The fascination with narratives has expanded in recent years, and political actors increasingly attempt to use narratives strategically. This entails their intent to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors, extend their influence, manage expectations, and change their discursive environments. The process is facilitated by the advent of the internet and various global and interconnected media platforms, constituting a dynamic communication environment in which ordinary people can interact with political and media organizations, as well as with one another (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 1-3).

This dissertation acknowledges that narrative analysis can have certain limitations, such as evaluating their efficiency and direct results on policy (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021: 417). For example, China's simultaneous promotion of material and ideational benefits complicates the evaluation of the extent to which narratives or economic incentives, such as investments, serve the CCP's foreign policy purposes. Nevertheless, the dissertation argues that examining narratives remains a valuable approach to understanding Chinese foreign policy, as it provides crucial insights into how countries like China wish to present themselves and be perceived by both domestic and international audiences.

First, the CCP is deliberately and proactively utilizing narratives to portray its domestic and international efforts in a benevolent light. As the case of China's Buddhist strategic narratives in Sri Lanka demonstrates, ideational content, such as narratives, is promoted alongside "hard" investments, like infrastructure projects, to enhance the legitimacy of the CCP and its cooperation partners, including the Sri Lankan government. Second, the narratives promoted by Chinese foreign policy actors, such as specific departments like the UFWD and ID-CCP, individual officials (e.g., ambassadors, religious leaders), state media outlets, and so on, have been approved of and often constructed by the Party leadership for specific purposes. However, this does not mean that individual actors do not rely on or utilize existing narratives and create or co-opt new ones to achieve their goals, highlighting the "Fragmented Power" of China's state capacity.

Therefore, analyzing Chinese narratives promoted under the BRI sheds light on both overt and covert policy priorities and individual actor interests. Examining the promotion and reception of narratives offers a concrete lens through which to investigate China's soft power strategies, their efficiency, and what this implies for China's "hard power" efforts, such as economic instruments. The dissertation's focus on narratives should thus be attributed to a desire to provide a more holistic and nuanced picture of China's influence

and power. The following sections will elaborate on the use of alternative lenses through which to analyze this.

4.3. The BRI as an Instrument of Political and Economic Influence

Article 3 focuses on the reception of China's political and economic influence in Sri Lanka under the BRI. To this end, it utilizes the concepts of foreign influence proposed by Aidt, Albornoz, and Hauk, as well as economic statecraft and the "five modes of economic influence" associated with Gong, Goh, Ferchen, and Mattlin. To start, political economists such as Aidt, Albornoz, and Hauk have argued that domestic politics and factors determining domestic policies should be viewed in relation to foreign influencing attempts by foreign state and non-state actors. According to their definition, foreign influence denotes instances when "a foreign power (a state or a non-state actor) seeks to affect a policy outcome in a (often less powerful) target country that is *de jure* outside of its jurisdiction" (Aidt, Albornoz, and Hauk, 2019: 432). A "foreign power" may encompass various foreign policy actors pursuing divergent strategies to achieve their objectives. Therefore, foreign influencing processes encompass competition and conflicts of interest between domestic and international actors, as well as their differing priorities.

Aidt, Albornoz, and Hauk identify three primary intervention strategies utilized by foreign powers to influence the policy choices of their intended target countries. These include agreement interventions, which concern instances where foreign powers use negotiated bilateral agreements, such as free trade agreements and tax treaties, to influence the policy choices of their intended targets; policy interventions, which denotes the utilization of strategic rewards or sanctions, such as trade agreements, aid and concessional loans, and boycotts, as influencing instruments; and institution interventions, which refers to attempts by the foreign power to change the governing institutions and influence the future policy choices of the target country. This is achieved, for example, through regime interventions (such as covert operations to overthrow leaders) and conflict interventions (such as actions that instigate, prolong, or end civil wars). Political economists, therefore, contend that foreign influence is shaped in equal parts by economic and political interests and that these two aspects are often mutually reinforcing, operating through multiple channels and actors simultaneously. Finally, the choice of intervention strategy depends on factors internal to the foreign power or target country, as well as factors

specific to their bilateral relationship and the broader international system (Ibid: 428, 438-440, 451, 471).

Studies have argued that China's foreign influence under the BRI has taken the form of all three types of interventions; therefore, the initiative has been conceptualized as an example of economic statecraft, i.e., the use of financial means to achieve foreign policy goals (see, for example, Ferchen and Mattlin, 2023; Gong, 2019). The efficacy of China's economic incentives to gain international political support, including through the BRI, has been examined by numerous scholars. Many of these studies have acknowledged that China actively employs soft power strategies, such as strategic narratives, to advance its interests through alternative channels (Sun, Kapstein, and Shapiro, 2024). Consequently, material benefits and ideational content are inextricably linked, adding to the complexity of measuring political influence (Aidt, Albornoz, and Hauk, 2019) and determining whether foreign influence attempts yield political outcomes (Sun, Kapstein, and Shapiro, 2024: 1).

Literature on China's influencing attempts has, therefore, differed in its evaluation of the extent to which the CCP and other Party, government, and business actors have altered the domestic political dynamics of BRI host countries according to their goals (Mendes and Wang, 2023). Part of this literature has argued that the initiative poses a threat to the international order and global governance regimes (see, for example, Rolland, 2017; Doshi, 2021; CFR, 2020). Others have inferred the intent and ability of different actors to achieve their overt and covert goals based on select official documents and their perception of the Chinese "grand strategy" (Ferchen and Mattlin, 2023: 981; for examples, see Brands and Sullivan, 2020; Goldstein, 2020). Some studies have focused on the BRI's utility in influencing host country governments. For example, scholars have detailed how countries that are economically dependent on Chinese investments may support China in international forums (Shahid, 2021), showcasing China's strategic use of economic ties to convince elites to take specific policy positions (Sun, Kapstein, and Shapiro, 2024: 2) or ensure positive public perceptions of China's presence (Sanny and Selormey, 2021). Another part of the literature has argued that the BRI's impact should neither be dismissed nor overestimated, retaining a middle-ground approach. At the regional level, studies have shown that while Chinese investments seek to shape political sentiments, they have not led to long-term influence among political elites in Southeast Asian BRI countries (Sun, Kapstein, and Shapiro, 2024: 1-2, 11). Likewise, on the systemic level, the initiative has failed to forge a "Sinocentric order" (Gong, 2019: 637) or impact global governance patterns (Mendes and Wang, 2023), even if it has the potential to increase China's overall influence.

In this way, despite claims about the BRI's influence, many studies have struggled to provide concrete evidence of its foreign policy outcomes. Perceptions of China as "all-knowing and all-powerful when it comes to economic statecraft" have contributed to a degree of misinterpretation, suggesting that any foreign policy outcome is part of a deliberate strategy to increase China's power. Examples include China's alleged "debt trap diplomacy" at the HIP in Sri Lanka. Consequently, the validity of perceptions regarding China's prowess in charting sophisticated, long-term plans to enhance its global power through economic strategies is increasingly questioned (Ferchen and Mattlin, 2023: 979-980). At the same time, scholarship on China's foreign influence has emphasized that China's strategies are challenged, for example, by regional preferences for US dominance, geopolitical rivalry, and China's assertive stance on the South China Sea issue (Gong, 2019: 638). Therefore, China's influencing attempts may lead to negative perceptions or resentment of Chinese international engagements (Sun, Kapstein, and Shapiro, 2024: 2). Due to these and related difficulties, analysts have argued that the BRI may have been a strategic miscalculation for Beijing: The initiative has not only been unnecessary for China's participation in and support of infrastructure and investment projects but has also heightened political and strategic wariness towards China among regional states and other major powers (Gong, 2019: 659).

On this background, Ferchen and Mattlin have proposed a new typology of Chinese "modes of economic influence," which builds on Goh's work on China's power and influence (Goh, 2014, 2016, 2020). These five modes, namely, the ability to prevail, preference multiplication, persuasion, informal influence, and unanticipated influence, encompass circumstances in which China can likely intentionally achieve its desired outcomes and when its influence is limited or its interests are undermined. The ability to prevail, conceptualized as a "stick" approach, refers to China's capacity and willingness to employ coercive power to induce other countries to act in accordance with its wishes. While Goh believes this is a high standard for measuring China's influence and that a range of different ways in which China seeks and may achieve influence needs to be explored, Ferchen and Mattlin argue it is still a valid mode because China's willingness and ability to use economic coercion or punitive economic measures to "achieve political or geopolitical ends has risen dramatically" (Ferchen and Mattlin, 2023: 985).

Nevertheless, these coercive tactics often have inconclusive outcomes, requiring further deliberation. Preference multiplication entails instances in which China's interests and preferences overlap or converge with those of target countries or specific actors. Since this mode focuses on economic

inducements, it functions as a "carrot" approach. Because the BRI focuses on enhancing trade, investment, and financial cooperation, and promoting mutually beneficial "win-win" development that aligns with the goals of host countries, the initiative can be viewed as an example of preference multiplication. Persuasion refers to how China or the target country understands or perceives convergence and divergence in their interests, meaning that perceptions and narratives play a central role. Informal influence encompasses considerations of economic activity that fall outside the purview of state authorities, including operations by actors that span the official and unofficial, sanctioned and unsanctioned, and legal and illegal spheres (Ferchen and Mattlin, 2023: 987-988, 992-993; see also Lee, 2018). Unanticipated influence accounts for the effects of informal Chinese influence and broader structural trends in China's and the global economy, which may have real implications for China's foreign and security relations. Finally, a potential sixth mode, latent structural power, may need to be incorporated into future studies, as there is a possibility that China could employ structural power in the future (Ferchen and Mattlin, 2023: 994-995, 998). Following these definitions, this dissertation conceptualizes the BRI as an instrument of Chinese foreign influence and economic statecraft.

Notably, numerous CCP, government, and business actors with differing goals and strategies promote Chinese foreign policy (Ye, 2019). Therefore, China refers to the broad array of actors employed in these efforts. Drawing on Gong's analysis of the BRI's fate in Southeast Asia (Gong, 2019: 639), *article 3* examined China's foreign political and economic influence in Sri Lanka by analyzing Sri Lankan responses to China's influence efforts under the BRI. By utilizing the three intervention types outlined by Aidt, Albornoz, and Hauk, in conjunction with Ferchen and Mattlin's five "modes of economic influence," the article captures instances of China's influence strategies and evaluates whether these efforts have resulted in increased Chinese influence. This was achieved by analyzing the ideational contents promoted by the CCP and how diverse Sri Lankan actors react to this strategy. Simultaneously, the article questions whether the importance of material benefits outweighs ideational aspects. These findings will be explored in section 5.3.

4.4. Autocratic Promotion, Diffusion, and Elite Agency

Article 4 explores the reception of China's promotion and diffusion of autocratic values in Sri Lanka under the ID-CCP's party diplomacy, including reflections on the agency of BRI host countries. To this end, the article leans on the "Authoritarian Gravity Center" (AGC) concept developed by Kneuer and Demmelhuber. The AGC concept seeks to identify the external push and pull factors contributing to democratic regressions or autocratization processes, including the consolidation of existing autocratic states (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2021A).

According to Kneuer and Demmelhuber, autocratization denotes the process of change from regime-type democracy to autocracy, encompassing both "rapid" and "slow deaths" of democratic qualities such as hybridization through democratic backsliding. AGCs are thus defined as regimes that constitute a direct lever or indirect force of attraction for countries in their (geopolitical) proximity, representing the willingness and ability to influence their regional neighborhoods through foreign policy instruments (Ibid: 5, 7-8). To be classified as an AGC, a country must have had a moderate autocracy score[9] for at least five years; be strongly inclined towards dominance vis-à-vis its geopolitical proximity, with significant immaterial and material capacities deriving from its geographic size, economic power, resource wealth, military power, or protagonist stance in nurturing ideological discourses; and hold a high degree of linkage (density of ties and cross-border flows) with its target states (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2021B: 37).

Kneuer and Demmelhuber contend that China has developed into an AGC, presenting a "concrete case and source of autocratic practices, ideas, and norms," including through the proliferation of initiatives like the BRI (Ibid: 33). As of 2025, China's BTI score is 3.18, denoting hard-line autocracy (BTI, 2025B). Along with AGCs like Russia, Iran, and Venezuela, China advocates for a multipolar world order, intentionally denounces the Western-led order, and strives to gain regional influence by advancing its autocratic and illiberal mindset through a carefully crafted foreign policy. This is achieved by establishing or utilizing existing bilateral or regional cooperation schemes, which may be informal or institutionalized, and include norms, ideas,

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9 Kneuer and Demmelhuber utilize the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), which measures the development status and governance of political and economic transformation processes (See BTI, 2025A).

structures, processes, or best-practice models in specific policy fields, such as through organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Ibid: 35).

The goals and motivations of the "sender" and "target" of autocratic promotion and diffusion differ. The sender, autocratic promoter, or AGC may attempt to prevent democratic tendencies (such as uprisings or liberalization), bolster like-minded elites not yet in office to secure future autocratic allies, or consolidate neighboring autocratic regimes and their incumbent(s). As such, the AGC's "modus operandi" is to garner external regime legitimacy and support and to enhance the region's international standing and influence. The AGC seeks to stabilize its regime and its contiguous environment while cementing its internal and external legitimacy by conveying legitimacy messages to garner widespread support and enhance its international voice (Ibid: 38-39). Conversely, target states are characterized by power asymmetries with the AGC; they are either defective democracies, hybrid regimes, or autocracies and may be members of the regional orders where the AGC is the protagonist country (Ibid: 28). With a BTI score of 6.20, Sri Lanka is classified as a defective democracy (BTI, 2025C). Target state motivations to adopt autocratic elements from the AGC can be categorized according to their mechanism. In the case of autocratic promotion, the target state may choose to comply with coercive measures to satisfy its economic or security interests. In the case of diffusion, the target state may view the AGC as a role model, offering solutions to problems or improvements to institutional settings or policies. In either case, it is assumed that the adopter perceives a gain in internal or external legitimation (Ibid: 42-43).

Promotion and diffusion are the primary mechanisms by which AGCs disseminate autocratic ideals and practices. Both are actor-centered and emphasize the domestic and international preferences of autocratic actors, including those of political elites who wish to export or adopt illiberal or autocratic elements. Regime change processes cannot be attributed exclusively to either mechanism, meaning that AGCs function as both push and pull factors for the spread of autocracy. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the degree to which either mechanism is at play (Ibid: 29-31, 36). Promotion denotes autocracy's active and intentional export through conditionality and other forms of leverage. It is typified by degrees of intensity ranging from control to hard leverage and subtle leverage. Control is the maximum level of influence achieved through (military) coercion and encompasses the imposition of regime types resulting from military intervention, defeat, or occupation. Hard leverage, the "carrot-and-stick" approach, is purposive and planned but occurs through offers of material incentives with a less intensive, though coercive

degree of influence. Subtle leverage is a non-coercive and voluntary sub-mechanism that relies on instruments such as strategic calculations (actors bargain, engage in rhetorical action, and adapt specific policies based on calculations of consequences) or normative suasion (actors internalize new norms and rules based on reflections, arguments, and a consensus on their appropriateness). Promotion may result in military, economic, financial, ideational, and other types of influence, and it is often a gradual and dynamic process (Ibid.: 41, 45). Finally, promotion encompasses a form of agency, intentionality to advance autocratic rule, and an underlying reason with roots in, for example, ideological, strategic, altruistic, self-interested, or calculative considerations that are separate from the intention. Therefore, autocratic promoters may rely on both rational and ideological motivations. The type and degree of direct influence play a central role, especially since agency may encompass intended, passive, or indirect forms of influence. The duration of influence is equally crucial since long-term influence increases the likelihood of adoption (Ibid: 45-46).

Conversely, diffusion is the passive spread of ideas, institutions, processes, policies, and/or policy elements through emulation and demonstration effects. Emulation embodies purposive and planned transfers of autocratic elements through collaborations between local and external actors. Demonstration effects occur when significant actors in the target state stand to gain from the change and when prerequisite conditions in the AGC and target state are similar (Ibid). In contrast to coercive promotion, diffusion entails voluntary adoption or transfer by the target state. To investigate instances of diffusion, one must identify temporal sequences of adoption or change that depend on opportunities (such as gaining power) and pressures to find solutions for problems that also exist in the AGC (for example, media coverage by oppositional groups). The autocratic promoter must be perceived as an attractive, successful role model with transferable policy elements that target state elites can emulate to consolidate an illiberal governance model. Practices of autocratic promotion and diffusion occur in four arenas of action: The institutional arena, embodying measures aimed at modifying existing political structures or the constitutional level; the policy arena, i.e., goals, content, or instrument corresponding to the AGC's visions and goals of "antagonizing the 'democratic' community," especially in the economic field; the ideational arena, concerning the spread of ideologies, ideas, values, and attitudes facilitating acceptance and support, including through the creation of transnational networks; and the arena of administrative techniques, meaning measures occurring below formal institutional levels (Ibid: 44-45).

Structural factors, such as linkage (ties in the economic, intergovernmental, technocratic, social, informational, and civil society spheres), economic asymmetries, and resonance structures established within a regional environment, are intervening variables that influence both mechanism types. These either facilitate or restrict the learning and cooperation processes of autocratic regimes. For diffusion, structural similarity (such as economic and social status), communication channels, a somewhat homogeneous background in history, culture (including religion, self-identity, and values), language, and the similarity of political behavior are especially crucial (Ibid: 27, 29, 36, 42). Independent variables include the direct, actor-driven influences and neutral transmissions on behalf of the AGCs (Ibid: 43-44). That is, the similarity of the AGC and target states may be as significant as spatial proximity, and collaborative networks and frequent interactions are critical facilitating factors for promoting and diffusing autocratic content. Therefore, the regional context constitutes a more decisive factor for the spread of autocratic practices than the international one (Ibid: 28). This does not mean autocratization happens in a vacuum; rather, forming a "regional regime identity" with autocratic traits will inevitably have international repercussions. Autocratic resilience and autocratization should, therefore, be investigated across regions by tracing complex interactions and facilitating comparisons between similar mechanisms (Ibid: 34).

Finally, while the BRI is a "pluralist endeavor" with no unified agenda (Schneider, 2021: 24), meaning that diverse Chinese ministries, government departments, and bureaus attempting to reach their goals and vying for support from the central government and the CCP shape the BRI's progress (Ye, 2019), the role of BRI host country actors should also be considered (Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 2019: 386-387). These local actors proactively connect with their Chinese counterparts to achieve their goals, in contrast to international narratives on the initiative's implementation that often render BRI recipients passive and hapless victims of the CCP's strategies (Schneider, 2021: 18; Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 2019; Kuik and Rosli, 2023; Hodzi, 2020). Political elites are critical in this regard due to their central role at the heart of domestic and international politics (Cotta, 2018). *Article 4* defined Sri Lankan political elites as the small group of high-level political officials (the President, their official or unofficial advisors, cabinet ministers, and other influential politicians from the ruling and opposition parties) who can make, enforce, and ensure the implementation of—as well as exercise disproportionate power over or influence on—domestic and foreign policies (this definition builds on Hodzi, 2020: 891; Kuik and Rosli, 2023: 36). These elites, who hail from across the Sri Lankan party spectrum, are the primary targets of China's

influencing efforts, including the promotion and diffusion of autocracy. Simultaneously, elites have their motivations for engaging with China's strategies and treat interactions with the CCP as "an additional channel to promote pragmatic cooperation between national and local governments." At the party level, these interactions are driven by "the party's idiosyncratic needs, which could be ideological, symbolic, and/or material" (Yao, 2023: 584).

It is crucial to examine the role of elites since they often adapt or reject ideational content for instrumental reasons related to their political advancement and because influencing processes may eventually convince them of the importance of adhering to certain norms and values (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990: 291-293). The influencing process, in turn, directly shapes domestic politics, including specific practices (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). This is problematic in the context of human rights because ideational content and governance practices prescribing adherence to or rejection of human rights frameworks may be incorporated into domestic practices depending on material factors. Governments may instrumentally change their human rights practices to access material benefits, such as foreign aid, or to stay in power during domestic opposition (Risse and Sikkink, 1999: 10). Concurrently, governments balance communicative pressures related to preserving their image and enhancing their international legitimacy. This may take the form of "ingroups" or "outgroups" of normative communities between states, resulting in states seeking the benefits of group membership rather than the costs of norm violations (Ibid: 37-38). This is particularly important because influencing often occurs during tumultuous periods following wars, political crises, and other periods of domestic or international restructuring. During this critical period, when existing norms, values, and ideals have been discredited, actors seek alternative ideational content, offering opportunities for political gains and coalitional realignment (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990: 284). This highlights the need to analyze the domestic contexts of BRI host countries. By examining local dynamics, the motivations and strategies of local elites in managing China's influence, including ideational promotion, can be better understood and contextualized. Failure to do so may obscure regional dynamics shedding light on the relationship between actor concerns and geopolitical contestations between China and the West (Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 2018: 387, 391).

Therefore, *article 4* conceptualized China's party diplomacy under the BRI as an elite influencing process that includes autocracy promotion and diffusion. While this is not a new approach (Hackenesch and Bader, 2020; Bader and Hackenesch, 2020; Tudoriou and Ramlogan, 2021; Tudoriou, 2023), it remains central to investigating questions related to the effects of China's role as an

AGC on human rights. Moreover, the focus on diverse Sri Lankan party relations rather than individual elites, as well as the emphasis on receptions of Chinese party diplomacy efforts, marks a novel and important contribution. The CCP has increased efforts to promote alternative governance patterns aligned with Beijing's priorities and interests and intimately linked with its political influence. This includes legitimizing and bolstering illiberal and autocratic governance models and autocratization processes (Bader and Hackenesch, 2020). Moreover, elites are especially vulnerable to influencing attempts after wars, political crises, and other international turmoil and restructuring periods. Periods of domestic instability, such as during the fragmentation of ruling coalitions and crises of legitimacy, may drive elites to seek alternative norms offering opportunities for political gains and coalitional realignment since existing norms have been discredited (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990: 284; Zürn and Checkel, 2005; Checkel, 2005: 811). Examining the domestic contexts of BRI host countries is imperative in unpacking the motivations and strategies of local elites in managing China's influence (Pan, Clarke, and Loy-Wilson, 2019: 387, 391). Therefore, *article 4* includes deliberations on the reception of the CCP's party diplomacy efforts against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's ongoing economic crisis and the recently concluded presidential and parliamentary elections, which took place in September and October 2024, respectively. The findings will be outlined in section 5.4.

4.5. Summary

This dissertation has employed theories and concepts related to strategic narratives, narrative analysis, policy evaluation, foreign influence, economic statecraft, and AGCs to challenge established truths and present arguments regarding the reception of China's foreign policy initiatives, including the BRI. Whereas the strategic narrative approach is gaining popularity among IR scholars due to its focus on international politics and the globalized media ecology, narrative analysis and policy evaluation are often used to analyze domestic politics or among FPA scholars since it requires a stringent focus on opening the "black box" of individual states and examining the goals of influential policymakers. Theories of foreign influence and economic statecraft belong comfortably in both spheres. Finally, while the AGC concept primarily examines regional relations between the AGC and target states, it has international ramifications, as autocratic promotion and diffusion may shape

regional identities, spill over into the international system, and challenge established global governance institutions, such as the LIO. While these approaches investigate and highlight separate instances of fragmentation and power in China's foreign policy and how they are received in the Sri Lankan context, they constitute a holistic approach to understanding the BRI's international implementation. Altogether, utilizing these approaches has underlined the power of narratives, political and economic influence, and authoritarian promotion and diffusion in shaping the reception of China's efforts in the Global South. At the same time, they have pointed to the importance of evaluating BRI host country elite agency by contextualizing their responses against domestic and international political, economic, and social dynamics.

5. Article Overview

This section presents the focus, analytical approach, and key findings of each research article. In this way, it positions this study in relation to its related bodies of scholarship and the broader research field.

5.1. China's Buddhist Strategic Narratives in Sri Lanka—Benefits and Buddhism?

Article 1 was motivated by the research gap concerning why the Sri Lankan Buddhist *Maha Sangha* would sign off on Chinese investments and infrastructure projects before the government. Likewise, it wished to examine the importance of Buddhism in Sino-Sri Lankan relations to understand why the BRI is framed through Buddhist narratives. To explore this query, the article investigated how China's Buddhist strategic narratives, forwarded through its Buddhist diplomacy, have been projected to Sri Lanka, how these were received and reproduced, and the implications and challenges of this strategy. To this end, the article analyzed official Chinese and Sri Lankan state documents, statements from Buddhist organizations, and news articles. Based on this analysis, the article argued that China's strategic narratives have enabled the BRI's implementation: Under the BRI's "people-to-people" bonds, Chinese and Sri Lankan officials have used the Buddhist history and exchanges between the two nations to advocate for the importance of projects such as the PCC. Promises of investment have attracted both positive and negative attention in Sri Lanka, and the shared Buddhist values proposed by both sides have served to mitigate possible criticism. Specifically, the article outlined and discussed the contents of China's Buddhist strategic narratives, which encompass themes related to the shared Sino-Sri Lankan Buddhist bonds, fate, and values, Buddhist historical figures such as Fa Xian, and the importance of Buddhism in furthering bilateral cooperation.

Accordingly, it proposed that these were primarily identity narratives, in that they aimed to portray China as a benevolent, harmonious Buddhist power to

enhance perceptions of the country in the international system. At the same time, because the scenario invoked by China juxtaposed the Western-dominated, imperialist system with the peaceful, interconnected world of China's making, the narratives could also be viewed as system narratives. China's Buddhist strategic narratives conjure a system in which Buddhist, authoritarian nations like China and Sri Lanka support one another in international affairs against what is perceived as the encroaching Western, rules-based world order of liberal democracies. Since China's short-term goal of utilizing these narratives concerns the goal of implementing the BRI as smoothly as possible while mitigating criticism, the narratives can also be viewed as issue narratives. Simultaneously, the Sri Lankan government and the *Maha Sangha* have their own motivations for co-opting or reproducing these narratives, particularly in securing elite and public support for Chinese investments in the domestic setting, while enhancing the country's international reputation and legitimacy as a Buddhist nation.

Article 1 further outlined specific challenges to China's Buddhist strategic narratives, including China's own human rights violations against ethnic minorities in contrast with the harnessing of religious resources, the agency of the Sri Lankan clergy in protesting against China's influence, particularly over sensitive issues like the role of the Dalai Lama and the perceived loss of Sri Lankan sovereignty through Chinese port projects. Finally, the article emphasized the difficulty of measuring the reception of strategic narratives, as this ideational content is often promoted in tandem with economic incentives – a thread that *articles 2*, *3*, and *4* continued.

Overall, the article contributes to scholarship on China's religious or Buddhist diplomacy, including in the BRI's promotion, and how religious countries like Sri Lanka may receive this. It provides insights into research on the interplay between religion and public diplomacy, the relationship between the BRI's material and ideational dimensions in Asia, and the CCP's focus on mobilizing Buddhist leaders and organizations to advance its interests. It further contributes to studies outlining the CCP's use of religious or cultural traditions to strengthen its legitimacy, particularly under the BRI. It likewise provides an in-depth case study of China's use of strategic narratives to forward the initiative's implementation in South Asia, including novel insights into the significance of Buddhism in Sri Lankan politics and the Chinese actors, exchanges, and goals involved in this strategy. This includes considerations of how strategic narratives can be utilized or co-opted by China and BRI host countries to further the initiative's progress. The article further supplements analyses on how China's strategic narratives may be limited or enabled by pre-existing "master narratives" in the global order and China's use

of "master commemorative" or strategic narratives, rooted in previous administrations, in enhancing China's external image.

The findings of *article 1* inform how we should view China's continued implementation of the BRI and the development of bilateral relations with religious countries like Sri Lanka. In a narrow sense, the BRI's progress may be ensured by projecting narratives on China's religious adherence and the "community of common destiny" that this shared faith entails. Conversely, much depends on the willingness of BRI host countries to accept these narratives. More broadly, this article has demonstrated that the CCP positions itself and the BRI through strategic narratives to mitigate criticism and further China's interests and stature in the international system. This suggests that further studies are needed to explore the interplay between economic benefits, religious incentives, and the agency of China's collaborating countries in the BRI's future progress. Aside from contributing insights into China's religious diplomacy under the BRI, *article 1* also sheds light on the role of various Chinese departments and bureaus in furthering China's foreign policy, including the UFWD and the BAC. This underlines the interrelated role of politics and religion in the Chinese context, showing how religious leaders are either CCP members charged with following the Party's policies or non-members indoctrinated to promote party policies through their work. It further hints at the fragmentation of the Chinese state apparatus, which will be elaborated in the section below.

5.2. Promoting China's Development Model for the Hambantota International Port: Selling Shekou to Sri Lanka

The research gap of *article 2* relates to the motivations of the CCP and SOEs in exporting the "Shekou Model" to HIP under the BRI and how the "iron triangle" of Party-Government-Business works together under "fragmented authoritarianism." The article examined how and why narratives related to the Shekou Model are used to "sell" the development of international BRI port projects, who the primary beneficiary of this strategy is, and how the strategy has been received in Sri Lanka. Rather than focusing on the Shekou Model's physical implementation, which is difficult to track due to a lack of official project documents, the article analyzed how and why SOEs, such as CMG, frame projects in the language of experiments and models. As part of this

analysis, the article situates the Shekou Model within the context of China's domestic, decentralized, and experimental policymaking approach. By viewing the Shekou Model in this light, the article argued that it is a key example of Chinese decentralized policy modeling practices as the country goes global. *Article 2* followed a combined narrative analysis and policy evaluation approach, arguing that for the CCP, "selling Shekou" in Sri Lanka aims to promote China's development model and the benefits of cooperation under the BRI. Conversely, CMG's primary objective is to benefit from support under the national BRI strategy while exporting its port model and expanding its international portfolio. The term "selling" was employed throughout the article to emphasize that the Shekou Model is part of CMG's domestic and international business strategy. For their part, Sri Lankan actors engage with China's narratives and promote the Chinese economic model to secure continued investments under the BRI.

Building on narrative analysis literature, the article argued that the setting of China's narratives in Sri Lanka concerns continued Sino-Sri Lankan collaboration under the BRI, for which the stakes are high. Due to the country's underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure, and stagnant economy, the appropriate behavior for Sri Lanka is to continue cooperation, with the potential for HIP to experience the same economic miracle as Shenzhen. In terms of characterization, the article distinguished between China (CCP, CMG) and Sri Lanka. The narratives characterize China as a helpful partner with skill, know-how, experience, and resources; conversely, Sri Lanka is characterized as an underdeveloped country with a struggling population needing guidance to progress. The emplotment of the narratives is simultaneously temporal and causal. China has successfully created a sustainable development model, resulting in Shenzhen's economic transformation. Now, China can help countries like Sri Lanka achieve similar results. Therefore, the overarching foreign policy narrative that the CCP is "selling" through its SOEs concerns the win-win benefits of continued BRI cooperation and the necessity of following China's development model. However, while China's policy may have benefited the Sri Lankan political and economic elite, it leaves much to be desired.

Article 2 underlined that while the CCP and CMG attempted to "sell" the Shekou Model to Sri Lanka to achieve their economic and political goals, the "brand" has been unsuccessful in the wider Sri Lankan context. Most statements from Sri Lankan actors referencing the Shekou Model come from

pro-China actors,[10] such as the "Belt and Road Initiative Sri Lanka" (BRISL) think tank, and general statements rarely utilize the Shekou Model framing to promote investments in HIP. Instead, positive news pieces and statements from the Sri Lankan side emphasize the general infrastructural and economic development that China has brought.

Therefore, the "selling" Shekou policy has been a "tolerable failure" for CMG and the Sri Lankan government. This is a politically feasible "second best" option. CMG has promoted the model in HIP and utilized it in its broader branding strategy, even if it has not gained the intended recognition. Similarly, the Sri Lankan government has cooperated with China to secure funding and benefits, despite the public not being convinced of the model's importance. Simultaneously, the CCP's aim to promote its development model and continued cooperation under the BRI has been a "success" since the goal of "selling" Shekou has been to promote the benefits of BRI cooperation and following China's development model. This suggests that the brand remains less important to the Sri Lankan actors than the results. In this way, the article argues that whether the HIP is developed using the Shekou Model is irrelevant to Sri Lanka if it achieves economic sustainability. It further contends that the CCP and CMG are unlikely to cease their promotion of the Shekou Model since it remains a central business strategy and recognizable domestic brand for CMG and serves as a valuable way of cementing China's "tried and tested" development model that the CCP can utilize when promoting international BRI projects.

Article 2, therefore, has three primary contributions. First, it investigates the CCP's promotion of the Chinese development model under the BRI, examining the HIP as an example of this approach and providing insights into the policy's actors and reception. Second, it brings scholarship on the domestic experimental model context into conversation with the BRI's international implementation. Third, it highlights key features in the relationship between the CCP and SOEs under the "iron triangle" framework by examining the Shekou Model's international promotion. Consequently, the article builds on literature on the fragmented nature of Chinese state authority, i.e., "fragmented authoritarianism," including the "iron triangle," by discussing the relationship between and diverging goals of the CCP and SOEs. Moreover, the article added to the rich literature on the CCP's use of models to further China's

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10 Throughout the research process, the dissertation has defined pro-China actors as individuals who favorably view or support China and its people, culture, policies, and so on, usually through long-term exposure through, for example, bilateral exchanges, studying, or traveling in China.

national policy objectives and economic targets by examining the role of SOEs in exporting experimental models under the BRI.

In summary, in linking the literature on China's fragmented and decentralized policymaking practices with experimental modeling and the BRI's international implementation, the article has added to the dynamic and emerging scholarship on the connection between China's domestic policy milieu and the BRI. This includes studies on how the initiative is linked to domestic development goals, is fragmented and localized, and contributes to global fragmentation; the integration between Chinese foreign policy pursuits and the interests of the Party-state and SOEs; and the differences in imperatives of accumulation between Chinese state and private capital.

5.3. Win-win versus the West? Investigating the Reception of China's Influencing Efforts in Sri Lanka

Building on fieldwork interviews, *article 3* wished to outline how diverse Sri Lankan actors react to China's economic and political influencing efforts, why this is the case, and what this means for China's attempts to promote ideational content under the BRI. To do so, it utilizes theories related to foreign influence, economic statecraft, and the "five modes of economic influence." Furthermore, it outlines China's increasing focus on promoting ideational content aligned with Beijing's values and interests to strengthen its international position (see section 3.3). By structuring the interview data around three central themes, which emerged from the iterative coding process, the article underlines the importance of Sri Lanka's history, economic, and political situation, China's pragmatic and flexible approach to cooperation, and the perceived hypocrisy of Western "universal" norms, values, and ideals in the reception of China's political and economic influence.

The article found that the reception of China's influencing strategy has partially succeeded in Sri Lanka, particularly in terms of promoting the economic advantages of cooperating with China, adopting the country's development model, and ensuring access to win-win benefits under the BRI. Therefore, the initiative has functioned as a vehicle for the CCP's influencing strategy and economic statecraft by increasing China's economic influence and strengthening the promotion of ideational content. In particular, ideational content related to non-interference, multilateralism, and respect for the

"diversity of civilizations" has been well received. Sentiments regarding non-interference, multilateralism, and Western hypocrisy over "universal" values existed before China's engagements in the country, but the BRI has emphasized the proliferation of these narratives. This has been part of the CCP's strategy to legitimize China's interests in the country and Sri Lanka's acceptance of China as an alternative and desirable partner and power.

The findings of *article 3* also underline that while some Sri Lankan actors may be interested in learning from China regarding authoritarian practices, carrying potential implications for human rights, many Sri Lankans perceive China's ideational promotion as lacking in cultural or religious values, leading to a perception that the Sino-Sri Lankan relationship is too contingent on China's funding capabilities. Based on these initial findings about the reception of China's influencing efforts in Sri Lanka, *article 3* proposes that despite China's enhanced promotion of ideational content, the CCP's political influence remains superficial and limited compared to its economic influence. However, while China's potential bid for a "Sinocentric" global governance order to replace the LIO seems unlikely, an alternative "win-win" order of material benefits and pragmatism may emerge. The long-term sustainability of this order will depend on whether other countries find it suitable to their interests.

Finally, *article 3* argued that China's influencing practices will likely intensify in the coming years and that the CCP will continue its bi- and multilateral engagements to promote ideational content reflecting Beijing's values and priorities. China will continue its turn away from West-centric "universal" norms, values, and ideals linked to Western interests and participate in debates on uni- and multipolarity, the inequality between the Global South and Global North, among other issues. As such, China's influence will be contingent upon Beijing's ability to create values that resonate internationally and continue engagements that showcase its economic strength and genuine intentions. Similar criticism has been directed at other great powers engaged in the country, pointing to interrelated issues of economic sovereignty and elite actor agency in soliciting and balancing investments. Hence, China's influence may also be affected by how the West, India, and Japan meet the needs of the Global South. This includes the establishment and implementation of Western infrastructure initiatives, such as the "Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment" (PGII), charted by the G7 group, and the "Global Gateway" (GG), led by the European Commission. Nevertheless, the CCP has also strengthened its efforts by proposing three new initiatives, i.e., the "Global Development Initiative" (GDI), the "Global Security Initiative" (GSI), and the "Global Civilization

Initiative" (GCI) to support the BRI's promotion of China as a responsible stakeholder in the international system. These initiatives may solidify China's "win-win" order. This argument is expanded in section 6.2.

5.4. Learning from China's Authoritarian Playbook: Chinese Party Diplomacy and Autocratization in Sri Lanka

Based on the interview data and literature on the BRI's influence on elites and host country agency, *article 4* sought to illuminate the reception of China's party-to-party exchanges and their effects on elite influencing practices in Sri Lanka. This includes China's autocratic promotion and diffusion. The article thus focuses on three interrelated questions: How has the ID-CCP's party diplomacy developed in Sri Lanka, how does the department forward autocratic promotion and diffusion, and to what extent are Sri Lankan elites interested in this diffusion – or, differently put, to learn from "China's authoritarian playbook"?

To analyze these queries, the article leaned on the AGC concept and outlined the goals, actors, and practices associated with China's party diplomacy in Sri Lanka since Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration (2005–2015). After identifying the ID-CCP's role in furthering China's party diplomacy under Xi, the article presented China's party diplomacy with the most influential Sri Lankan parties from 2005 to 2024, i.e., the *Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna* (SLPP, Sri Lanka People's Front), *Sri Lanka Nidahas Pakshaya* (SLFP, Sri Lanka Freedom Party), *Eksath Jathika Pakshaya* (UNP, United National Party), *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP, People's Liberation Front), and the *Jathika Jana Balawegaya* (JJB, or National People's Power, NPP) coalition. Moreover, it investigated the ID-CCP's engagements with the *Sri Lankavay Komiyunist Pakshaya* (CPSL, Communist Party of Sri Lanka) and elites from Tamil nationalist parties like the *Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchchi* (ITAK, lit. "Sri Lanka Tamil State Party") and *Akila Ilankai Thamil Congress* (ACTC, *All Ceylon Tamil Congress*).

Based on the findings, *article 4* argued that the ID-CCP's work in Sri Lanka has evolved since 2005 and that China has learned from its mistakes. This follows Xi's increased emphasis on utilizing party diplomacy to further China's foreign policy, party-specific interests, political and economic influence, and international standing. As such, rather than focusing solely on

engaging ruling parties, China has expanded its relations with opposition parties and future political leaders, including ethnic minorities. The party channel aims to facilitate autocratic promotion and diffusion and share experiences of the Chinese development model and the CCP's authoritarian political system. This seems to have served the CCP's overarching foreign policy interests by legitimizing increased cooperation with China, including through the BRI. Notably, certain Sri Lankan elites, including pro-China actors, politicians, and officials seeking alternative, autocratic values and governance practices, as well as leftists with a perceived ideological proximity to the CCP, have shown an interest in learning from China's autocratic practices. Others, such as opportunistic elites tired of "Western lecturing" and bureaucratic red tape, have engaged with the ID-CCP's party diplomacy based on strategic calculations related to their personal, national, and foreign policy objectives.

Still, *article 4* noted that Sri Lanka's authoritarian trend carries implications for China's future party diplomacy and the sharing of autocratic experiences, and the willingness of certain actors to learn from China's authoritarian playbook bodes ill for Sri Lanka's human rights and democratic framework. Due to Sri Lanka's authoritarian trend, the country remains at risk of China's authoritarian diffusion, and the growing legitimacy of China's alternative "ingroup" of illiberal states will complicate this. China's aid and international support of various Sri Lankan administrations, including through material support like aid, armaments, and pragmatic investments during and after the civil war, have already impacted ethnic and religious communities. At the same time, China's party diplomacy remains challenged. This includes public opposition, such as tensions with domestic and Sri Lankan ethnic minorities, the Chinese economic downturn, and the economic and political presence of other regional powers. Therefore, *article 4* mirrored the view presented in *article 3* that China's capacity to provide funding and the Quad's simultaneous economic and political engagements will be central to the CCP's future party diplomacy in Sri Lanka and the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, *article 4* highlighted the importance of diversifying and balancing investments to enable local agency, leverage Chinese interests in BRI countries, and enhance resilience against authoritarian practices.

Article 4, therefore, has three primary contributions: It provides insights into the ID-CCP's work in Sri Lanka, with comparability for other South Asian countries. Furthermore, it presents novel data on how diverse Sri Lankan actors perceive and engage with China's influencing attempts, including autocratic promotion and diffusion, and evaluates how domestic dynamics affect elite motivations and agency. Finally, it contributes to studies on China's promotion

of authoritarian norms and practices. In this way, it adds to the emerging body of literature on China's party diplomacy beyond the work of the UFWD and non-governmental agencies like SOEs. This is important since studies concerning China's foreign policy have generally emphasized the role of Chinese state actors and government-to-government relations while neglecting the CCP's exchanges with foreign political parties. The article further enhances studies regarding the immediate and long-term effects of the ID-CCP's party diplomacy, including work on the agency of small states under Chinese and other foreign aid donors. Similarly, it contributes to research on China's influencing of political elites, including in Sri Lanka, with important implications for examining China's global authoritarian promotion.

6. Conclusion

This section summarizes the dissertation's research problem, questions, findings, overarching theory, and contributions before outlining avenues for further research.

6.1. The Implications of China's "Fragmented Power" in Sri Lanka

This dissertation set out to examine whether and in which ways China's power on the international stage is fragmented and how this impacts the reception of Chinese foreign policy endeavors. From the outset, the dissertation's research focus has been guided by questions moving from the global to the local realm and from broad to narrow contexts, and it has strived to provide in-depth analyses of the goals, actors, and practices that constitute China's foreign policy. To this end, it hypothesized about China's "Fragmented Power," which later became its overarching theoretical framework. From the beginning, the dissertation assumed that the challenges marking China's domestic policymaking framework carry implications for how foreign policy instruments like the BRI are pursued and received.

Specifically, the dissertation wanted to move away from understanding Chinese foreign policy as monolithic, centrally controlled and initiated, and uniform in its goals and practices. Instead, it sought to conceptualize it as a sphere linked to, and thus influenced by, domestic decentralization and experimentation. To this end, it investigated how these policy patterns impact the reception of China's foreign policy in Sri Lanka by examining the strategies, motivations, and goals of various actors in promoting or implementing the BRI, including its associated policies and practices. Based on the findings, which provide novel and nuanced insights into the initiative's trajectory and how a diverse Sri Lankan audience perceives it, the dissertation contends that China's power is fragmented. This highlights that China's

decentralized policymaking practices influence the actors and strategies promoting the BRI.

Article 1 examined how China's Buddhist strategic narratives, forwarded through its Buddhist diplomacy, have been projected to Sri Lanka, how they have been received and reproduced, and the implications of this strategy. Aside from contributing to research on the CCP's use of religious diplomacy to strengthen its legitimacy and further the BRI, as well as using strategic narratives to promote its interests and improve its international standing, it provided an empirically grounded analysis of the importance of Buddhism in the Sri Lankan context. The article also offered insights into the CCP's dual promotion of material and ideational benefits. Finally, the article emphasized the role of departments and bureaus, such as the UFWD and BAC, in China's foreign policy endeavors. The UFWD has had to contend with internal competition with other bureaus, such as SARA, to maximize its power, gain access to funding, and cement its legitimacy in the domestic political system, including within the national BRI strategy. As for the BAC, which faces competition within the Chinese religious system, the promotion of Buddhist narratives in Sri Lanka (with internal clearance from the CCP and high-ranking religious leaders who are also Party members) has served the dual purpose of strengthening Sino-Sri Lankan ties while portraying China as a Buddhist country. To complicate matters, for some religious leaders and members of the Buddhist clergy, this promotion may be motivated by adherence to religious precepts and a desire to strengthen the position of Buddhism in the domestic context. As such, China's utilization of Buddhist diplomacy remains complex due to its instrumental nature and the domestic repression of religious beliefs. In terms of reception, while the Sri Lankan *Maha Sangha* and politicians have reproduced Chinese Buddhist narratives to facilitate their domestic goals, the wider public – many of whom are Buddhists – have questioned whether China's Buddhist approach is genuine.

Article 2 investigated how and why narratives related to the Shekou Model are used by CMG and the CCP to "sell" the development of international BRI port projects, who the primary beneficiary of this strategy is, and how the Sri Lankan side has received it. In so doing, the article provided insights into the CCP's promotion of China's development model among developing countries. It further discussed how China's domestic policymaking practices, particularly "fragmented authoritarianism" and decentralized, experimental policy models, influence its foreign policy pursuits and how these are perceived. Finally, it contributed to studies on the "iron triangle" of Party-Government-Business, including what this means for business-driven "ideological deviation" by the SOEs under the BRI. As shown in *article 2*, for its part, the CMG has attempted

a delicate balancing act between the CCP's foreign policy goals and the profit maximization expected of central-level SOEs. In terms of reception, Sri Lankan officials involved in implementing BRI projects have often assumed that SOEs act on behalf of the Chinese government, and SOE leaders have been viewed as extensions of the Party top, but as this dissertation has highlighted, that is not the case. Domestic fragmentation means that the economic interests of the associated SOEs play a significant role in project implementation and governance, pressuring SOEs in decision-making processes on the ground(s). As remarked in previous sections, Chinese SOEs have been corporatized and operate as largely autonomous, self-financing capitalist enterprises, meaning that their primary interest remains the opportunity for a return on investment (see, for example, Jones and Zeng, 2019; Olinga-Shannon et al., 2019; Lee, 2018). This can result in practices diverging from overarching CCP goals, with potential implications for China's external image and foreign policy goals. Moreover, it might result in SOEs, CEOs, and other top and middle-level stakeholders incurring externalities in terms of diplomacy or security. For CMG, this has entailed public diplomacy considerations to mitigate concerns regarding the implementation of the Shekou Model in the HIP. The article, therefore, concluded that the actors involved in "selling" Shekou have met their goals to different extents. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between different "agencies" and motivations in promoting and adhering to Chinese foreign policy.

Article 3 analyzed how diverse Sri Lankan actors respond to China's foreign influence, why this is the case, and what this means for the CCP's attempts to enhance its ideational promotion under the BRI. It further shed light on the Party's influencing practices and attempts to establish itself as an alternative, normative governance pole in Sri Lanka, with wider comparability for other developing countries in the Global South. This includes an in-depth exploration of which ideational content, such as norms, values, and ideals, have been well-received in the Sri Lankan context and why this is the case. The article thus added to studies of China's political influence, arguing that it remains superficial, precarious, and contingent on material benefits. The findings thus underscore the discrepancy between the relative success of China's economic vis-à-vis political power, which points to a different kind of fragmentation. The article demonstrates how the CCP's foreign influence strategy, which involves the dual promotion of material and ideational benefits, has achieved some success in Sri Lanka. This is particularly true in terms of promoting economic incentives and ideational content related to win-win benefits. However, in terms of reception, China's provision of economic benefits continues to outweigh its cultural or ideological values. Therefore,

while some Sri Lankan politicians and officials may be interested in China's ideational content, most wish to cooperate with China to gain access to economic benefits, such as funding streams and investments.

Lastly, *article 4* assessed how the ID-CCP's party diplomacy has developed in Sri Lanka, whether and what Sri Lankan elites are interested in learning from China's authoritarian playbook, and what this entails for the country's ethnic minorities. This illuminated the ID-CCP's work in Sri Lanka, with comparability for other South Asian countries, strengthening research on the multitude of actors engaged in China's foreign policy and party diplomacy. It further presented empirically grounded insights into how diverse actors receive and engage with the CCP's influencing attempts and how Sri Lanka's domestic political and economic context affects the motivations and agency of elites. This has implications for China's broader party diplomacy efforts in the Global South. Finally, it offered essential clues on China's global authoritarian promotion, particularly in disseminating governance practices to international parties and elites. This is particularly important because it can potentially influence ethnic and religious minority groups directly. Finally, the article's findings highlight that most Sri Lankan politicians do not differentiate between the different departments and bureaus with whom they discuss projects or investments. This includes a lack of differentiation between whether engagements are carried out by the ID-CCP or the FMPRC, despite the fact that they are also embroiled in internal competition and have differing areas of jurisdiction within the Chinese political system. The article thus shows that China's party diplomacy through the ID-CCP has been well-received by some Sri Lankan elites. Nevertheless, most seem to strategically align with China's efforts to ensure their economic, security, and political interests. At the same time, China's role as an authoritarian gravity center, coupled with Sri Lanka's authoritarian trend, has already impacted the country's human rights, democratic framework, and ethnic and religious communities.

Together, the articles demonstrate how the CCP continually learns from and improves its governance patterns, despite internal and external challenges, which may, over time, enhance China's standing in the international system. At the same time, the dissertation shows that China's "Fragmented Power" has had a mixed reception in Sri Lanka. Generally speaking, while many Sri Lankan academics and analysts have recognized the challenges facing China's foreign policy endeavors, including the impact of decentralization on BRI projects, knowledge about China's political system and policymaking practices remains limited in the broader Sri Lankan society. For example, most members of the Sri Lankan public associate any Chinese engagements in the country, no matter how small, with the CCP. Therefore, the fragmented nature

of China's engagements is often overlooked, even though it has a significant impact on foreign policy outcomes. The various actors involved in Chinese foreign policy efforts, exemplified here by the UFWD, BAC, SOEs such as CMG, and ID-CCP, have attempted to promote the Party's goals in various ways. Simultaneously, they have sought to attain their individual aspirations, including in ways that do not necessarily complement the Party's overarching policy preferences.

Consequently, the dissertation contributes to studies of the reception of Chinese foreign policy endeavors by examining the BRI's implementation in Sri Lanka from a bottom-up perspective. At the same time, it enhances research on China's fragmented state bureaucracy by investigating the decentralized, experimental, and multifaceted ways in which the goals and practices of the Party, State, and Business sectors converge and diverge in promoting, implementing, and governing BRI projects. In this way, it provides a holistic and nuanced perspective on how China's "Fragmented Power" influences its reception in Sri Lanka.

With these contributions, the dissertation has underlined the importance of context-specific analyses that unpack BRI host country dynamics on the ground(s). By examining the often "messy" and contradictory nature of the initiative's implementation, contestation, and progress in Sri Lanka, including tensions between the goals, actors, and practices engaged in promoting and achieving ideological and economic goals, the dissertation has contributed to studies of China's foreign policy beyond the macro level. It has also highlighted the crucial role played by local actors, reinforcing arguments that the concerns, hopes, motivations, and maneuverability of diverse stakeholders should be taken seriously. As the dissertation has shown, the BRI is simultaneously co-created and shaped by multiple "agencies" and remains a pluralist endeavor with no single, unified agenda. In other words, the BRI is characterized by internal competition among diverse Chinese ministries, government departments, and bureaus, which vie for support from the central government and the CCP while attempting to achieve their goals and shape the initiative's progress. Still, it takes two to tango, and BRI host country actors retain significant agency in implementing the initiative. These actors exercise agency by connecting with their Chinese counterparts to achieve their goals, thereby dispelling Western views that they are passive recipients of Chinese engagement and investment.

Finally, the dissertation has contributed empirical insights underlining that Sri Lanka, like other developing countries, remains primarily interested in soliciting Chinese engagements and continuing bilateral cooperation to secure material benefits. Throughout the articles, China's difficulty in creating and

promoting ideational content in the form of narratives, norms, values, and governance practices has been highlighted. The articles have simultaneously shown the strong potential for China to assertively and proactively chart ideational content to strengthen its position as an alternative pole to the US or as the legitimate creator of an alternative "ingroup" for authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian states. In summary, by focusing on China's BRI and its trajectory and reception in Sri Lanka, with wider applicability to the Global South, this dissertation has contributed to charting the development and impacts of Chinese foreign policy interests, thereby ensuring its contemporary academic and policy relevance.

Nevertheless, the implications this fragmentation entails for China's foreign policy remain to be discussed. Building on arguments made in the four articles, this dissertation contends that China, despite its "fragmented authoritarianism" and decentralized, experimental policymaking approach, has managed to cement its international position. This supports the theoretical notion of the deliberate nature of Chinese "Fragmented Power," which encompasses China's political and economic influence, exemplified by different diplomatic strategies and influencing attempts under the BRI framework. This policy-making and foreign policy implementation approach has enabled diverse actors to experiment with policies and models to serve their goals in flexible and risk-minimizing ways. The strategy has served the CCP's overarching foreign policy interests. In this way, while China's "Fragmented Power" has incurred challenges, it has enabled the CCP to strengthen its economic and political clout in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, Sri Lankan elites, including individual politicians and officials, have attempted to maximize the benefits of aligning with the CCP to serve their own goals. This highlights the permeability of China's "Fragmented Power," emphasizing that the differences in accumulation between private and state capital (Lee, 2018) may present opportunities for host country actors beyond what state-centric accounts would otherwise suggest. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the power relations between China and Sri Lanka are asymmetrical and that it is therefore China that "sits at the end of the negotiation table."

As such, domestic fragmentation in decision-making processes has had detrimental effects, particularly in intra-actor competition, unintended externalities in diplomacy and security, difficulties in balancing ideological goals and practical issues, and politically and economically contingent agency which usually befalls elites rather than the public. It is thus true that the "Party leads on everything" and that Xi Jinping has recentralized power since assuming Party leadership in 2012. It also remains true, however, that "ideological deviation" exists between the Party, SOEs, and government

agencies engaged in foreign policy pursuits like the BRI. Through this understanding and its empirical contributions, the dissertation has sought to provide a comprehensive picture of the fragmented nature of "Global China."

At this point, it may be prudent to ask what the findings of this dissertation entail for the future of China's foreign policy, including the BRI. While it is outside the scope of this dissertation to offer any conclusive "reading of the tea leaves," two points deserve cautious deliberation. First, based on the findings of this dissertation, it seems unlikely that Xi and the remainder of the Politburo Standing Committee will be able to – or even be interested in – remedying or addressing the existence of China's "Fragmented Power." This is not only because decentralized, experimental policymaking is a tried and tested approach that most often achieves the goals for the CCP, SOEs, and departments that utilize it; it is also because it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to get rid of. "Global China" is expanding, including through the BRI, and the CCP's lofty ambitions to achieve national rejuvenation are unlikely to cease. Therefore, while the BRI's first "win-win decade" has incurred its share of challenges and criticism and may have concluded less satisfactorily than the CCP would have liked when it comes to specific project implementation and China's international image, particularly in the West, China's "Fragmented Power" is here to stay. Studies of the BRI should thus keep in mind the initiative's decentralized and experimental implementation and the agency of local actors in accepting or rejecting China's advances.

Second, as the articles have individually underlined, the material and ideational benefits of cooperating with China cannot be easily disentangled. However, by 2025, China's economy remains severely impacted by several related challenges, most prominently the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu, 2024) and ensuing debt restructuring in BRI host countries (Hameiri and Jones, 2024). External factors include the re-election of US President Donald Trump, which will be explored in the next section. If China's material incentives dwindle, the interest of host country actors in collaborating with China and buying into Chinese norms, values, and governance practices will decrease as well. Or, differently put, China's political influence remains limited and contingent upon its economic power. This means that China's current and future economic prowess is crucial to the BRI's trajectory, the enhancement of China's normative power, and the establishment of China's alternative "ingroup" of states seeking to mitigate the influence of or displace the Western-led LIO. In this context, it is notable that Xi Jinping has proposed three new global initiatives to support the BRI's progress. The following section reflects on how the dissertation's key contributions can be used in further research, given recent developments.

6.2. Further Research and New Developments

This dissertation has highlighted how the fragmented nature of Chinese foreign policy impacts its reception in developing countries like Sri Lanka and has illuminated the CCP's multifaceted diplomatic strategies and actors. It has also shown how China utilizes different instruments, such as religious and party diplomacy under the BRI, to pave the way for the initiative's smooth implementation and diffuse authoritarian norms and practices.

However, China's foreign policy ventures have expanded significantly since the dissertation commenced, and today, the BRI is not the only initiative seeking to improve China's position in the international system. In 2021, 2022, and 2023, the CCP proposed three new initiatives: the 全球发展倡议 ("Global Development Initiative," GDI), the 全球安全倡议 ("Global Security Initiative," GSI), and the 全球文明倡议 ("Global Civilization Initiative," GCI). According to the CCP, the GDI aims to "pool efforts to tackle challenges, promote post-COVID recovery and seize opportunities so as to open up a bright future for achieving common sustainable development and building a global development community" (FMPRC, 2024A). From a critical Western perspective, it has been argued that the GDI seeks to "usurp the international dialogue on the global development agenda, place it under Chinese tutelage, and infuse it with (supposed) Chinese principles" (Schuman, Fulton, and Gering, 2023). Alternatively, it may be conceptualized as Beijing's bid to enhance its overarching status as a responsible development power and authority in SSC, emphasizing influencing global governance regimes and institutions to ensure its systemic position as a credible development provider.

Conversely, the stated aims of the GSI are to peacefully resolve disputes through dialogue, uphold the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, and maintain security in both traditional and non-traditional domains. Moreover, it is presented as a means by which China will "help build global consensus to address security challenges" (FMPRC, 2024B). This has caused some Western analysts to speculate that it is "a manifesto for an alternative system of international affairs to the current 'rules based' order," and thus constitutes Xi's attempt to present a comprehensive vision of a new world order elevating China's influence "at the expense of American power" (Schuman, Fulton, and Gering, 2023). A middle-ground approach may see the GSI as part of China's overarching soft power strategy and as a way to promote its benevolent interests in enforcing order and stability in the international system, particularly in spheres and locations where the US is (perceived to be) retreating.

Finally, the GCI posits that the "diversity of civilizations" should be respected and that countries should not impose their values on others (FMPRC, 2023; CGTN, 2023A). This entails that countries should not be forced to follow so-called "universal" Western values and is inherently anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist. The GCI thus functions as an extension of China's promotion of ideational content related to the importance of multipolarity and non-interference. While the objectives and means of these initiatives are deliberately vague, flexible, and open to interpretation—much like those of the BRI—it is evident that they aim to further Beijing's foreign policy objectives. Whether this includes an emphasis on following the BRI's decentralized and experimental approach is challenging to predict. However, it does seem to involve improving China's image as a responsible regional and international stakeholder supporting developing countries, engaging in conflicts to protect its allies, and shielding its partners from international scrutiny by promoting "civilizational diversity."

The proposal of Xi's new initiatives comes at a critical juncture for Chinese foreign policy, including the BRI. China's ambitions face internal and external challenges and constraints. Domestically, following the COVID-19 pandemic, China's economy has faced significant strain. This has resulted in financial challenges, including the collapse of the real estate bubble, crackdowns on the business industry, reduced household spending, and a loss of confidence among investors and the public (Palmer, 2024). Moreover, the pandemic-induced lockdowns led to severe disillusionment and criticism among the public (BBC, 2022). Developments in the international sphere have exacerbated China's domestic economic issues; in the wake of the pandemic, the BRI's trajectory and China's global pursuits were heavily impacted by calls for debt restructuring of project loans among developing countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan (Standish, 2022), Zambia, Ghana, and Sri Lanka (Abeyrathne, 2023). As a result, China has recognized the need to restructure its economic engagement to prevent overdrafts (Wu, 2023).

The CCP's strategy in Sri Lanka also faces several potential challenges due to the country's domestic developments. As mentioned in section 2.3.1, Sri Lanka's economic crisis and recently concluded presidential and parliamentary elections have upended China's presence, even if Dissanayake's government has shown an interest in cooperating with Beijing thus far (DeVotta, 2024). Nevertheless, increased calls for anti-corruption measures and transparency in government spending and foreign investments by his party and the NPP alliance may complicate China's long-term presence. Most recently, in February 2025, Indian power project investments under the Adani group were canceled by the Sri Lankan government due to allegations of corruption and

bribery (The Tribune, 2025). It is unclear whether such renegotiations or cancellations may impact Chinese investments in the future. Either way, the cancellation of Indian projects does not mean that China will face less competition. On the regional level, India has stepped up exchanges with the new government. India has emphasized improving relations with Dissanayake since the beginning of 2024, months before the presidential elections, which seems to have enhanced the JVP's relations with its immediate neighbor (DeVotta, 2024). In recent months, several bilateral agreements have been signed to strengthen political exchanges, cooperation in areas such as development, defense, education, technology, and capacity building, increased support in debt restructuring efforts, as well as trade and investment collaborations. These agreements have emphasized Sri Lanka's crucial role in India's "Neighborhood First" and "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) strategies (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

Simultaneous developments in the overarching international system present complex puzzles for China's standing in international relations, and China must balance political ruptures with increasing geopolitical competition. This includes the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has placed China in a diplomatic dilemma. Initially, Beijing appeared poised to "walk the tightrope" by offering no direct support for Russia while refraining from condemning Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions internationally (Christoffersen, 2024). However, China's economic and diplomatic support soon became evident. Supplies of industrial, dual-use inputs to Russia, increased Sino-Russian energy cooperation, and Beijing's continued siding with and shielding of Russia in international forums soured relations with the US, EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and other countries, which feared a potential weakening of the LIO (Kim et al., 2024).

Finally, the re-election of US President Donald Trump in November 2024 has shaken the international system and brought unanticipated challenges to China's foreign policy goals. This includes increased geopolitical competition between the two great powers and attempts to contain Chinese efforts, most recently in the Panama Canal (Rosendal, 2025). The tightening relationship between the US and Russia, especially as concerns Trump's support for Putin over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, poses another potential – and somewhat surprising – challenge for Xi. That the Trump administration has taken a hard stance on China, including imposing tariffs on Chinese goods, is not surprising in and of itself. However, Trump's leaning towards Putin is. There has even been speculation that Trump's emphasis on courting Russia may be a ploy to contain China's power. As such, the development may cause a furrow of brows in Beijing since China needs Russian support to withstand US economic and

political pressure (Northrop and Chiang, 2025). Likewise, Russia remains one of the CCP's staunchest supporters in its bid to create an alternative normative order to rival the LIO.

However, Trump's presidency may also offer China new opportunities. For example, the new US-Russia constellation may aid China's promotion of alternative values that emphasize a turn away from Western values, particularly since the US no longer seems to champion or adhere to the LIO. While this is more speculative, Xi's commitment to the three new global initiatives signals China's continued international focus. This may solidify impressions among Global South actors that China is a serious partner. Conversely, developing countries may also choose to cooperate with China due to the vacuum left by the US retrenchment. As briefly outlined in section 2.3, until recently, the US has continued its efforts to strengthen cooperation with Sri Lanka through investments (USAID, 2024). These re-emphasized the importance of bilateral security cooperation to ensure Sri Lanka's commitment to the FOIP strategy (United States Embassy in Sri Lanka, 2024A). However, after Trump's dismantling of USAID and domestic and international programs targeting "diversity, equality, and inclusivity," the investment scenario in the Global South is set to change dramatically (Unger, 2025).

Since Trump's second presidency has only just begun, the outcomes of these changes and similar constraints on US foreign and aid policy are difficult to predict. As such, while we can speculate that Trump's administration might give China an edge in Sri Lanka's investment framework, it may just as well contribute to intensifying geopolitical rivalry between China and the Quad in the Indo-Pacific, the biggest loser of which will most likely be the Sri Lankan public. Therefore, examining the trajectories and impacts of Xi's BRI, GDI, GSI, and GCI on global tensions, the Western-led values-based order, and countries receiving Chinese aid and investments is crucial. This is particularly true for developing countries with weak governance and investment regimes, human rights issues, and authoritarian tendencies or administrations. Future research should thus analyze these new global initiatives and their effects on global governance patterns, including the spread of authoritarianism.

As a closing remark, I would like to invite the reader to return to the field with me for a moment. As noted in section 2.1., this dissertation has sought from the beginning to let the voices of the Sri Lankan interviewees speak for themselves to the greatest extent possible. Due to the nature of the articles and this introductory chapter, these voices have a more prominent position in *articles 3* and *4*. Nevertheless, as this introductory chapter began with a vignette from my fieldwork, I would like it to conclude in the same manner.

As I waited in the cool marble hall of the Galle Face Hotel, one of the oldest and most iconic buildings in Colombo, I could not help but marvel at the fact that the great grass lawns outside the doors had housed the protesters involved in the *Aragalaya* protests just months before. With its location in the Fort district, just a stone's throw from the Presidential Secretariat and the country's largest financial center, the Galle Face Green had been the perfect place to pitch the *Gota Go Gama*. It was midday, and the sun was relentlessly beating down from above; I could only imagine how the protesters must have felt, sprawled out across the hot grass and asphalt patches for days on end. Suddenly, my contact approached me; a retired, high-ranking official with great knowledge of and experience navigating the country's foreign policy, hand outstretched, walking into the cool lounge. We sat outside under one of the large fans, which hummed efficiently as it distributed cool air onto our perspiring foreheads. Sipping sweetened tea, he told me about Sri Lanka's geopolitical considerations, how he had always attempted to "reason with the West," and how the bullish behavior of certain great powers had confounded Sri Lankan administrations over the years. Towards the end of our conversation, he looked at me sternly and lamented that Western nations often do not practice what they preach and that this, more than anything, is why politicians in countries like Sri Lanka have to balance their options carefully, to "engage, but not entrench." His two parting messages were: "There is no way to stop the Asian century from happening," and "despite Xi Jinping's blunders, China will rise again."

My parting message to the reader, in turn, is a reminder that the motivations, aspirations, and actions of the enactors and recipients of Chinese (and other) engagements matter. Contextual, in-depth understanding of Chinese foreign policy engagements and the goals of actors involved in these undertakings on either side of the bilateral divide are essential for evaluating whether, and in which ways, the actions of the CCP are detrimental or beneficial for BRI host countries. Discounting the agency of these countries and individual influential actors is unlikely to facilitate our understanding of the challenges that foreign policy initiatives like the BRI may pose. Such an approach may also fail to account for the capacity of these actors to question, invoke changes to, or contest China's "Fragmented Power." It is my hope that this dissertation contributes to debates on the importance of examining and analyzing "Global China" and its impacts in nuanced ways.

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Appendix I: Information for Interview Participants

Information will be provided to research participants either orally or in writing in connection with invitations to participate.

Title

"Fragmented Power: Chinese Governance Practices of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road."

Information about the project

This project aims to analyze and discuss Chinese governance practices of the Maritime Silk Road portion of the Belt and Road Initiative. More specifically, the project focuses on the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party's strategic pursuits and the role that China's state-owned enterprises play in the implementation and governance of Belt and Road Initiative projects. In short, the project examines the degree to which the Chinese Communist Party allows "ideological deviation" from its state-owned enterprises so that they can operate projects on their own, pursuing pragmatic and flexible practices to ensure that ports can fulfill their commercial purposes. In examining how these governance activities are structured, how tasks and problems are addressed, and which steering activities are implemented, the project also assesses whether conflicts exist between the interests of the Chinese Communist Party, Chinese state-owned enterprises, and Sri Lankan stakeholders.

   The results of the project will be utilized in a PhD dissertation that will be published at Lund University. In addition, part of the information obtained through the interviews may be published in other research or popular science articles and used in public lectures or academic conference presentations.

Information for prospective participants

The project aims to interview Chinese and Sri Lankan stakeholders who currently reside in or around Hambantota and Colombo and work on or in fields adjacent to the port projects related to the Belt and Road Initiative. Accordingly, the project focuses on conducting interviews with government employees and officials, businessmen, workers, academics, and journalists. Other participants may also be included.

The interview will take place on the date, time, and location jointly agreed upon with the participant and will depend on the interviewee's preference and availability. No recordings will be made.

Participation requirements

The interview will require approximately 1 to 2 hours of the interviewee's time. Participation is voluntary, and the interviewee is free to opt out or to have their records deleted at any time before, during, or after the interview.

Risk assessment

Interview participation will involve no physical or health risks. There is little to no expected emotional risk in discussing Chinese investments and political influence in Sri Lanka. The interviewee will not be expected to discuss emotionally triggering or politically sensitive experiences related to China's investments, the Belt and Road Initiative, or related topics. The interviewee may not disclose any information that they perceive as posing a personal risk.

Privacy and data

By agreeing to the interview, the interviewee is consenting to the use of interview material for research purposes. This includes the researcher's doctoral thesis and related academic or specialized publications that will result from this project. *The researcher will summarize this information and request verbal consent before proceeding with the interview.*

The researcher will anonymize the identities of interviewees to the greatest extent possible. If there is another preference, the interviewee should feel free to state so. The researcher will process the data collected from the interviews and other research materials, storing it on a secure laptop and a backup server provided by Lund University.

To get more information

For any further questions or concerns regarding this project, please contact Tabita Rosendal by email: tabita.rosendal_ebbesen@ace.lu.se.

For more information about the researcher and the project, please visit: https://portal.research.lu.se/en/persons/tabita-rosendal-ebbesen.

Appendix II: Interview Guide, June–July 2023

1. What is your relation to the Hambantota / Colombo Port Project? E.g., what is your position, do you work directly with / consult on the project?
2. How much influence would you say that you have in the project? Please elaborate on how you estimate this / what makes you feel this way.
3. Do you feel like you / your superior has a good understanding of the project's goals? Why / why not?
4. Do you feel like you / your superior has a good understanding of China's goals in Sri Lanka? Why / why not?
5. How do you perceive China's influence in Sri Lanka? Please provide examples.
6. Do you think that Sri Lankan policymakers / the parliament / the government listens to China when it comes to political decisions? Why / why not? What do you think about this?
7. Do you think that the projects in Hambantota and Colombo Port are financially viable? Why / why not?
8. Do you think that China understands Sri Lanka's economic situation? Why / why not?
9. What are you worried about when it comes to China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Hambantota and Colombo Port projects? What are you looking forward to?
10. What do you think that China's engagements in Sri Lanka have contributed to? E.g., issues, benefits, social / economic changes, etc.
11. Do you think that there have been problems in the negotiation / cooperation process concerning Belt and Road Initiative projects between China and Sri Lanka? Why do you think that is?
12. If you could provide advice on how the Chinese and Sri Lankan governments should continue to implement the Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka, what would you suggest?

Appendix III: Interview Guide, October–November 2023

1. What is your relation to China? (for example, are you in a position where you regularly interact with or carry out work related to China, Chinese politics, etc.)?
2. Do you think that Sri Lanka is impacted by Chinese politics? How do you see this?
3. To what extent are Chinese politics discussed in Sri Lankan media outlets, and do you think that these discussions are representative of public opinion, elite views, or both?
4. Do you feel that you are personally impacted by Chinese politics? Can you give any examples?
5. Do you think that other countries or major powers are influential in Sri Lanka?
6. Do you feel personally impacted by other countries or major powers? How?
7. In your opinion, what types of norms, values, or ideals does China represent?
8. Do you think any of China's norms, values, or ideals are applicable to Sri Lanka – and should they be?
9. In your opinion, which country should Sri Lanka try to emulate – for example in relation to politics, the economy, human development, and social issues?
10. What role do you think China will play in Sri Lanka in the future? What about other countries or major powers?

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Fragmented Power

This dissertation presents a theory on China's "Fragmented Power" in foreign politics by examining the reception of the "Belt and Road" Initiative in Sri Lanka. This initiative, which exemplifies Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy, has sparked significant global debate but remains underexplored in academic circles, particularly regarding its reception and the role of local actors in host countries. Through four interconnected articles and an introductory chapter, this dissertation provides new insights into China's diverse foreign policy strategies and the perceptions of China's political and economic power among Sri Lankans from various societal backgrounds. It contributes to emerging scholarship on the connections between Chinese domestic and foreign policies, highlighting the effects of decentralization and experimentation, the increasing importance of religious and party diplomacy, and the value of local perspectives in understanding the influence of "Global China."

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