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THE STRING OF NODES: HOW THE PROJECTION OF LOGISTICAL POWER REDEFINES TRADE IN THE ASEAN

Leonardo Gioia

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The Indo-Pacific region handles 60% of global maritime trade, and control over its territories is contested in strategic doctrine and public debate. Yet the focus on military primacy, alliances, and institutions such as ASEAN often bypasses a fundamental question: how are these exchanges materialised? Politics, economics and strategy converge in an under-theorized element: logistics. Without railways, ports, pipelines, and digital supply-chain platforms, there is no trade, integration, or durable influence. This article introduces logistical power as the capacity to project influence through infrastructure networks that bind economies, shape dependencies, and reconfigure geopolitical space. Moving beyond "debt trap" and the "String of Pearls" rhetoric, it analyses three nodes of Chinese infrastructure expansion in and around ASEAN: the Mekong basin, Kyaukpyu port (Myanmar), and the Chittagong ecosystem (Bangladesh). Extra-ASEAN cases Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) are examined to highlight how institutional density and collective negotiating capacity transform dependence from a liability into a manageable resource. The argument is that ASEAN countries are not passive terminals of Chinese logistical projection. Laos pursues calibrated dependence to escape isolation; Thailand pragmatically negotiates; Vietnam diversifies via bamboo diplomacy; Myanmar clings to Chinese support amid civil war. While logistical power can indeed redefine global hierarchies, the challenge for ASEAN is not to reject foreign infrastructure but to develop collective capacity to manage dependencies, turning its logistical crossroads into strategic leverage rather than passive vulnerability.

Keywords: *Logistical Power Theory, ASEAN, BRI, Infrastructure, Fractal Networks*

INTRODUCTION

Logistical Power Theory (LPT): An Analytical Framework

To analyse how infrastructure networks reconfigure political space, this article draws on Logistical Power Theory (LPT), an integrated framework that emerges from the synthesis of Classical Seapower Theory (Mahan 1980; Till 2018), Supply-Chain and logistics studies (Cowen 2014; Neilson 2012), and Core–Periphery Theory (Prebisch 1950, pp. 8-10; Friedmann 1967, pp. 20-41; Wallerstein 1974, pp. 347-357). Each of these traditions captures a portion of the phenomenon but presents limitations when applied alone. Mahanian seapower focuses overwhelmingly on the military applications of maritime control, leaving the economic and connective dimensions of infrastructure unexplored. Critical logistics research tends to privilege corporate actors and the biopolitics of circulation over state-driven geopolitics. Core–periphery analysis, while useful in describing structural inequality, struggles to conceptualise relationships between regional nodes beyond functional master-servant dynamics.

LPT overcomes these limitations by introducing the concept of logistical power as *the ability to activate infrastructures – ports, routes, railways, networks – to project global influence, exercise economic coercion, and reconfigure territorial hierarchies*. Ports, in this perspective, are not simple transit points or static symbols of state capacity, but operational engines of power (Notteboom 2022, Chapter 11.1): dynamic nodes where infrastructure, logistical coordination, and strategic ambition converge. They are tangible manifestations of a complex nodular reality formed by interconnected networks (Coeck et al. 1996; Haezendonck et al. 2006), in which logistics acts as a catalyst for geopolitical change.

LPT distinguishes itself from existing theorisations on three levels:

- Beyond Mann (1984, 2008): Infrastructure is not merely a static foundation for the territorial penetration of the state, but an *activating device* for projecting influence beyond national borders.
- Beyond Wallerstein (1974): Centre–periphery hierarchies are not determined solely by the exploitation of resources and labour, but by the capacity to orchestrate flows and control logistical chokepoints.
- Beyond Cowen (2014) and Neilson (2012): Logistics is not only a business practice or an abstract “weapon of empire,” but a specific dimension of

state and supranational power, with measurable effects on regional economies and political autonomy.

LPT distinguishes two forms of logistical power: external and internal. External logistical power is the ability to command and orchestrate cross-border flows, influence standards, interconnections, and the architecture of global supply chains. Internal logistical power is the capacity to resist and absorb shocks through bureaucratic-administrative control over domestic networks.

The distinction between external and internal logistical power is an analytical convenience, not an ontological separation. Logistical networks exhibit fractal self-similarity: the centre-periphery dynamics that structure inter-state relations reappear, with different content, at the intra-state and local levels. A port controlled by a foreign power (external projection) and a municipal bureaucracy that reorients public resources away from export sectors (internal reorganization) are both manifestations of the same underlying mechanism: whoever controls a critical node redefines the hierarchy around it. The difference lies in the substance of the ties, treaty versus labour contract, financial loans versus welfare provision, not in the topology of power.¹

Empirically, this means that external and internal logistical power must be read simultaneously. Like a book that can be read from right to left and from left to right without changing its structure, the logistical network is shaped by both the outward projection of state and corporate actors and the inward resistance, absorption, or failure of the communities that host the nodes. A collapse of internal logistical power, due to civil war, institutional decay, or local insurgency, is not a separate phenomenon from external projection; it is its condition of possibility and its permanent threat. The two dimensions are co-constitutive: they must be held apart for clarity of analysis, but they never operate apart in reality.

This article therefore focuses on the external dimension, defined as *the ability of a territorial node (city, region, port) – or of a state projecting power through such a node – to orchestrate cross-border flows of goods, capital and information, influencing standards, networks and hierarchies beyond its administrative borders*, while treating the internal responses of host communities not as exogenous frictions, but as constitutive elements of the projection process itself. The

¹ The fractal nature of the network ensures that the power dynamics observed at the macro level are reproduced topologically at the micro level. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Mandelbrot 1982; Barabási 2002.

Arakan Army, the Baloch insurgents, and the displaced villagers along the Boten-Vientiane railway are not outside the network; they are its internal counter-currents,² shaping the very flows that external powers seek to orchestrate.

Crucially, the nation-state remains the primary unit capable of projecting external logistical power at scale, but it often does so through extraterritorial nodes: ports, railways, and special economic zones built or financed abroad. This is the mechanism exploited by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By creating, funding, and operating strategic logistical nodes in other countries, Beijing extends its capacity to orchestrate flows far beyond its sovereign territory. The receiving state, however, does not simply surrender control: it negotiates, resists, or leverages the new infrastructure for its own strategic goals. The result is a dynamic, often asymmetric, but never unidirectional relationship.

LPT models the world as a *Network of Networks* (Buldyrev et al. 2010; Kivelä et al. 2014), exhibiting internal self-similarity, clustering, and robustness to random failure, but also vulnerability to targeted shocks on critical nodes.³ The three ASEAN cases analysed in this article (the Mekong Corridor, Kyaukpyu, and Chittagong) are examined precisely as critical nodes within this networked architecture, where China's external logistical power meets the strategic responses of Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Bangladesh. The two extra-ASEAN comparators (Gwadar and Hambantota) serve to isolate the effect of regional institutional density: in South Asia, the absence of an ASEAN-like fabric transforms infrastructure dependence into a far more acute sovereignty risk.

² This theoretical framework adopts a perspective borrowed from the physics of complex systems (Nicolis & Prigogine 1977) and non-linear fluid dynamics (Ball 2004), where power is not understood as a fixed "quantity" possessed by a single actor, but as the very form of the network. If the logistic projection is a vector "flow", its stability is not an intrinsic property of the origin (the centre), but emerges from the interaction between the inertial thrust of capital (External LP) and the institutional or social "viscosity" of the territory crossed (Internal LP) (Helbing 2012). Non-state actors are not external obstacles, but "vortex" or dissipative structures within the flow that reorganise the energy of the network according to local logic. Using the metaphor of the "network-book", the state reads the system "from the left" (macro projection, large hubs), while local communities read it "from the right" (micro-logistics, resistance). The reality of logistical power emerges exclusively at the meeting point of these two simultaneous readings: it does not belong to either of the two actors, but is the configuration produced by their dynamic interaction within a self-organised system, where the global configuration is inseparable from local micro-fluctuations.

³ The structure of international logistics networks displays fractal-like properties (Albert et al. 1999; Song et al. 2005), but with a crucial caveat: while mathematical fractals are infinite and identical to themselves at every scale, in international networks the *nature of the bond changes* as one moves across levels. Between states, an arc (a logistical relationship) may be an economic treaty; between firms, a supply contract; between politicians, a patronage tie. The topology remains similar, and vulnerability to external shocks persists, yet the substance of the connection varies, requiring careful analytical scaling. This insight is elaborated in the broader LPT framework (Author, forthcoming).

Normative Commitment and Empirical Symmetry

Logistical Power Theory (LPT) does not import its evaluative criterion from any external political preference. If power is not a fixed quantity possessed by one actor but the emergent form of the logistical network itself – a fractal geometry of centres, peripheries, and flows – then the normative standard by which any infrastructure projection must be assessed is topological, not ideological. A network in which multiple nodes retain the capacity to orchestrate flows, renegotiate the terms of connectivity, and generate alternative pathways is structurally resilient and distributes the benefits of circulation broadly. A network in which a single node monopolises orchestration capacity, reducing all others to passive terminals, is structurally brittle and vulnerable to cascading failure.

This criterion is inherently symmetrical. The LPT framework does not single out China: it applies identically to any actor that builds and operates cross-border infrastructure, regardless of its flag. The same centre–periphery dynamics, the same patterns of asymmetric dependency and multi-nodal resilience, are observable in the European Union's Global Gateway initiative (European Commission 2021; Stanicek 2024), in Italy's Mattei Plan for African energy corridors (Camera dei Deputati 2024; Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2024; Governo Italiano 2024), in India's submarine fibre-optic network linking the Indian Ocean rim (Submarine Networks IEX; Offshore Energy 2017; Projects Today 2021), and in Japan's Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) as a logistical-industrial node (Prime Minister's Office 2022; BAE Systems; United Kingdom Ministry of Defence 2023). The substance of the ties differs – energy, data, defence – but the topology of power repeats.

This is not an empirical coincidence but a logical consequence of the fractal nature of logistical networks. The ASEAN cases analysed in this article are not exceptional; they are a particularly dense and variegated instance of a planetary phenomenon. The LPT map, once drawn for Southeast Asia, can be redrawn for the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, or the Baltic littoral. The flags change; the topology of power does not. The framework's purpose is therefore neither to celebrate nor to condemn any particular state, but to provide a verifiable cartographic instrument for navigating the dissipation of logistical power across any regional network, and, potentially, for anticipating breakdown points before they rupture.

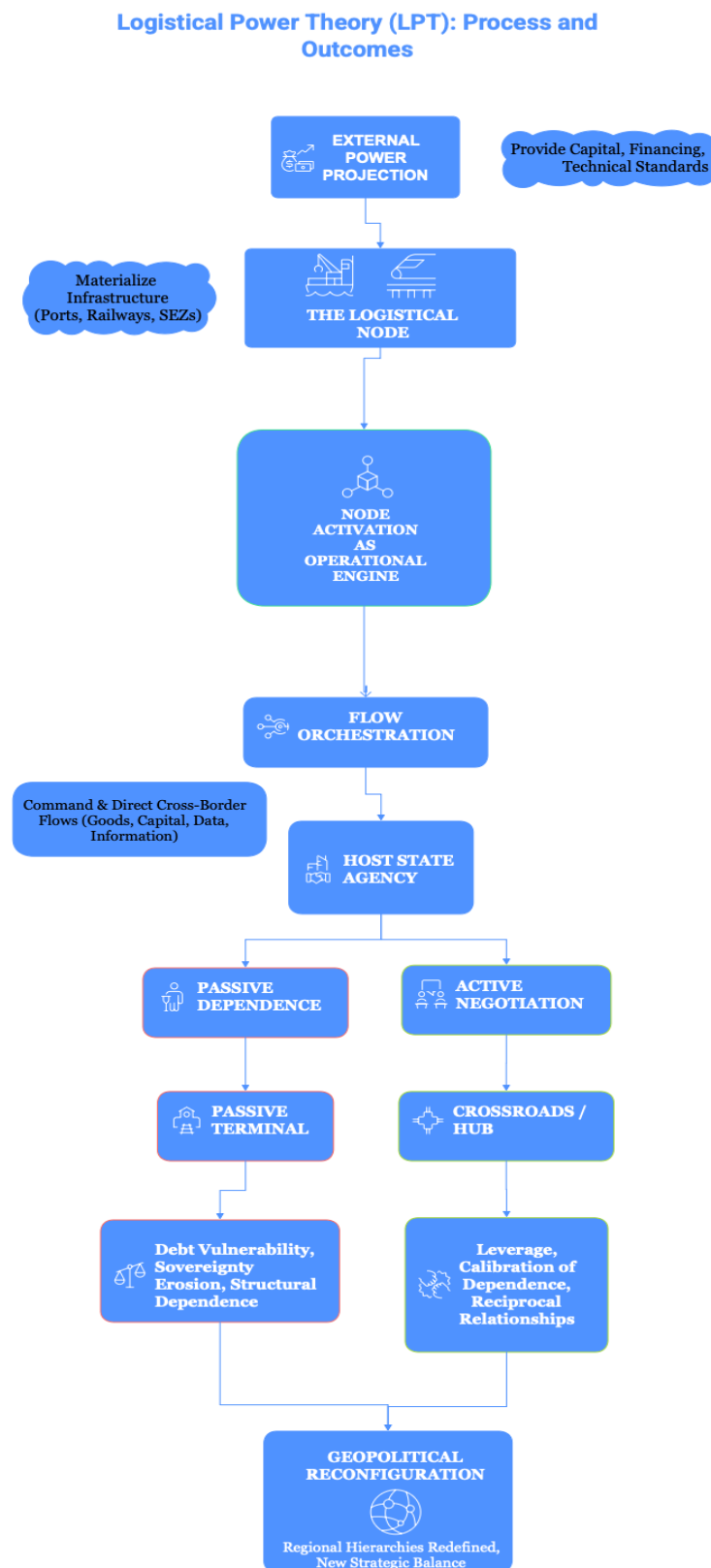
By adopting the LPT lens, the article moves beyond the militarised narrative of the “String of Pearls” (Ghiasy 2021, pp. 265-290) and the simplistic debt-trap accusation. It

shows that logistical power is not merely a weapon of the strong: it creates vulnerabilities and bargaining chips for both sides, and its final configuration depends on the institutional capacity, strategic clarity, and collective coordination of the states that host the nodes.

Table 1. Theoretical Positioning of Logistical Power Theory (LPT) Against Classical Frameworks

Theory	Main Focus	Limit according to the LPT
Mahan (Seapower)	Military control of the seas	He neglects the economic and connective dimensions
Wallerstein (Core-Periphery)	Exploitation of resources and labour	Ignore the ability to orchestrate streams and chokepoints
LPT (Logistical Power)	Activation of infrastructure to project influence	—

Figure 1. Visualization of Logistic Power Theory (LPT)



Made with Napkin

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design based on a comparative case study methodology. Its aim is to investigate the causal mechanisms through which external logistical projections interact with the socio-political fabric of host states, generating different outcomes in terms of dependency, agency, and network reconfiguration.

The data are drawn from a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official government policy documents (e.g., the EU Global Gateway, Italy's Mattei Plan), corporate reports from key logistical actors, most notably the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) for the Kyaukpyu pipelines and Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries (ZPMC) for port machinery, and international trade databases (UNCTADstat, Clarksons Research). Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed scholarly articles, strategic reports from international think tanks (IISS, CSIS, PISM), and specialized infrastructure and logistics journals.

Data collection follows a systematic review of infrastructure concession agreements, technical specifications of port equipment (to assess vendor lock-in), and regional integration arrangements within the ASEAN framework. For data analysis, the study employs a *topological process tracing* approach. This method reconstructs within-case causal chains (process tracing) while simultaneously mapping each node's evolving position within the logistical network (topology), paying particular attention to shifts in connectivity, institutional density, and the socio-political viscosity, i.e., the resistance generated by local communities, insurgent groups, and domestic bureaucracies, that conditions the host state's capacity to negotiate, resist, or absorb external logistical power.

Each case study (Mekong corridor, Kyaukpyu, Chittagong ecosystem) is examined through the lens of Logistical Power Theory (LPT), systematically comparing how different geographical positions, institutional densities, and internal fragilities determine the host state's agency within the broader fractal network.

DISCUSSION

Case 1 – Indochina: Navigating Dependence, Negotiating Logistical Power

The Lancang-Mekong basin is the logistical aorta of mainland Southeast Asia. Stretching 4,800 km from the Tibetan plateau to the South China Sea, the river sustains about 73 million people and pierces six states (Mitra et al., pp. 149-172). It is also the theatre where China's external logistical power confronts the most variegated set of national responses in the entire Belt and Road landscape. Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam inhabit the same infrastructural embrace, yet each has developed a distinct strategy for converting connectivity into autonomy, or accepting its erosion.

Historical Background: From Mekong Cooperation to Chinese Nodal Control

Early attempts to a common basin governance date to the 1957 Statute of the Lower Mekong (Jacobs 2002, pp. 354-364), promoted under UN sponsorship by Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam and Thailand (Jensen et al. 2013, pp. 354-364). China, isolated during that period, did not participate, and the mechanism wilted during the Indochina wars (Jacobs 2002, pp. 354-364). Beijing filled the institutional vacuum decades later. Through the Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Program (Jensen et al. 2013, pp. 354-364), China embedded itself as a development partner; in 2015, with the launch of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) (Wilkins et al. 2024), it acquired a dedicated minilateral platform located in Beijing, designed to run parallel to the older Mekong River Commission.

The LMC is the institutional face of a deliberate Chinese strategy (Singh 2022, pp. 43-49): creating complementary structures that (Economy 2018), without formally dismantling existing ones (Rudd 2022), shift the centre of gravity of regional governance toward Beijing (Lancang Mekong Cooperation 2016; Hillman 2020). Through it, China has linked water resource management, infrastructure finance, and diplomatic alignment into a single policy network. This architecture has enabled Beijing to convert its position as upstream buffer, reinforced by eleven massive dams on the Lancang, into a lever of logistical power over downstream states.

Nodes And Networks

Within this framework, three categories of logistical nodes have redefined Indochina's connectivity (Nadin et al. 2023, pp. 13-29):

- I. Water infrastructure: The dams themselves are immense control nodes. By regulating the river's flow, China can affect the Mekong's level, sediment transport, and fisheries, with direct consequences on agriculture and navigation in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This hydrological leverage is a pure form of external logistical power: it allows a node on Chinese soil to orchestrate cross-border flows without a single railway track (Hlaing 2024, pp. 1-15).
- II. Terrestrial arteries: The logistical core is the Boten–Vientiane railway (National Development and Reform Commission 2015), completed in 2021. This 414 km, US\$6 billion link integrates Laos into the pan-Asian railway network and connects Kunming directly to the Thai border. The railway is built entirely to Chinese technical standards, with a standard gauge of 1,435 mm, a deliberate engineering choice that enables seamless integration with China's domestic rail network but creates a physical break with Thailand's meter-gauge (1,000 mm) system (China Railway 2022). This gauge discontinuity necessitates a dedicated transshipment yard at Vientiane South Station, where cargo must be unloaded from standard-gauge wagons and reloaded onto meter-gauge rolling stock (UNESCAP 2020). The yard, invested and built by the Laos-China Railway Co., Ltd., is configured with one standard-gauge track and two meter-gauge tracks, with an annual transshipment capacity of approximately 800,000 tons (CIIE 2022). The dependence on Chinese standards extends beyond the rails: the signalling system, comprising 345 signal controllers, 171 rerouting machines, and 425 track circuit sections, was installed by the China Railway Construction Electrification Bureau Group and operates on Chinese proprietary technology (State Information Center of China 2020; CRECG 2023). Moreover, since the line's opening in December 2021, the operation of the Lao section has relied on over 540 Chinese technical specialists dispatched from the China State Railway Group to supervise maintenance, train dispatching, and locomotive upkeep, while more than 1,000 Lao personnel have been trained through Chinese-led programmes. Rolling stock, including the 'Lane Xang' EMU trains, is Chinese-supplied, and replacement parts, software updates, and major repairs all depend on Chinese manufacturing chains (Mangkorndejsakul 2021; SCIO 2022). The railway is the first operational segment of the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC). In Cambodia, the Phnom Penh–

Sihanoukville Expressway (AidData 2021) and the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ Official Website) forms an integrated land-sea system facing the South China Sea. Thailand is constructing a high-speed rail link to Nong Khai, with long-term plans to connect to Vientiane.

- III. Maritime infrastructure: China has upgraded Sihanoukville port and holds a *de facto* commercial presence there. In Thailand, the most ambitious logistical prize remains the Kra Canal (Brewster 2017), a project that would sever the Malay Peninsula and bypass the Strait of Malacca, but Bangkok has effectively shelved it. In its place, Thailand has proposed the Land Bridge: two deep-sea ports at Chumphon and Ranong linked by a 90 km highway-rail corridor, a US\$36 billion scheme that would maintain Thai sovereignty over the connecting infrastructure (ThinkChina 2023).

Each of these nodes is a vector of Chinese external logistical power: built, financed or operated by Chinese entities, they extend Beijing's capacity to orchestrate flows of goods and capital beyond its administrative borders. Yet, crucially, each also represents a bargaining chip for the host state, precisely because it is located on sovereign territory.

National Strategies: Four Models Of Response To Logistical Power

Laos Calibrated Dependence's

For Vientiane, the China-Laos railway is not a trap but a conscious strategic gamble. The goal is to transform the country from land-locked to land-linked, becoming the inevitable transit corridor between China and Thailand (Morris et al. 2020). The government accepts debt levels that have reached 112% of GDP (US\$17 billion, of which US\$5.1 billion owed to Chinese creditors) (Barney et al. 2025) because the railway represents the only real path out of geographical isolation. However, Laos does not place all its eggs in one basket: it maintains historical military ties with Vietnam, carefully monitors land concessions along the route, and has resisted the transformation of Special Economic Zones into Chinese extraterritorial enclaves. The result is what the paper terms *calibrated dependence* – a form of accepted asymmetry, pursued with a sensitivity to red lines and external counterweights (Stec 2023).

Cambodia Asymmetrical Alignment's

Phnom Penh's strategy is less articulated but no less rational. Having long relied on Chinese political cover at the UN Security Council and on massive infrastructure investments, Cambodia has become the most consistently pro-Beijing ASEAN member. The Sihanoukville hub offers China a commercial gateway to the Gulf of Thailand (SEEZ Official Website), while Phnom Penh obtains modern connectivity without immediate debt distress comparable to Laos (AidData 2021). The risk, however, is a progressive reduction of strategic options: Cambodia's economy is heavily dependent on Chinese tourism, construction and energy finance, while its diplomatic space shrinks in parallel with democratic backsliding.

Thailand Pragmatic Negotiation with Red Lines

Bangkok is the most calibrated player in the region. It accepts Chinese infrastructure to modernise its economy and maintains its role as a manufacturing hub (Hardi et al. 2020, pp. 107-121) (the Eastern Economic Corridor), but refuses to cede technical or territorial control. The Kra Canal case is emblematic. Thailand has systematically held back on a Chinese-funded canal cutting through the Kra Isthmus, fearing it would physically divide the country and grant Beijing excessive maritime leverage (Luft & Nye 2017 pp. 19-37). Instead, Bangkok has put forward its own Land Bridge project, keeping sovereignty over both coasts and the connecting infrastructure (ThinkChina 2023). In parallel, Thailand preserves a formal military alliance with the United States, receives the largest flows of Japanese industrial investment, and has signed a global partnership agreement with the European Union. This multi-table game is a survival strategy that transforms logistical dependence into a continuously renegotiated variable.

Vietnam Bamboo Diplomacy and Calculated Distance

Although part of the CICPEC corridors, Hanoi is the most wary partner. Historical disputes in the South China Sea make any Chinese infrastructure loan a potential security risk. Vietnam adopts a "bamboo diplomacy" (Hiep 2024): flexible, resilient, capable of bending without breaking. It accepts Chinese capital only when strictly necessary and technologically advantageous, without ever compromising national security. In 2023, it elevated relations with the United States to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (U.S. Department of State 2025), and in early 2026 it signed an analogous agreement with the European Union. This dual elevation has made Vietnam the preferred destination of the

“China Plus One” (FedEx Official Page 2024) strategy, transforming geographical proximity to China from a threat into an opportunity. The result is the lowest degree of infrastructural dependence among the four, a model of diversification that keeps logistical power at arm’s length.

Evidence Of Dependence And Asymmetry

The material indicators of asymmetric dependence vary markedly:

- **Debt:** Laos’ external debt doubled between 2010 and 2023, with China holding the largest bilateral share. The 2022 currency crisis forced Vientiane to request annual debt deferrals from Beijing, creating a structural financial lever that limits future policy autonomy (Nishizawa 2022), a dynamic that can be called *alliance jeopardisation*. Cambodia, by contrast, has managed Chinese loans more cautiously in terms of GDP ratios, but remains exposed to a highly concentrated aid and investment portfolio (China Daily 2020).
- **Operational control:** In Laos, the railway is a joint venture, but Chinese standards, rolling stock, and personnel dominate daily operations. In Sihanoukville, the Chinese commercial footprint is so pervasive that it has raised sovereignty concerns, especially given reports of a possible naval facility. Thailand, conversely, has insisted on Thai-led construction contracts and technology transfer for its high-speed rail, preserving a much higher degree of operational control.
- **Institutional leverage:** Through the LMC, China has institutionalised an upstream riparian advantage that no other Mekong country possesses. The dams’ impact on water flow is both an environmental and a geopolitical fact, and Chinese data on dam operations remains largely opaque to downstream partners.

Contradictions And Limits: The Local Face of Logistical Power

Logistical power looks monolithic from afar; up close, it encounters friction. In Laos, the most vocal resistance comes from communities affected by land concessions

along the railway corridor. There is growing local resentment against SEZs perceived as Chinese enclaves, where labour conditions and land expropriation have fuelled protests. In Cambodia, the concentration of Chinese investment in coastal Sihanoukville has generated social tensions and anti-Chinese sentiment that the government struggles to manage (Government Public Relations Department 2024). In Thailand, public scepticism toward a Chinese-project Kra Canal is so deep that no government has dared to revive it, despite Beijing's recurrent diplomatic overtures. In Vietnam, anti-Chinese nationalism, periodically inflamed by political incidents, imposes a hard political ceiling on any large-scale BRI project. These local dynamics reveal that logistical power is not a smooth transmission belt. It must negotiate terrain, public opinion, and memories of historical entanglement. LPT captures this by recognising that nodes are not inert infrastructure but sites where the substance of the connection (political, economic, social) can shift and even reverse the intended effect.

Logistical Power In The Basin: A Preliminary Assessment

Seen through the LPT lens, the Mekong basin is a *network of networks* in which Beijing has activated dams, railways, and ports to orchestrate cross-border flows and reshape regional hierarchies. But the porosity of state sovereignty and the diversity of national strategies have prevented the emergence of a simple core–periphery pattern. Laos has moved closer to the Chinese core, yet retains a thread of strategic autonomy through its Vietnam counterweight. Thailand has kept the core at a deliberate distance, reinforcing its own bargaining power. Cambodia has aligned closely without apparent short-term cost, at the price of a less measurable long-term loss of options. Vietnam has essentially stopped the core at its border, while still profiting from the dispersal of manufacturing supply chains that the BRI, indirectly, has accelerated. The challenge for the Mekong countries is not the cheap accusation of a debt trap (Himmer & Rod 2022, pp. 250-272), but the deeper, subtler governance of calibrated dependence (Stec 2023). The LPT framework suggests that the final outcome – a region of passive terminals or a community of empowered crossroads – will depend less on the quantity of Chinese concrete poured and more on the capacity of states, individually and collectively, to convert infrastructure into genuinely reciprocal logistical relationships.

Table 2. Analytical Matrix Of Host-State Agency And Autonomy Under The LPT Framework

Country	Strategy Model	Main Objective	Key Risk
Laos	Calibrated dependence	Getting out of geographical isolation	"Alliance jeopardisation"
Thailandia	Pragmatic negotiation	Modernisation without giving up control	Erosion technical control
Vietnam	Bamboo diplomacy	Diversification and national security	Anti-Chinese nationalism
Cambogia	Asymmetrical alignment	Rapid development and policy coverage	Reduction of strategic options

Case 2 — Myanmar And The Dilemma Of Kyaukpyu: Logistics Hub Or Strategic Trap In Time Of Civil War?

While the Mekong basin illustrates how ASEAN states can calibrate dependence, Myanmar demonstrates the extreme fragility of logistical power when the host state's internal stability fractures. The port of Kyaukpyu and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) are among the most strategically logistic nodes in Beijing's Indian Ocean ambitions. Yet they sit in a country ravaged by civil war, where central government's authorities have collapsed precisely within the regions the infrastructure is built to traverse. For both China and Myanmar, Kyaukpyu port has become a geopolitical dilemma: it is indispensable because it is precarious, and precarious because it is indispensable, in energy terms.

Historical Background: From Periphery To Strategic Back Door

Until the late 1980s, China was not Myanmar's primary economic partner. Japan was the largest source of Burmese imports, while Southeast Asian neighbours absorbed the bulk of trade (Seekins 1997, pp. 525-539). Chinese commercial influence concentrated in Upper Myanmar, a cross-border economy dominated by low-cost consumer goods exchanged for raw materials. The 1988 military crackdown changed everything (Seekins 1997, pp. 525-539). Western sanctions froze economic ties, and China stepped into the vacuum, becoming Myanmar's principal arms supplier, financier, and diplomatic shield (Seekins 1997, pp. 525-539). By 1995, 33% of Burmese imports originated from China, and

Yunnan province had become the engine of cross-border commerce, aided by Special Economic Zones in Ruili and Wanding (Kudo 2008, pp. 87-110).

Strategic logic followed economic penetration. With 2,000 km of coastline on the Bay of Bengal and a position just 250 km from the Strait of Malacca, Myanmar offers China a partial escape from the “Malacca Dilemma” (Goswami 2021). The British had understood this geography way before the others in the region (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2015); Japan invaded in 1942 to sever Allied supply lines (Sewell 1945, pp. 496-504). Beijing pursued the same end by economic means, conceiving the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) to connect Kunming directly to the Indian Ocean at Kyaukpyu (Krishnan 2020), bypassing the congested and geopolitically exposed strait (Scott 2019, pp. 94-113).

Nodes And Networks: The Anatomy Of A Corridor

The CMEC is not a single project but a layered logistical network of systems (Brewster 2014, pp. 71-79)

Kyaukpyu deep-sea port, on Ramree Island in Rakhine State, is the final operational node. Operated by a Chinese consortium led by CITIC under a 50-year concession (renewable in 25-year terms), it is flanked by a planned Special Economic Zone (US\$2.7 billion). The port’s strategic function is to receive crude oil from the Middle East and Africa and pump it inland (Poling et al. 2018, pp.4-6).

The China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines, an 800 km twin conduit completed in 2013 at a cost of US\$1.5 billion, link Kyaukpyu to Kunming. Built by China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the pipelines were designed to cut the transport distance for Chinese crude imports by roughly 12,000 km (Abb 2025). The crude oil pipeline is a 771-kilometre artery with a diameter of 1,016 mm (Φ1016), constructed from X70 steel and coated with a 3PE high-temperature external anti-corrosion layer plus a liquid epoxy internal coat, with a design pressure of 10 MPa (Summers 2018, pp. 480-488). Its designed transmission capacity is 22 million tons per year, equivalent to roughly 440,000 barrels per day, of which Myanmar retains 2 million tons annually for its domestic consumption (Zheng & Tokunaga 2019). The oil terminal on Madè Island is built to accommodate Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCCs) of up to 300,000 deadweight tons, offloading Middle Eastern and African crude into storage

tanks before the pipeline begins its overland journey (Li & Zhang 1991, pp. 267-274; CNPC 2013). Because the crude arriving from the Middle East is predominantly waxy and high-pour-point, it must be heated continuously to remain fluid: the pipeline relies on a chain of heating and pumping stations, stockpile stations and block valve stations spaced along the route (CNPC 2020), all controlled by the Chinese-led joint venture South-East Asia Crude Oil Pipeline Company Limited (SEAOP) (Pipeline Technology Journal 2017; Poling 2018). Any prolonged power interruption would cause the crude to cool, freeze, and potentially block the line, creating an acute dependence on Chinese-supplied energy, spare parts, and technical personnel for uninterrupted operation (Li et al. 2010, pp. 235-242; CNPC 2013; ERIA 2015).

The Kunming–Kyaukpyu railway, a long-planned 800 km rail link intended to complete the overland corridor, has remained stalled by funding disagreements, security concerns, and the civil war (Abb 2025).

The CMEC blueprint includes connections to Mandalay, the Yangon New City project, and industrial zones along the corridor (Abb 2025).

From an LPT perspective, Kyaukpyu is a quintessential external logistical node: financed, built, and operated by Chinese entities on foreign territory, it extends Beijing's capacity to orchestrate energy and trade flows well beyond its sovereign borders. However, unlike the Mekong cases, where the host states maintain formal control and a degree of bargaining power, Kyaukpyu is integrated in a country where the state itself has partially failed.

National Strategy: Contested Dependence

Myanmar's approach to Chinese logistical power is the most dramatic among the ASEAN cases, definable as *contested dependence*. Before the 2021 *coup d'état*, Naypyidaw attempted a cautious diversification: it cultivated Japanese, South Korean, and EU investment, suspended the Myitsone dam under public pressure, and exhibited a degree of autonomy even as it accepted BRI megaprojects (Belt and Road Portal 2018). The military's seizure of power shattered this balancing act (Ratcliffe 2022). Western sanctions returned immediately, isolating the junta economically and diplomatically (European Union 2013). China, adhering to its principle of non-interference, became the regime's sole

functioning lifeline: arms supplier, fuel exporter, infrastructure partner, and diplomatic buffer in the UN Security Council (International Crisis Group 2024).

The junta thus clings to Chinese investments as an anchor in a deep internal war and international isolation. Yet the dependence is not passive. The generals know that Beijing needs Kyaukpyu and the pipelines (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2023; Maung 2025), and they use this reality to extract continued political support and economic relief, even as they resist Chinese pressure to cease hostilities against ethnic armed groups that Beijing itself maintains contact with (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2023). The result is a twisted symbiosis: China gets a surviving government that protects its strategic assets; the junta gets a sponsor that cannot afford to let it collapse (Kyaw 2025).

For China, the civil war has forced an uncomfortable dual-track approach: officially it engages the junta to safeguard its corridor (The Irrawaddy 2025), while simultaneously maintaining dialogue with ethnic armed organisations like the Arakan Army (AA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) that control territory the energetic corridor must cross (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2025; Myint 2025). In October 2023, the "Three Brothers Alliance" (of which the AA and TNLA are members) launched a coordinated offensive that captured the junta's regional military command in Lashio and other strategic towns along the Sino-Myanmar border. This directly threatened Chinese economic interests and forced Beijing to mediate ceasefires, a role entirely at odds with its non-interference rhetoric.

Evidence Of Dependence And Asymmetry

The pipeline and port concession agreements give Chinese state-owned enterprises dominant management rights. The profit-sharing structure and land lease terms are not publicly transparent, but the 50-year concession on the SEZ mirrors the long-lease models of Gwadar and Hambantota, raising sovereignty concerns (Poling et al. 2018, pp. 4-6). While Myanmar's total external debt is not as extreme in GDP terms as that of Laos, Chinese lending for BRI projects has grown significantly since 2016 (Yun 2017).

The CMEC framework agreement included pledges of financing for infrastructure worth several billion dollars; however, civil war disruptions have made project completion uncertain and repayment prospects dim (Poling 2018). The World Bank has warned of

growing debt distress, and the junta frequently seeks rescheduling and additional loans from Beijing. Concerning the energy dependence, the Kyaukpyu pipelines supply not only China but also domestic Burmese consumption. The pipelines themselves are a physical umbilical cord: a critical energy node that China must protect at all costs, which paradoxically gives both the junta and the armed groups that threaten it a degree of coercive leverage over Beijing. Finally, Chinese military, including fighter jets, armoured vehicles, and surveillance technology, have been documented entering Myanmar since the coup. This military supply chain creates an additional dependency that blurs the line between logistical and military power (Seekins 1997, pp. 525-539 ; Parameswaran 2017).

Contradictions and Limits: The Local and The Insurgent

The CMEC's trajectory exposes the most significant limitation of external logistical power: it cannot operate in a vacuum of sovereignty. The projects are physically located in conflict zones, and the local population is not only hostile to the junta but increasingly suspicious of Chinese presence.

The Arakan Army, which effectively controls much of Rakhine State, has attacked military convoys and positions near Kyaukpyu. In 2024–2025, fighting intensified, and the CITIC-led projects for the port expansion and SEZ were suspended following diplomatic pressure and security alerts from the EU and US. Beijing has had to dispatch special envoys to negotiate directly with the Arakan Army to secure the safety of its pipelines and personnel – a stark illustration that a non-state actor can hold a logistical superpower hostage (Kyaw 2025). The Myitsone dam suspension in 2011, driven by massive domestic protests and environmental concerns, demonstrated early on that infrastructure friction can derail even the most strategic projects. The Letpadaung copper mine protests further solidified a legacy of local resistance to Chinese extractivism. In Rakhine, the Rohingya crisis and the Myanmar military's scorched-earth campaigns have generated deep-seated communal tensions, making any large-scale infrastructure development a potential flashpoint (International Crisis Group 2024).

Chinese engineers and managers have been kidnapped, attacked, or forced to evacuate multiple times since the coup. These episodes force Beijing to invest heavily in private security and deal-making with local militias, significantly driving up the operating cost of logistical power (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2023). The junta cannot guarantee the security of the corridor because it does not control the territory. This

undermines the foundational assumption of LPT: that the host state can provide the bureaucratic-administrative stability necessary for the node to function. When the node's host is a patchwork of contested authorities, external logistical power becomes dangerously exposed.

Logistical Power In A Fractured State: Assessment Through LPT

Kyaukpyu is the place where the promise of Chinese external logistical power confronts its most severe limit. The LPT framework reveals that logistical power is not simply a function of concrete and steel; it is a function of the stability of the relational network that the infrastructure activates. In Myanmar, the arcs of that network are sabotaged by a host state lacking sovereignty, by insurgent groups wielding territorial control, and by a local population with a history of uprising against both the central government and foreign developers. The consequence is that Kyaukpyu, conceived as a *backdoor* to the Indian Ocean, has become a node of contested access (Byrd 2020, pp. 307-316).

China is bound to the junta by its need to keep the pipelines flowing and the port operational, but it is simultaneously bound to the rebels by the reality that they control the ground. This double bind erodes Beijing's negotiating advantage: the junta can extract continued support by leveraging the threat of collapse; the Arakan Army can disrupt operations and demand recognition. Neither is a passive recipient of logistical power. In sum, Myanmar's contested dependence is a cautionary tale for the BRI: where institutional density collapses and armed non-state actors proliferate, logistical power does not simply project outward: it recoils inward, forcing the projecting state into entanglements it never intended.

Case 3 – Chittagong: The Bangladeshi Logistics Ecosystem And The Art Of Selective Integration

Among the BRI nodes examined in this paper, the Chittagong ecosystem stands out as the most mature attempt to transform logistical power into a negotiated, multi-layered *network of networks*. Bangladesh has not merely accepted Chinese investments; it has implanted them within a national strategy of selectivity, diversification,

and institutional balance, creating a model that, while not without tensions, offers a counter-narrative to both the debt-trap alarmism and the Gwadar-style sovereignty erosion, as it will be described furtherly.

Historical Background: From Suspicious Distance To Strategic Embrace

China and Bangladesh established diplomatic relations in 1975, four years after Bangladesh's violent secession from the collapse of united Pakistan. Beijing, a historical ally of Pakistan, initially viewed the new state with suspicion, but quickly recalibrated (Choudhury 1990, pp. 127-156). Bangladesh, encircled by India on three sides, saw in China an alternative pole capable of offsetting New Delhi's overwhelming regional weight (Shabbir 2017, pp. 137-152). The relationship remained low-intensity until the early 2000s, when China began channeling infrastructure finance through concessional loans.

The turning point was the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. Dhaka recognised in the BRI a "golden opportunity" (The Daily Star 2017) to upgrade its crumbling logistics backbone – ports, railways, energy pipelines – without the political conditionality attached to Western lending (Ministry of the Finance of the People's Republic of China 2024). Unlike India, which formally distanced itself from the initiative, Bangladesh embraced it, but with a distinctly cautious hand (Chakma 2019, pp. 227-239; Daily Sun 2020). By 2016, during the Chinese president's visit, agreements worth US\$21.5 billion were signed, catapulting Bangladesh into the top tier of South Asian BRI recipients (Karim & Islam 2018, pp. 283 - 302).

Nodes and Networks: An Integrated Ecosystem

The Chittagong node is unique in China's Indian Ocean expansion: it is not an isolated port project but a full-fledged logistics ecosystem that binds together multiple sectors under a single strategic umbrella.

The port of Chittagong is the central nervous system. Upgraded with Chinese capital and know-how, it remains under the sovereign management of the Chittagong Port Authority, a crucial distinction from the long-lease models of Gwadar and Hambantota. The port handles over 90% of Bangladesh's maritime trade and is a pivotal node in the proposed Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor (China Daily 2010, 2018).

The Payra deep-sea port, financed with a US\$600 million Chinese loan, is designed to supplement Chittagong's capacity and offer a second maritime outlet on the Bay of Bengal (Mamun 2016).

The Dohazari–Cox's Bazar railway, inaugurated in 2023, connects the southern coastline to the national network, functioning as a piece of the larger BCIM corridor (Belt and Road Portal 2023). The Padma Bridge Rail Link connects the capital to the south-west, integrating once isolated regions. The Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel (completed 2022) – South Asia's first underwater road tunnel – was built by a Chinese state firm. These transport corridors are the arteries through which Chinese external logistical power extends inland from the port (Dawood 2018; Sobhan 2023).

Around the port, the Anwara Chinese Economic and Industrial Zone hosts factories in textiles, steel and electronics, exploiting low-cost labour to export to the EU and Asia (Dawood 2018). The Payra coal-fired power plant (built with Chinese and South Korean partners) provides energy for the ecosystem, while Chinese-manufactured equipment and digital platforms are progressively layering the node's material and informational architecture (Wen 2023).

The material fabric of the Chittagong ecosystem embeds Chinese technical standards deep into the node's daily operations. The port's quayside is equipped with gantry cranes procured from Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries (ZPMC) (TBS 2025), the Chinese state-owned manufacturer that commands over 80% of the global container crane market: Chittagong Port Authority purchased four quayside gantry cranes from ZPMC at a cost of Tk 243.58 crore, together with six rubber-tyred gantry cranes for Tk 70.83 crore (Barua 2023; The Business Standard 2024). Meanwhile, at the Patenga Container Terminal, Bangladesh's first privately-operated container facility, RSGT Bangladesh has deployed fourteen hybrid rubber-tyred gantry cranes manufactured by GENMA-KALMAR in Taicang (GENMA 2025; The Observer Bangladesh 2025; Apparel Resources 2025), China, under a 22-year concession agreement signed in December 2023 (Public Private Partnership Authority [PPPA], 2023; Sarder & Hossain 2024; The Daily Star 2026). These cranes feature battery-hybrid power technology but remain dependent on Chinese supply chains for proprietary components, software, and specialised maintenance (Blanchard 2024; Container News 2024). The digital architecture of the port reinforces this dependence: the CPA Sky single-window platform, launched in February 2026, integrates customs, port clearance, and vessel tracking into a unified digital environment with real-time radar monitoring and single sign-on access, tracking 128

vessels simultaneously across 21 berths (New Age Business 2024). CPA Sky's back-end technical support is provided by DataSoft Systems Bangladesh Limited, a local firm, and a US-based company, and the platform itself is not currently supplied by Huawei. However, Huawei's broader penetration of Bangladesh's ICT ecosystem is extensive: the company has completed 5G rollouts in major Bangladeshi cities, reduced data latency by 40%, and showcased smart port solutions at the Belt and Road Initiative in Bangladesh Exhibition as a declared partner in Dhaka's 'Smart Bangladesh' digital transformation programme (Barua 2023). Should Chittagong Port's digital infrastructure migrate toward Huawei's proprietary smart port architecture in the future, a trajectory consistent with the Digital Silk Road's pattern in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Gulf, the switching costs would be prohibitive, locking the node into Chinese-controlled data flows, software ecosystems, and hardware supply chains (Nouwens 2021).

From an LPT perspective, the Chittagong ecosystem is a *network of networks* deliberately engineered to be resilient: if one sector (e.g., textiles) falters, others (energy, logistics, digital) compensate. It is a node through which Beijing projects external logistical power, orchestrating cross-border flows of goods, capital and information, but one that Dhaka has retained the capacity to regulate (Belt and Road Portal 2017).

National Strategy: Selective Dependence and Strategic Balance

Bangladesh's approach is best described as *selective dependence*. Dhaka welcomes Chinese infrastructure finance and technology when aligned with its own development priorities, but maintains clear boundaries: no long-term lease of sovereign port facilities, no surrendering of operational control, and continuous cultivation of alternative partnerships (Ghiasy 2021, pp. 265-290).

This selectivity is evident on three fronts:

Unlike Hambantota (99-year lease) or Gwadar (profit-sharing heavily skewed toward Beijing), the Chittagong port upgrade left ownership and operational management firmly in Bangladeshi hands. The Payra port and the Padma Bridge, though Chinese-funded, are sovereign Bangladeshi projects.

Dhaka balances its heavy Chinese investment portfolio with deep and multidimensional ties to India, which remains its largest trade partner in South Asia, its

primary source of electricity imports, and a vital security interlocutor. Japan, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank remain major funders of infrastructure, preventing monoculture dependence. Bangladesh, together with Pakistan, is one of the only two South Asian countries hosting both the terrestrial and maritime components of the BRI, but it has done so without severing its dense connectivity with New Delhi (Belt and Road Portal 2019).

Bangladesh has integrated Chinese-funded projects into its own medium-term development plans (the Five-Year Plans and the Delta Plan 2100), rather than passively accepting the BRI project list. This has allowed Dhaka to channel Chinese capital toward pre-identified gaps, enhancing its absorption capacity and strengthening its negotiating position (Belt and Road Portal 2020).

As economist Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir has argued, Dhaka is promoting a *renewed multilateralism*: it transforms great-power competition into opportunities by refusing to choose sides, instead leveraging each partner's interest to extract maximum benefit (Nan 2025).

Evidence of Dependence and Asymmetry

Selectivity does not mean symmetry. The material indicators of Chinese influence are substantial. China is now Bangladesh's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade exceeding US\$12 billion. Bangladesh has granted China special trade concessions, reducing duties on 97% of Chinese exports. This asymmetry, while partially offset by garment exports to Western markets, creates a structural import dependence on Chinese machinery, electronics and intermediate goods (Belt and Road Portal 2020).

Bangladesh is the second-largest BRI recipient in South Asia, with Chinese-linked infrastructure projects totalling around US\$10 billion (Lingqing 2019). While public debt to GDP (around 30%) remains manageable compared to Laos (112%) or Sri Lanka (peak 120%), the absolute volume of Chinese lending has risen fast, and a portion of it is not fully disclosed under sovereign guarantees, raising fiscal transparency concerns. The deployment of Huawei surveillance and smart-port infrastructure creates a less visible but durable form of dependence. Once critical digital systems are built on Chinese standards and hardware, switching costs become prohibitive (Belt and Road Portal 2023) – a pattern that LPT identifies as *network power*, where the ability to set technical standards becomes a

source of enduring influence. Bangladesh's strategic location on the Bay of Bengal – and its potential to serve as a Chinese “pearl” – invites constant scrutiny from India and the United States. Any internal political shift that is perceived as tilting too far toward Beijing risks destabilising this delicate balance, as the recent post-2024 political transition has already demonstrated.

Contradictions and Limits: The Local and The Geopolitical

The Chittagong model, for all its sophistication, faces internal and external pressures. The Anwara industrial zone and large-scale infrastructure have required extensive land acquisition, generating protests from farming communities and accusations of inadequate compensation. The Payra power plant has faced criticism over coal dependence and environmental degradation, feeding a nascent civil-society pushback against the “development at any cost” model.

The dramatic political upheaval of 2024–2025, with the ouster of the long-ruling Sheikh Hasina government and the installation of an interim administration under Muhammad Yunus, has introduced uncertainty (Stommes 2026). China moved quickly to engage the new government, but the internal polarisation and competing factions create an unstable environment for long-term infrastructure planning. The 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2025 was marked by high-level reassurance, but also by heightened caution on both sides (Belt and Road Portal 2025).

Chittagong's logistics ecosystem cannot be understood in isolation from its proximity to India. The BCIM corridor, intended to connect China, Myanmar and Bangladesh to India's north-eastern states, remains effectively stalled by New Delhi's disinterest. India watches Chinese port-building in its eastern neighbourhood with deep concern and has responded by investing in its own connectivity projects (the BBIN corridor, the Sittwe-Paletwa waterway). Dhaka must constantly calibrate its Chinese embrace to avoid provoking New Delhi, whose cooperation is essential for water sharing, energy trade, and security (Masud 2025).

Logistical Power in A Sovereign Ecosystem: Assessment Through LPT

The Chittagong ecosystem, seen through the LPT lens, demonstrates that a host state with sufficient institutional capacity, strategic clarity, and diversified partnerships can convert external logistical power into a resource that reinforces, rather than erodes, its own sovereignty. Bangladesh has achieved what isolated nodes like Gwadar (in Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) could not: it has absorbed massive Chinese investment while retaining sovereign control over its critical port infrastructure, avoiding the long-lease trap, and preserving active relationships with India, Japan, and multilateral lenders. The node extends Beijing's capacity to orchestrate Bay of Bengal flows, but Dhaka has kept its hand on the conductor's wand, or at least a firm grip on the score.

Yet LPT also reveals the boundary conditions of this success. Selective dependence is not a steady state but a continuous practice, vulnerable to political shocks, debt accumulation, technological lock-in, and the relentless pressure of great-power competition. The model works so long as the state retains internal coherence and external balancing skills, conditions that the 2024–2025 transition has rendered less certain. Chittagong remains the most promising version of ASEAN-adjacent logistical sovereignty, but it is a work in constant need of recalibration.

Case 4 – Comparative Perspectives: Hambantota and Gwadar and The Risk of Isolated Logistical Sovereignty

The ASEAN and ASEAN-adjacent cases analysed so far display a spectrum of negotiated dependence, made possible in part by the dense institutional fabric and multiple partnership options available to states within Southeast Asia's regional architecture. To understand how logistical power operates when such density is absent, it is useful to examine two nodes outside ASEAN that have become iconic and controversial symbols of Chinese infrastructural expansion in South Asia: Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. These two cases serve as a control group: they show what happens when a host state faces Chinese external logistical power alone, without the collective bargaining capacity, institutional buffers, or diversified regional alternatives that ASEAN membership can provide.

Historical Background: Geostrategic Logic in The Indian Ocean

China's interest in Gwadar and Hambantota arises from the same fundamental imperative that drove the Kyaukpyu corridor: the need to diversify energy supply routes and reduce exposure to the Strait of Malacca. The Indian Ocean hosts the world's busiest energy sea lanes, and China, as the world's largest oil importer, has systematically sought to establish a network of port nodes that can act as logistical fallbacks and commercial strongholds. This logic, characterised in US strategic doctrine as the "String of Pearls" (Ghiasy 2021, pp. 265-290), encompasses a chain of infrastructure from the Chinese mainland to the Horn of Africa. LPT reinterprets this network not as a proto-military belt but as an archipelago of external logistical nodes designed to orchestrate cross-border flows and reconfigure commercial hierarchies.

Gwadar, situated in Pakistan's Balochistan province, is the westernmost pearl of this imagined chain. Its strategic value is immense: it sits roughly 172 km from the Iranian port of Chabahar (India) and just outside the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 40% of global oil traffic passes (U.S. EIA 2026). For China, Gwadar offers direct access to the Indian Ocean, reducing the maritime distance for Middle Eastern crude imports by roughly 12,000 km and completely bypassing the Malacca chokepoint. Hambantota, in southern Sri Lanka, occupies an equally privileged position. It lies only 10 nautical miles from Dondra Head, a critical waypoint on the Europe-Asia shipping route, and sits astride the sea lanes through which 64% of global trade flows (Financial Express 2021). For Beijing, Hambantota was conceived as a refuelling, transshipment, and logistical support node on the long maritime corridor between African energy sources and Chinese manufacturing centres.

Nodes and Networks: The Anatomy of Two Isolated Hubs

Gwadar

The port of Gwadar is the maritime anchor of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Schwemlein 2019), a US\$70 billion megaproject that includes the Karakoram Highway (CPEC Port Authority n.d.), oil pipelines, power plants (CPEC Energy Authority n.d.), and industrial zones stretching from Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea (CPEC Economic Authority n.d.). Pakistan is the only South Asian state that offers China

direct territorial access to the Indian Ocean without crossing the territory of a third country, making it an irreplaceable partner for Beijing's energy security goals.

The operational model of Gwadar is markedly concessionary. The China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC) operates the port and holds 91% of port revenues and 85% of the free zone's earnings under a long-term agreement (Indian Express 2017). The surrounding free zone is intended to host Chinese manufacturing and logistics firms. From an LPT standpoint, Gwadar represents the maximum extension of Chinese external logistical power on foreign soil: a node that Beijing effectively controls, through which it can orchestrate flows of energy and goods, and whose revenue structure generates enduring Chinese commercial interests.

The material dependence of the Gwadar node on Chinese supply chains extends from the seabed to the quayside. The port's navigational channel is maintained by China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), which in 2023 began de-silting operations to restore the channel to its original design depth of 14.5 metres, a US\$17.16 million project critical to keeping the port accessible to deep-draught vessels (CPEC Authority n.d). Without this cyclical dredging, siltation rapidly reduces the operable depth, and the Chinese state-owned contractor remains the sole entity tasked with the work. On the quayside, the three Ship-to-Shore (STS) container cranes at Gwadar International Terminal were originally manufactured by Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries (ZPMC) and relocated from Long Beach, California, to Gwadar in 2017, with ZPMC also awarded the contract for designing, planning, and supplementing parts (Dredging Today 2023). The offloading, modifications, testing, and commissioning were carried out by ZMPC Lanka Ltd., a joint venture between ZPMC and Access Engineering PLC (ZPMC Official Page n.d.), deploying a mixed team of Chinese and Sri Lankan specialists to upgrade the high-voltage system from 5 kV to 11 kV and reconfigure the rail track gauge from 30.48 m to 30 m. ZPMC controls an estimated 82% of the global container crane market, and its proprietary components, control software, and maintenance protocols lock Gwadar into a single-vendor ecosystem (ZPMC Port Machinery n.d.): replacement parts, specialised repairs, and technical personnel must all be sourced through Chinese channels (ZPMC Mediterranean n.d.). More broadly, under CPEC procurement practices, the bulk of mechanical, electrical, and crane equipment for Gwadar has been imported from China at concessional rates, a dependency codified by a 23-year tax exemption package granted to COPHC and its four operating subsidiaries for port and free-zone construction (CGTN 2023). The digital architecture of the port does not yet mirror this physical lock-in:

Gwadar's customs clearance operates through the WeBOC (Web-Based One Customs) system developed jointly by Pakistan Customs and Pakistan Revenue Automation Limited (PRAL), a local public-sector entity (Zaubu Database n.d.). However, the planned next-generation port community system, intended to link Gwadar with Karachi and Port Qasim in an integrated digital network, remains under design, leaving open the question of whether the future digital backbone will follow a Chinese, indigenous, or hybrid architecture (Kardon et al. 2020).

Hambantota

The Hambantota deep-sea port, financed by two Chinese state-owned enterprises (China Harbour Engineering and Sinohydro Corporation) with a US\$1.4 billion loan from the Export-Import Bank of China, was intended to become a regional transshipment and logistics hub (Wignaraja et al. 2020). The project, however, faced chronic delays, low throughput, and accumulated financial losses. In 2017, unable to service the mounting debt, the Sri Lankan government granted China Merchants Port Holdings Company (CMPHC) a 99-year lease on the port in exchange for US\$1.12 billion, a move aimed at bolstering the country's depleted foreign exchange reserves (Reuters 2018; Carrai 2019).

The Hambantota lease quickly became the global poster child for the “debt trap” narrative (Moramudali 2020; Himmer & Rod 2022, pp. 250-272). Yet the LPT reading is more subtle: the lease was not a coerced surrender but a deliberate, if desperate, renegotiation by Colombo to convert an unproductive liability into a usable asset while preserving formal sovereignty (the Sri Lankan Navy maintains perimeter security (Wignaraja et al. 2020), and the lease explicitly prohibits military use (Cabinet Office of Sri Lanka. (2017)). Still, the outcome concedes operational control of a strategic node to China for nearly a century (Manhas et al. 2023; Frumento 2026), a degree of logistical power transfer unmatched in the ASEAN cases studied.

National Strategies: Uneven Bargaining Power

Pakistan's Desperate Embrace

Pakistan's relationship with China is historically deep, rooted in the two countries' shared rivalry with India (Hillman 2018). CPEC is the flagship of Pakistan-China cooperation, and for Islamabad, the corridor is not merely an infrastructure project but a lifeline for economic revival and strategic depth (Khan et al. 2016; Sharif et al. 2025, pp.

462-481; Government of Pakistan 2026). Pakistan, beset by chronic fiscal crises, energy shortages, and security challenges, has limited alternative sources of large-scale infrastructure finance; Western and multilateral lenders have reduced exposure due to instability and governance concerns (Schwemlein 2019; Center for Research and Security Studies [CRSS]). Chinese capital, delivered rapidly and without conditionalities, is therefore accepted even on highly asymmetric terms. The result is what LPT would describe as *structural dependence without institutional counterweights*: Pakistan needs CPEC, and China needs Gwadar, but the bargaining asymmetry is so severe that Pakistan has effectively traded long-term sovereignty over a strategic node for immediate economic relief and geopolitical insurance against India.

Sri Lanka's Renegotiation

Colombo's trajectory is different but equally instructive. Unlike Pakistan, Sri Lanka is not in a perpetual rivalry with a giant neighbour, and it attempted a more independent posture. However, domestic economic mismanagement, a balance-of-payments crisis, and the steep financial weight of Hambantota's losses forced its hand. The 99-year lease was a drastic but deliberate choice made by a sovereign government that had failed to commercialise the asset and saw the Chinese offer as the least bad option. In LPT terms, Sri Lanka exercised a residual agency, it converted a broken node into a functional one, but at the price of surrendering future logistical autonomy. The contrast with Chittagong, where Dhaka kept port ownership and operational control, is undeniable.

Evidence of Dependence and Asymmetry

The material indicators of dependence in both cases are far more severe than in the ASEAN comparators. Concerning concession terms and sovereignty erosion, Gwadar has 91% of port revenue and 85% of free zone revenue accrue to the Chinese operator. The port is, for all practical purposes, a Chinese-administered enclave on Pakistan's sovereign territory. Local fishing communities and businesses have been displaced, and the development model is perceived by many Balochistan residents as extractive colonialism.

In the Hambantota case, the 99-year lease, while not a sale, grants CMPHC majority control over port operations, berth allocation, and commercial development (Reuters 2018). Sri Lanka retains sovereignty on paper, but its ability to use the port

independently is constrained by long-term contractual obligations. The contrast with Chittagong, where the port authority remains fully sovereign, underscores the different outcome that institutional strength and diversified alternatives can produce. Regarding the Debt stock and financial pressure, within the Pakistan case, CPEC loans are a significant fraction of Pakistan's external debt, and repeated delays in industrialisation and export returns mean that the corridor has not yet generated the economic surplus needed to repay Chinese lending on schedule. China has rescheduled some payments, but this merely converts financial debt into long-term geopolitical dependence (Schwemlein 2019; Fanell 2019, pp. 10-55). In the Sri Lanka framework, the Chinese debt accounted for roughly 10–15% of Sri Lanka's total external debt at the time of the 2022 default, but the Hambantota project had become a symbol of perceived Chinese creditor dominance in the island's politics. The IMF bailout in 2023 required Colombo to restructure all bilateral debt, including Chinese loans, which Colombo managed to do – but only after the lease itself had already been surrendered (Wignaraja et al. 2020).

In conclusion, regarding the dual-use anxieties, while both ports are formally commercial, their location and Chinese control fuel persistent concerns about potential military reconversion (Grare 2018). At Gwadar, Chinese naval vessels have visited for goodwill exercises, and the CPEC framework includes security cooperation (Duchâtel & Duplaix 2018; Grare 2018). At Hambantota, the explicit prohibition on military activity in the lease agreement and the absence of any Chinese warship berthing since 2016 underscore that the port's value is logistical and commercial rather than immediately naval. Yet the visible ambiguity surrounding these nodes, amplified by Chinese opacity, generates perpetual mistrust among neighbouring states and external powers, further isolating the host country diplomatically.

Contradictions and Limits: Isolation and Internal Fragility

The most significant vulnerability of both nodes is not financial or military, but political and social. About Gwadar, Balochistan province has been in a state of low-intensity insurgency for decades. Separatist groups and armed militants have repeatedly attacked Chinese personnel, convoys, and infrastructure, viewing the Chinese presence as a colonial extension of Punjabi-dominated Islamabad. In 2021, a suicide bombing targeted Chinese engineers working on a dam in Balochistan; in 2024–2025, attacks on CPEC-related sites intensified. These security threats force China to maintain

private security forces, invest heavily in protection, and negotiate indirectly with local power brokers – a dynamic reminiscent of Kyaukpyu, but with the crucial difference that in Pakistan the central state is not fractured by civil war. Even so, the insurgency raises the operating costs of Gwadar and demonstrates that external logistical power cannot be sustained without local consent.

In Sri Lanka’s domestic contestation, the Hambantota lease became a lightning rod for anti-Chinese sentiment in Sri Lankan politics. Sinophobic narratives, the perception that the country had been “sold” to Beijing, and protests by local communities displaced by the port and industrial zone have placed successive governments under pressure. The 2022 *Aragalaya protest* movement included criticism of the China-Sri Lanka relationship. Colombo has since attempted to recalibrate: it maintains cordial ties with Beijing but has also strengthened security cooperation with India and the US, signalling a desire to restore some balance.

Unlike ASEAN states, which can amplify their voice through a regional bloc, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are largely alone in their negotiations with Beijing. Neither is embedded in a dense institutional architecture that aggregates bargaining power. In South Asia, SAARC is paralysed by India-Pakistan rivalry, and bilateral diplomacy dominates. The absence of a collective mechanism means that Chinese logistical power encounters atomised, easily out-negotiated counterparts – with the predicted LPT outcome: maximum asymmetry, minimum negotiation.

Table 3. Cross-Node Comparison of Logistical Dependence

Characteristic	Chittagong (Bangladesh)	Hambantota (Sri Lanka)
Property/Control	Sovereign (Local Port Authority)	99-year lease to China
Financial Model	Chinese capital, local management	Debt converted into equity/concession
Integration	Part of a national ecosystem	Isolated hub

Logistical Power Without A Regional Fabric: Assessment Through LPT

The Gwadar and Hambantota cases confirm a core implication of LPT: external logistical power is at its most penetrating when the host node is institutionally isolated,

lacks diversified partners, and cannot pool sovereignty into a collective negotiating bloc. In such contexts, the node becomes less a crossroads and more a terminal – a point where Chinese influence flows in but local agency has limited outlet.

For ASEAN, the comparative lesson is sharp. The Mekong, Kyaukpyu, and Chittagong cases show that even heavily indebted or conflict-stricken states can preserve margins of autonomy when they operate within a regional ecosystem of multiple donors, overlapping institutions, and shared norms. Gwadar and Hambantota, by contrast, are cautionary tales of what happens when such an ecosystem is absent. The difference is not merely one of debt-to-GDP ratios or contract clauses, but of the relational environment in which logistical power is exercised.

LPT suggests that the network topology matters: in a dense *Network of Networks*, nodes can support each other, create alternative pathways, and turn dependence into a negotiable resource. In a sparse network, where the only reliable link is the direct one to Beijing, dependence hardens into structural sovereignty loss. The challenge for ASEAN countries, therefore, is not to reject Chinese infrastructure but to deliberately thicken their own network, multiplying partners, harmonising standards, and insisting on collective clauses, so that the string of nodes becomes a web, not a leash.

The Fractal Depth of Logistical Power: Communities As Normative Nodes

The fractal architecture of logistical networks implies that the micro-physics of local opposition is not external to the projection of power but internal to it at a different scale. Displaced farmers along the Boten–Vientiane railway, fishing communities displaced by Gwadar's expansion, ethnic armed groups contesting the Kyaukpyu corridor, these are not simply obstacles or 'friction' in an otherwise smooth logistical surface. They are nodes in their own right, carriers of normative claims about land, livelihood, and self-determination that constitute a form of logistical power at the capillary level. Their protests are not only physical interruptions of commodity flows; they are the circulation of a counter-ideology, a logistical movement of dissent that can reconfigure the entire network if it reaches a critical threshold.

A complete LPT analysis therefore grants these communities standing as normative evaluators. Their objections are not externalities to be managed; they are judgments on the legitimacy of the infrastructure project itself. The theory reads them as it

reads any other node: by mapping their position, their connections, and their capacity to orchestrate counter-flows. In this sense, the study of logistical power reaches down to the most elementary relational unit, the person or community whose territory is traversed, and finds there the same dynamics of centre-periphery contestation that structure the inter-state level. The fractal holds all the way down.

CONCLUSIONS

Logistical Power And The Future Of Asean's String Of Nodes

This article set out to answer a question that the dominant narratives, the militarised "String of Pearls" (Ghiasy 2021, pp. 265-290) and the alarmist "debt trap" (Himmer & Rod 2022, pp. 250-272), have obscured: how do ASEAN and neighbouring states actually respond to China's projection of logistical power? The answer, demonstrated across five cases and three ASEAN nodes, is that they do not respond uniformly, passively, or helplessly. Each host state confronts Chinese infrastructure with a distinct strategic calculus, and the outcome is shaped as much by local agency and regional context as by Beijing's ambitions.

A Spectrum Of Response, Not A Binary

The cases analysed form a spectrum of strategic responses to external logistical power.

Laos has chosen *calibrated dependence* (Stec 2023), accepting high debt levels and Chinese operational control of the Boten–Vientiane railway as the price of escaping land-locked isolation. It has done so with eyes open, maintaining military ties with Vietnam and resisting the transformation of Special Economic Zones into extraterritorial enclaves. The risk is *alliance jeopardisation*: the point at which debt and asymmetric connectivity erode the very autonomy the strategy seeks to preserve.

Thailand embodies *pragmatic negotiation* with red lines. It accepts Chinese railway finance but imposes its own construction standards and technology transfer conditions. It rejected the Kra Canal entirely and proposed the Land Bridge as a sovereignty-preserving

alternative. Playing simultaneously on US, Japanese, EU and Chinese tables, Bangkok has kept logistical power at a deliberate, continuously renegotiated distance.

Vietnam practices *bamboo diplomacy* and calculated distance: flexible, resilient, and deeply wary. It takes Chinese capital only on terms that do not compromise national security, and has diversified its strategic partnerships so successfully – elevating relations with the US and the EU – that it has transformed geographical proximity to China from a threat into the anchor of the "China Plus One" manufacturing boom.

Myanmar is trapped in *contested dependence*. The post-coup junta clings to Chinese investment as an existential anchor, while Beijing clings to the junta as the only entity that can formally protect the Kyaukpyu corridor. Yet the civil war has fragmented territorial control, forcing China to negotiate with ethnic armed groups it does not recognise diplomatically. Kyaukpyu is both indispensable and precarious, and Beijing's logistical power there is exposed in ways that no blue-sky BRI document anticipated.

Bangladesh, though outside ASEAN proper, offers the region a model of *selective dependence*: absorbing over US\$10 billion in Chinese infrastructure finance while retaining sovereign ownership of its ports, diversifying partnerships with India, Japan and multilateral lenders, and integrating Chinese capital into its own development plans. The Chittagong ecosystem shows that a host state with sufficient institutional capacity and strategic clarity can convert external logistical power into a resource that reinforces, rather than erodes, its agency.

The Comparative Lesson: Isolation Erodes Sovereignty

The extra-ASEAN comparators (Gwadar and Hambantota) serve as a control group that sharpens the ASEAN picture. Both are isolated hubs built in contexts of low institutional density, limited partner diversification, and chronic financial vulnerability. The results are stark: a 99-year lease of a strategic port, a profit-sharing model transferring 91% of revenues to the Chinese operator, and persistent security threats from domestic insurgencies hostile to the Chinese presence.

The LPT framework explains this divergence. In a dense *Network of Networks*, composed of the Southeast Asian ecosystem of ASEAN, ADB, GMS, LMC, plus rival Japanese, Indian, and EU connectivity initiatives, host states can create alternative

pathways, multiply partners, and pool sovereignty into collective bargaining without surrendering national autonomy. In sparse networks, where the only reliable link is the direct one to Beijing, dependence hardens into structural sovereignty loss. The lesson for ASEAN is not moral but topological: *thicken the network*.

Table 4. Summary Table: Logistics Nodes and National Strategies

Host state (Node)	Strategy	Key infrastructure	Degree of dependence	Primary risk
Laos (Mekong)	Calibrated dependence	Boten–Vientiane railway	Very high	Alliance risk, local resentment
Thailand (Mekong)	Pragmatic negotiation	High-speed rail, Land Bridge	Moderate	Loss of technical control
Vietnam (Mekong)	Bamboo diplomacy	CICPEC segments	Low	Maritime disputes, nationalism
Myanmar (Kyaukpyu)	Contested dependence	CMEC, oil/gas pipelines	Very high	Civil war, insurgent leverage
Bangladesh (Chittagong)	Selective dependence	Port, Payra, Padma rail	Moderate	Instability, tech lock-in
Pakistan (Gwadar)	Structural dependence	CPEC, port, free zone	Extreme	Baloch insurgency, sovereignty loss
Sri Lanka (Hambantota)	Post-default lease	Deep-sea port (99-yr lease)	Very high	Loss of operational control

Asean's Challenge: From Individual Calibration To Collective Governance

It is here that a tempered assessment of ASEAN's potential is necessary. The paper's analysis has repeatedly shown that individual ASEAN states possess remarkable strategic creativity. However, the translation of individual success into collective power is not automatic, and enthusiasm should not outrun evidence. ASEAN's institutional architecture (consensus-based, non-interfering, slow-moving) is both a shield and a limitation. It allows member states to aggregate diplomatic weight without ceding sovereign autonomy, and to present a coordinated front in forums like the ASEAN-China dialogue. Yet this same architecture has historically prevented the emergence of a unified infrastructure strategy, a common debt-alert mechanism, or joint negotiating standards for BRI projects. Member states compete for Chinese investment; their red lines differ; and their bilateral relationships with Beijing remain more consequential than any collective ASEAN posture.

For ASEAN to transform *calibrated dependence* into *regional interdependence*, three practical steps are required:

Harmonised standards and transparency: ASEAN could adopt common guidelines for BRI project evaluation, disclosure of loan terms, and environmental and social impact assessments. Such standards would not block Chinese investment but would increase its predictability and reduce the information asymmetries Beijing currently exploits.

Multilateral financing pools: Co-financing infrastructure with Japan, the EU, India, and multilateral development banks (ADB, AIIB, World Bank) would dilute Chinese leverage, embed projects in international norms, and reduce any single state's exposure. The EU's Global Gateway and Japan's Quality Infrastructure Initiative are already available instruments.

A collective debt-monitoring mechanism: ASEAN, perhaps through the ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO), could establish an early-warning system for BRI-linked debt distress, enabling coordinated restructuring rather than bilateral and opaque Chinese-only rescheduling.

These are demanding institutional tasks, and they run counter to ASEAN's instinct for non-interference. Yet the alternative, reliance on purely bilateral, ad-hoc calibration by individual states, leaves the poorer and more fragile members permanently exposed. The string of nodes, if left ungoverned, could become a string of liabilities.

The Intra-Asean Distributional Challenge

The collective governance of logistical dependence, however, is not a uniform public good for all ASEAN members. The very diversity of national strategies documented in this article, from Laos' calibrated dependence to Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy, implies divergent preferences regarding collective bargaining. Laos and Cambodia, whose economic and political ties to Beijing are dense and whose alternatives are limited, have little incentive to pool sovereignty in a bloc that may adopt standards or negotiation red lines that reduce their access to Chinese capital. Vietnam and Indonesia, by contrast, possess more diversified economic bases and greater strategic depth, and would benefit from collective mechanisms that reduce Beijing's ability to exploit bilateral asymmetries.

This distributional conflict is not a theoretical possibility; it is already visible in ASEAN's slow and fragmented response to BRI. Member states compete for Chinese investment, and consensus-based decision-making gives de facto veto power to any state that prefers the bilateral status quo. Any proposal for collective infrastructure standards, joint debt monitoring, or coordinated negotiation with Beijing must therefore reckon with this internal cleavage. The LPT framework does not resolve this tension, but it makes it legible: in a fractal network, the interests of nodes are shaped by their position, and nodes at the periphery of the Chinese-centred network may rationally resist measures that threaten their preferential access to the core. The path from calibrated dependence to regional interdependence thus passes not only through institutional design, but through the harder terrain of intra-ASEAN political negotiation, a terrain this article has mapped structurally, but whose resolution lies in the realm of political choice.

Epistemological Reflections: The Limits Of The LPT Framework

While the Logistical Power Theory (LPT) provides a robust lens to decode the Indo-Pacific's infrastructure, it is essential to acknowledge its inherent ontological and methodological limitations. The use of graph theory and network analysis in International Relations (IR) often risks falling into the "paradox of mathematical simplification." As noted by Kahler, Hafner-Burton and others (2009), transforming complex sovereign entities into "nodes" and diplomatic treaties into "arcs" can lead to a form of geometric reductionism.

In a graph, two interconnected nodes may appear formally equal, yet this mathematical symmetry often masks deep political asymmetries. A logistical link is never just a vector of goods; it is a multidimensional bond where prestige, fear, cultural history, and ideology converge. These are variables that a standard adjacency matrix struggles to quantify. Furthermore, political science has historically struggled with “mathematisation.” Just as the Rational Choice Theory often failed to account for human irrationality and systemic shifts, a purely topological approach to logistics might overlook the “viscosity” of internal politics. The LPT describes the form of the system – how power flows – but it cannot yet fully explain the substance of the choices made by its actors. Therefore, this framework should be viewed not as a predictive mathematical certainty, but as a structural map that requires constant integration with qualitative, historical, and sociological inquiry. In conclusion, the LPT does not align perfectly with any single school of International Relations; rather, it exists in a state of constant tension between them. It shares the Realist obsession with power and structural constraints, yet rejects the 'unitary actor' myth by revealing the fractal and porous nature of the state. It acknowledges the Idealist promise of connectivity but strips it of its perceived neutrality, exposing the power hierarchies embedded in every flow. Finally, it converges with Constructivism by showing how infrastructure physically reshapes national identities and strategic narratives, yet it insists on a materialist grounding that avoids pure social abstraction.

Logistical Power As A Permanent Feature of The 21st Century

The LPT framework has enabled this article to see past the military-commercial binary that dominates Indo-Pacific analysis. What China is constructing through the BRI is not a colonial empire nor a purely philanthropic connectivity scheme. It is a new architecture of logistical power: a *Network of Networks* that can orchestrate flows of goods, capital and information, influence standards, and reconfigure hierarchies, all without firing a shot or deploying a warship.

But logistical power, as LPT insists, is relational. It does not operate in a vacuum; it requires host nodes, and those nodes have their own agency, strategies, and red lines. The countries of Southeast Asia are learning to play this game, each with its own rules and objectives. Laos of today, land-linked, is not the isolated Laos of a decade ago. Vietnam of today, a manufacturing powerhouse courted by both Washington and Brussels, is not a passive terminal of Chinese corridors. Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and even the

isolated nodes of Pakistan and Sri Lanka all reveal that the projection of logistical power is a negotiation, not a dictation.

The future of the Indo-Pacific will be written not only in the chanceries of Beijing and Washington, but node by node, connection by connection, in the logistical networks that physically bind the region together. The question is whether ASEAN can write its own chapter collectively, or whether each member will continue to draft its lines alone. The string of nodes is not yet complete; its final shape depends on the choices that Southeast Asian states will make, individually and together, in the years to come.

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