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## Ten Years of China's Belt and Road Initiative: The Case of the China-Laos-Thailand High-Speed Railway Project

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### Abstract

This study examines a decade of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a focus on the China-Laos-Thailand High-Speed Railway Project. It pursues three objectives: (1) to trace the development of the project over ten years, (2) to analyze its economic and geopolitical impacts, and (3) to identify the challenges and lessons learned from railway development projects in the region. The research employed qualitative methods, including field surveys, and stakeholder interviews. Findings indicate that the BRI's first decade has seen the completion of the high-speed rail link between Yunnan Province (China) and Laos, with future extensions required to connect Bangkok and other Thai urban centers. Cross-border transport capacity remains limited, and investment regulations continue to hinder progress. Effective cross-border infrastructure development will require negotiations at both government and private-sector levels, as well as flexible logistics networks adaptable to shifting regional dynamics. Despite ongoing challenges, the BRI railway project offers significant opportunities for deepened cooperation among China, Laos, and Thailand. The project promises enhanced regional competitiveness, regional integration, strengthened bargaining power, and a more balanced distribution of influence across Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), High-Speed Railway, Regional Integration

### Introduction

China has emerged as a major political and economic power in the twenty-first century. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by President Xi Jinping in 2013 has further strengthened China's global influence, emphasizing investment in infrastructure and large-scale development projects. A prominent example is the China-Thailand High-Speed Railway Project, which has significantly expanded China's presence in Thailand over the past

decade. Thailand's strategic location and extensive infrastructure make it a pivotal actor in the BRI, particularly within the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor.

The BRI has directed substantial investment toward the construction of the China-Thailand High-Speed Railway. This project aims not only to enhance connectivity within Thailand but also to integrate the country into a wider high-speed railway system across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Once completed, the network will facilitate the movement of passengers and goods, linking China, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore into a seamless regional transport corridor.

According to ASEAN officials and experts, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has played a pivotal role in enabling ASEAN countries to expand their development pathways and accelerate economic growth. BRI, a reference to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, was initiated by China in 2013 to build trade and infrastructure networks connecting Asia with Europe and Africa on and beyond the ancient Silk Road trade routes (Xinhua, 2022). The convergence between the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the BRI will further strengthen connectivity, reduce logistics costs, and promote personnel exchanges, while creating more opportunities for countries along the Belt and Road and promoting regional integration (Guangyong, 2023).

The China-Laos-Thailand High-Speed Railway is a key part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance regional connectivity. However, the project has encountered substantial delays, especially in Thailand. While the China-Laos section is complete, the Thai section is notably behind schedule. These delays have been attributed to funding issues, design disagreements, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study examines the first decade of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a focus on the China-Laos-Thailand High-Speed Railway Project. It pursues three objectives: (1) to trace the development of the project within the broader context of the BRI, (2) to analyze the impacts of the China-Laos-Thailand High-Speed Railway on regional connectivity and economic cooperation, and (3) to identify the challenges and lessons learned from railway development that may guide future collaboration between Thailand, Laos, and China.

## Concept and Theory

Regionalism is the concept of loyalty to a distinct geographic region, leading to political, economic, or social systems and goals based on that region's interests. It can manifest in movements for greater autonomy or even independence within a state, or in formal agreements between countries for economic and political cooperation, like the European Union or ASEAN. Regionalism is driven by a desire to increase regional influence and often involves formalizing a shared identity and addressing common goals (Longley, 2021).

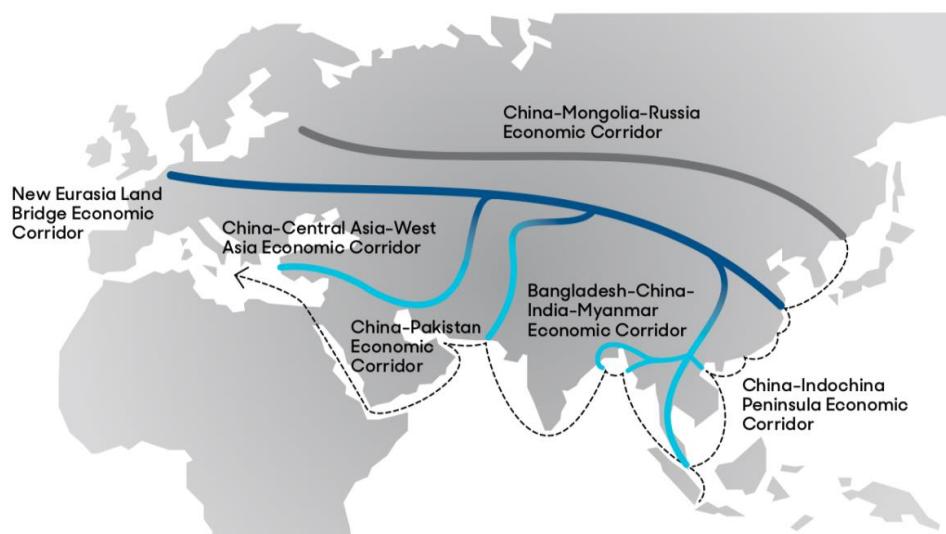
Economic regionalism refers to the organized efforts and political aims of neighboring countries to collaborate to promote economic growth by reducing trade barriers and coordinating policies. This concept includes agreements

such as free trade areas, customs unions, and common markets, which help manage economic interdependence and enhance shared interests within a specific geographic region. Notable examples of economic regionalism include the European Union (EU) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

The geo-economic concept in ASEAN focuses on the interplay between economic strategy and geography. This concept highlights how the region's strategic location, economic growth, and role in global supply chains are influenced by geopolitical competition, particularly between the United States and China. ASEAN is tasked with managing trade tensions, diversifying supply chains, and utilizing its position as a significant economic hub to foster regional stability and prosperity in a changing global landscape. In response to these challenges, ASEAN is establishing task forces to monitor policies and promote regional economic resilience and cooperation (Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2025).

### To Trace the Development of the Project Over Ten Years

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is designed to enhance infrastructure connectivity and stimulate trade and investment across Eurasia, extending from western China through Central Asia to Europe (Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, 2020). Within the Silk Road Economic Belt, cooperation is organized around five key areas and six major economic corridors that traverse three principal routes: (1) China to Europe via Central Asia and Russia, (2) China to the Middle East through Central Asia, and (3) China to Southeast and South Asia. The six corridors include: (1) the China–Mongolia–Russia Economic Corridor, (2) the New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor, (3) the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor, (4) the China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, (5) the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, and (6) the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (Figure 1)



Source Jun (2019)

Figure 1 The belt and road initiative: six economic corridors

The China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC) extends from China's Pearl River Delta to Hanoi and Singapore, passing through Nanning, Pingxiang, and key transport routes such as the Nanchong–Guangan Expressway and the Nanning–Guangzhou High-Speed Railway. This corridor functions as a vital land bridge linking China with the Indochina Peninsula, traversing the central regions of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Malaysia. Its establishment is anticipated to significantly enhance China's collaboration with the ASEAN nations (China SCIO, 2020).

China and the Indochina Peninsula are linked by both land and sea, sharing close geographical, cultural, and people-to-people ties. In December 2014, the governments of Thailand and China signed a memorandum of understanding on railway infrastructure cooperation, framed within Thailand's Transport Infrastructure Development Strategy (2015–2022). The event marked the 40th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Thailand and China (Kardkarnklai & Waji, 2022). The memorandum aimed to position Thailand as a regional transportation hub and to strengthen connectivity along the China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC) and other ASEAN networks under the BRI framework.

In 2016, Thailand and China formalized this commitment by signing an agreement for the Bangkok–Nong Khai High-Speed Railway, intended to link Bangkok with Kunming via Laos. Under the arrangement, Thailand assumed responsibility for financing, while China contributed technological expertise and railway systems. Despite repeated delays, the Thai government pledged completion by 2028. Setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic prompted Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Thailand in July 2022, urging acceleration of the Bangkok–Kunming connection.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) carries significant economic importance for Thailand. The country is advancing its Thailand 4.0 Strategy and the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), which emphasizes innovation-driven growth, knowledge-based industries, and creative development. These initiatives aim to revitalize the economy and reduce inequality. Within this framework, the BRI's infrastructure and regulatory linkages, particularly through subregional cooperation among Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand, are expected to enhance regional integration and stimulate sustainable growth.

The completion of the China–Thailand high-speed railway has significantly enhanced transport efficiency, reducing travel time for goods and passengers between Bangkok and Kunming to just 15 hours. While the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has achieved notable progress in Thailand, the dissemination of accurate and accessible information remains essential. The initiative's success depends on effectively communicating its core principles of collaboration, shared construction, and mutual benefit. Ultimately, the BRI seeks to promote shared prosperity among all participating nations.

In 2023, China marked the tenth anniversary of its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-billion-dollar program to finance roads, ports, and other critical infrastructure worldwide. This milestone provides an opportunity to reflect on the initiative's significance and to assess the evolving role of China's international finance in shaping the global economy. In addition, China has clarified and strengthened BRI guidelines likely to shape future implementation of BRI projects (Ye, 2022). For instance, China's political leadership has emphasized shifting the BRI from vision to action, ensuring that future projects conform to the principles of "green and sustainable development." The state has also articulated three overarching missions for the BRI moving forward:

1. Growth promotion – Sharing China's development experience, integrating with other national economies, and reinforcing the long-term foundations of global development.
2. Re-globalization – Rebalancing maritime and land-based globalization, fostering a more inclusive and equitable global economy, and reducing dependence on Western-centric models.
3. New regionalism – Advancing economic corridors and belts as flexible alternatives to conventional economic unions and zones.

#### **China's Belt and Road Initiative, Exploring the China-Laos-Thailand High-Speed Railway Project**

The Indochina Peninsula represents a critical link within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Policy coordination, diplomacy, and "high-speed rail diplomacy" are reshaping transportation networks across Southeast Asia. China has expressed readiness to invest in railway systems in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand, forming the foundation of a regional transport development strategy. However, disparities in economic development across these countries present significant challenges to uniform progress.

China has also emerged as a global leader in the railway industry, prompting many countries, including Thailand, to collaborate with Beijing on high-speed rail projects. In Thailand, the initiative has been divided into two phases. The first phase involves a 125-billion-baht high-speed rail project covering 252.5 kilometers between Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima. The second phase, estimated at 200 billion baht, will extend the line to Laos in cooperation with China's State Railway Group Co. Ltd. (Charoenpoin, 2019).

The newly constructed railway connecting Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan Province, with Vientiane, the capital of Laos, represents the first completed segment of a long-envisioned Pan-Asian railway linking Beijing to Singapore. This ambitious project has since been integrated into China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The next critical extension will connect Nong Khai, situated across the Mekong River from Vientiane, to Bangkok, further advancing regional integration and cross-border connectivity (Strangio, 2021).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) railway in Thailand spans 608 kilometers and forms part of the larger network extending from southern China to the Strait of Malacca. The Indochina section connects Kunming to the

border town of Boten, passes through Vientiane in Laos, and enters Thailand at Nong Khai. From there, the line continues southward through Bangkok before extending onward to Malaysia and Singapore, creating a continuous transport corridor across mainland Southeast Asia (Thongnoi, 2023).

Situated at the heart of Southeast Asia, Thailand maintains vital sea and land connections with other ASEAN members, granting it a strategic role in advancing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation. Joint construction under the BRI framework has already produced significant, with flagship projects such as the China–Thailand railway demonstrating tangible progress. Notably, this railway will be Thailand's first standard-gauge line, symbolizing a new era of bilateral collaboration. The project will also be Thailand's first standard-gauge railway, which marks a new era for the two sides jointly building a community of a shared future not only between China and Thailand but for the entire region (GT Staff Reporters, 2022b).

Thailand plays a pivotal role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) due to its strategic location and infrastructure within the China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, as well as the complementarities between the BRI and Thailand's Thailand 4.0 and Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, pushed the Thai economy into deep contraction, intensifying both the challenges and opportunities associated with BRI implementation. The positive implications include a sense of connection and unity, opportunities of supply chain integration and capacity cooperation, and opportunities from new behavior of consumer and business (China ASEAN Studies, 2020).

Experts and business representatives anticipate that the China–Thailand railway will significantly enhance connectivity between Southeast Asia and China, generating broad regional benefits. Although still under construction, the line has already linked Thailand, China, and Laos, consistent with the Trans-Asian Railway concept under the Belt and Road Initiative. Designed to traverse the Indochina Peninsula, the railway will connect Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, ultimately establishing close integration between mainland ASEAN and China.

The first phase of the project, scheduled for completion within four years, covers 250 kilometers from Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima in northeastern Thailand. The second phase will extend the line to Nong Khai, linking with the China–Laos high-speed railway, while the final phase will connect Saraburi to Map Ta Phut Port on the eastern seaboard. Successive Thai governments have highlighted the project's importance for modernizing the country's aging infrastructure and stimulating economic growth beyond Bangkok. Closely aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the railway is positioned to transform Thailand into a regional logistics hub linking China, the Mekong subregion, Malaysia, and Singapore (Busbarat, 2017).

China has agreed to transfer technical expertise to Thailand, enabling the country to gradually develop its own high-speed railway network. According to Chinese engineers involved in the negotiations, cooperation on the China–Thailand High-Speed Railway has strengthened Thailand’s aspiration to independently design and construct such systems. This shift reflects Thailand’s growing ambition to play a more active role in future railway development and regional connectivity initiatives (Chen, 2023). The railway project was initially proposed in 2010, alongside four other planned high-speed routes originating from Bangkok. However, progress was delayed for several years due to disagreements over project terms with China and the political instability following the 2014 coup. Construction officially commenced in 2017 but soon faced further setbacks (Clark, 2025). The project is now moving forward again, with the first stage between Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima scheduled to open in 2023 (Figure 2).



Source CGTN (2019)

Figure 2 China-Thailand railway project

Phase 1 of construction covers a 253-kilometer section between Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima, with an estimated cost of 50.63 billion baht (USD 1.67 billion). Stations along this route include Bang Sue, Don Muang, Ayutthaya, Saraburi, Pak Chong, and Nakhon Ratchasima.

Phase 2, still in the planning stage, will extend 354.5 kilometers from Nakhon Ratchasima to Nong Khai. Proposed stations include Nakhon Ratchasima, Bua Yai, Ban Phai, Khon Kaen, Udon Thani, and Nong Khai.

The railway, a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is scheduled to commence operations by 2025, with trains running at speeds of up to 250 kilometers per hour. Complementing this development, infrastructure projects under Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) will reinforce the country's position as a regional logistics hub (China ASEAN Studies, 2020). Key upgrades include the expansion of U-Tapao International Airport, Laem Chabang Port, and Map Ta Phut Industrial Port (Table 1).

**Table 1** Infrastructure projects of EEC

Project	Detail	Completed
High-Speed Rail	Linking 3 major international airports Don Muang, Suvarnabhumi, and U-Tapao, at 250 km/hour.	2025
Double-Track Railway	Linking Laem Chabang Port, Map Ta Phut Industrial Port, industrial zones, and inland container depots.	2023
U-Tapao International Airport	Upgrading to international airport and regional aviation hub with a capacity of 60 million passengers/year	2024
Laem Chabang Port Phase 3	One of the best seaports in ASEAN with a capacity of 18.1 million TEU/year	2025
Map Ta Phut Industrial Port Phase 3	Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminal 20 million tons/year, liquid material terminal 11 million tons/year.	2024
Intercity Motorway	Linking key destinations in EEC	2019

Sources Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) (2019), Royal Thai Embassy (2023)

The China–Laos Railway, a landmark project of high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, extends 1,035 kilometers, including 414 kilometers within Laos, linking Kunming in China's Yunnan Province with the Lao capital, Vientiane. Officially inaugurated in December 2021, the railway represents a docking project between the BRI and Laos' national strategy to transform from a landlocked country into a land-linked hub. By reducing travel time between Vientiane and Kunming to approximately 10 hours, the railway has redefined Laos' regional role, facilitating trade, investment, and broader economic integration (Xinhua, 2022). The Laos–China Railway forms the core of the central route for BRI cooperation in Southeast Asia and constitutes a key segment of the Singapore–Kunming High-Speed Rail Link, also known as the Pan-Asia Railway Network (Larpnun, 2023).

## Laos-China Railway

Part of six international economic corridors under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)



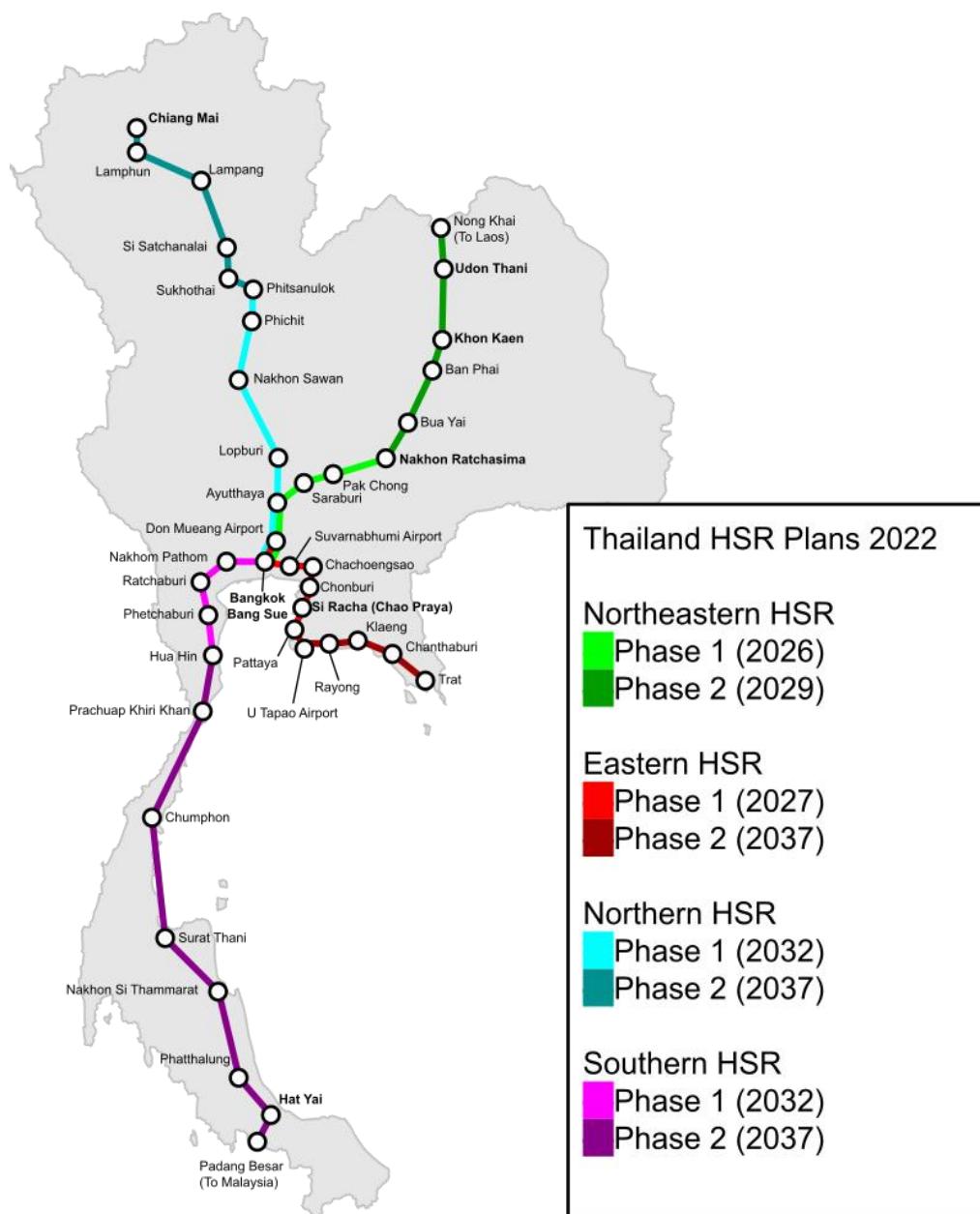
Source France24 (2021)

Figure 3 Laos-China railway

Progress on the 253-kilometer high-speed railway between Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima—the first phase of the Thailand–China rail link—is expected to culminate in operations by 2027. Once completed, the full line will extend 608 kilometers from Bangkok to Nong Khai on the Laos border (Figure 3), where it will connect with the Laos–China railway at Vientiane and continue onward to Kunming in China's Yunnan Province. The 355-kilometer extension is projected to cost USD 8.5 billion, though only the design stage has been completed to date. The initial phase to Nakhon Ratchasima carries an estimated cost of USD 5.1 billion (Rogers, 2023).

At the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing on October 19, 2023, Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin reaffirmed his government's commitment to accelerating the long-delayed construction of the China–Thailand railway. In an interview with *Xinhua* prior to his visit, he emphasized that "logistics is one of the significant issues for Thailand regarding BRI cooperation" and pledged to strengthen the integration of Thailand's domestic railway network with the China–Laos Railway, a flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project in the region (Gill, 2023).

China has contributed significantly to Thailand's economic development through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), cooperation in industrial and supply chains, and preferential policies under the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area. The BRI also complements the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025, enhancing regional infrastructure integration. Chinese enterprises have played a central role in constructing essential infrastructure, including railways, highways, ports, airports, telecommunications, and power systems, laying the foundation for deeper economic corridors and expanding trade flows between the two countries (GT Staff Reporters, 2022a).



Source Rogers (2023)

Figure 4 Thailand high speed railway plans 2022

#### To Analyze its Economic and Geopolitical Impacts

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has become a defining element of the country's global engagement, advancing economic cooperation and development across some of the world's most dynamic regions. Its official goals emphasize five forms of connectivity: (1) policy coordination, (2) facilities connectivity, (3) unimpeded trade, (4) financial integration, and (5) people-to-people bonds. In Thailand, the establishment of a high-speed rail link from Bangkok to the Lao border via Khon Kaen and Nong Khai illustrates the strategic importance of the country's northeastern transportation network. While the project aims to stimulate economic growth and regional development, it has also generated significant public concern. Critics highlight

risks related to sovereignty, the necessity of duplicating existing rail links, and the financial implications of heavy reliance on foreign partners, particularly China. These debates underscore the importance of carefully evaluating both the potential benefits and vulnerabilities associated with the project.

Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has financed large-scale infrastructure projects through its state-owned banks and sovereign wealth funds, while encouraging mainland Chinese firms to pursue foreign direct investment in participating countries. These efforts are creating a network of transnational economic corridors that allow both China and partner states to hedge against the geopolitical risks associated with reliance on single trade routes. Given the Initiative's scale and scope, both multinational and domestic firms have strong incentives to monitor the business opportunities emerging from BRI projects, while also acknowledging the challenges of investing in specific Belt and Road countries (Park et al., 2021).

China Railway Kunming Group Co., Ltd. announced that the China-Laos Railway has served over 60 million passengers since its launch in December 2021. An international service connecting Kunming and Vientiane is set to begin in April 2023, aiming to transport approximately 595,000 cross-border passengers from 115 countries and regions. Enhancements include dedicated ticketing booths, support for international payment methods, and a cross-border reservation system. The passenger volume is projected to reach 15.48 million by 2025, highlighting the railway's significant role in regional connectivity (People's Daily Online, 2025).

In the case of Thailand, Thai goods, including durian and other fruits, are being exported through the China-Laos Railway. From January to May 2023, these exports totaled 2.8 billion baht, marking a significant increase due to shorter transport times. The railway has facilitated the transportation of a wide variety of goods, handling 4.1 million tons of freight with a value of nearly 20 billion yuan during the first three quarters of 2025.

According to a report from the Ministry of Commerce, the top ten exports from Nong Khai, Thailand, via Lao PDR to China during a five-month include (1) durian (2,073 million baht), (2) mangosteen (378.6 million baht), (3) transformers and components (315.2 million baht), (4) longan (37.4 million baht), (5) mineral products and other fuels (17.89 million baht), (6) processed pineapple (11.43 million baht), (7) pomelo (2.99 million baht), (8) agro-industrial products (2.72 million baht), (9) mango (1.79 million baht), and (10) other fruits (1.52 million baht). (Foreign Affairs Office, The Government Public Relations Department, 2023). This list details the financial value of each exported item during the specified period. The China-Laos Railway has greatly enhanced trade between Thailand and China, especially for agricultural products.

The 1,035-kilometer railway connecting Kunming in Yunnan Province, China, to Vientiane, the capital of Laos, is a flagship project of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative. This railway has greatly improved

regional connectivity, stimulated economic growth, facilitated cultural exchanges among people, and showcased significant development potential as an important transport corridor (Xinhua News Agency, 2024).

Recent massive investments, an increase in the number of Chinese nationals in the region, and improved connectivity brought by the BRI have led to the growth of organized crime groups in Southeast Asia. One notable example is Sihanoukville, a port town in Cambodia that has been designated as a special economic zone under China's BRI. This area has been linked to various issues, including drug and human trafficking, telecom fraud, prostitution, and gambling (Lim, 2023).

Trafficking in persons for forced criminality, particularly involving online scams and financial fraud, is a significant issue in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and other regions of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. In response, China has been intensifying its efforts to address this problem both domestically and in collaboration with regional authorities. In 2022, China's state-affiliated Global Times reported that authorities had resolved 464,000 cases related to online gambling and telecom fraud (Lim, 2023).

China has remained ASEAN's largest trading partner, and bilateral trade is expected to expand further with the implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). All ten ASEAN member states have signed memoranda of understanding to participate in the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Landmark projects illustrating this cooperation include the China–Laos Railway, which has transformed Laos from a landlocked country into a land-linked logistics hub, and the China–Thailand High-Speed Railway Project, which is set to further strengthen regional connectivity (GT Staff Reporters, 2022b).

### **The Challenges and Lessons Learned from Railway Development Projects in the Region**

The past decade has revealed both challenges and valuable lessons in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China–Thailand High-Speed Railway Project. Looking ahead, it is evident that the BRI encompasses a wide spectrum of projects, with the China–Thailand line holding considerable potential for enhancing regional connectivity. However, insufficient oversight of some initiatives has allowed undesirable practices to persist. In Thailand, the influx of Chinese capital, workers, and tourists has generated concerns over corruption, illicit activities, and social tensions, contributing to local resentment. Greater sensitivity to local contexts alongside proactive engagement with Thai authorities to mitigate societal and environmental impacts will be crucial in addressing these concerns and strengthening the long-term sustainability of BRI projects.

The China-Laos-Thailand high-speed railway faces several challenges, including debt sustainability, political instability, corruption, environmental concerns, and social issues such as displacement and inadequate compensation. Key lessons learned emphasize the need for greater transparency, managing diverse urban and

rural perceptions regarding acceptance and benefits, and the critical importance of developing domestic infrastructure to fully integrate into the new network and realize its economic potential.

China must strengthen its management of the China–Thailand High-Speed Railway Project by ensuring that independent experts conduct environmental impact assessments in line with international standards. Moreover, the quality of infrastructure should not be sacrificed for the sake of rapid implementation. Addressing concerns over “debt-trap diplomacy” associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will also require greater transparency and wider access to project data.

At the same time, China should work to reduce inconsistencies in its foreign policy. While its more assertive positions often serve domestic audiences and reflect strategic rivalry with the United States, they risk undermining perceptions of China in Southeast Asia. As Chinese leadership ambitions depend on regional support, the BRI’s significant contributions to Southeast Asia’s infrastructure must be safeguarded from reputational harm. Building trust will require more than rhetorical assurances: China should temper its assertive posture in the South China Sea, reinforce ASEAN centrality, and engage in constructive competition with the United States. By aligning its actions with its stated principles, China can enhance the credibility and long-term impact of the BRI (Ho, 2022).

The Lao government has leaned heavily on foreign assistance to support the economy for decades, and now financial liabilities from mega projects have plunged the country deep into the red. The World Bank said that by 2022, Laos’ public debt soared to 110% of its GDP, with about half of the external debt owed to China (Business and Human Rights Resource Center, 2023). The scholar predicts that there will be challenges with payments and worsening economic conditions if the national currency, the kip, continues to decline. This decline could lead to high inflation in an economy that is heavily reliant on imports. Furthermore, major credit agencies are questioning Laos’ ability to meet its financial obligations.

The China-Laos-Thailand High-Speed Railway Project that Thailand plans to approve is the Bangkok–Nong Khai route, which will connect Vientiane in Laos with Kunming in Yunnan, China. This project was initially approved by the Thai government in 2010; however, its implementation has been delayed due to internal political conflicts and international power dynamics. Thailand ultimately decided that China would be its primary partner in developing the high-speed rail system. The two countries have discussed various aspects of cooperative investment, including technology transfer and loan terms (Lertpusit & Suvakunta, 2023).

The final dimension of economic connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the movement of people, encompassing cross-border labor flows as well as social interactions through tourism and educational exchange programs. While hard infrastructure projects often dominate discussions of the BRI, soft infrastructure

is equally vital in fostering sustainable integration. This trend has been reinforced by a growing Chinese interest in studying and traveling abroad, coupled with rising international demand for tourism and educational opportunities in China (Yan, 2018). Neighboring Asia-Pacific countries, in particular, have demonstrated the strongest people-to-people connectivity with China, as deepening trade links continue to drive cross-border worker mobility with key regional partners, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) framework and the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) may also hold the key (Hastiadi, 2023).

## Conclusions

China's geographical proximity to Thailand has facilitated deeper integration with neighboring countries within the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC). Over the past decade (2013–2023), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has produced both positive and negative implications for the China–Thailand High-Speed Railway Project. Looking ahead, the next phase of China's BRI policy emphasizes broader participation from governments and societies, with expanded linkages in trade, investment, and tourism. In this context, China's involvement in the BRI should serve as a driver of regional economic growth and contribute to addressing both regional and global challenges.

The Laos–China railway, inaugurated in late 2021, connects Kunming to Vientiane and extends toward Thailand as part of the BRI, strengthening China's presence and influence across the China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor. Complementing this, the China–Thailand High-Speed Railway Project seeks to establish seamless connectivity between China, Laos, and Thailand, creating a vital transportation corridor across mainland Southeast Asia. Early outcomes are notable: since its opening, the China–Laos railway has transported more than 10 million tons of cargo, particularly between China and Thailand. Beyond enhancing transportation and logistics systems, these projects provide a foundation for mutual prosperity and regional economic growth. To achieve the BRI's long-term objectives, China must actively advance infrastructure development across the region, fostering integrated systems that support trade, investment, and tourism while navigating the associated opportunities and strategic challenges. The synergy between the BRI and Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) further strengthens Thailand's potential as a regional logistics hub, deepening geo-economic cooperation between China and Southeast Asia. Moving forward, these goals will continue to evolve through sustained bilateral negotiations and regional partnerships.

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