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Chinese Linkage in Asia

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ABSTRACT

As China has increased its presence and cooperation on multiple fronts under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this paper proposes a multidimensional concept of 'Chinese Linkage' to understand various layers and levels of engagement under BRI. I conceptualize the Chinese Linkage in Asia based on the seminal work of Levitsky and Way's (Western) Linkage along five dimensions, namely, economic, social, cultural, communication, and intergovernmental ties for 32 countries in Asia for the period 2000-2020, with 2013 as a benchmark year for the BRI launch. By analyzing diverse cases in Asia including sub-regions such as South, Southeast, and Central Asia, I examine the cross-national variation in the degree of Chinese linkage in the BRI partner countries and their patterns of engagement. This region-wide analysis allows understanding of various mechanisms of exchanges and public diplomacy in a systematic manner under China's BRI in Asia.

Keywords: China, Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, Chinese Linkage, Asia

1. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese engagement abroad has significantly increased over the last decade, especially under China's global connectivity plan of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2013, China's President Xi Jinping announced the Initiative (formally known as the One Belt One Road) aimed at enhancing regional connectivity and economic cooperation through infrastructure investment and trade across the globe. The Belt and Road comprises two components – the 'belt' refers to the "Silk Road Economic Belt" of overland routes and corridors, whereas the 'road' is the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" consisting of sea routes across Asia, Africa, and Europe (Kuo and Kommenda 2018). According to the latest data, China has signed over 200 cooperation agreements for the BRI with 148 countries and 32 international organizations as of February 6, 2022 (Belt and Road Portal 2022). By reviving the ancient Silk Road trade routes and creating new economic corridors and maritime routes, China unites the major regional players and fosters collaboration among them. China's shift towards the expansion of the political, diplomatic, economic, and cultural influence of Asia through regional and sub-regional cooperation is also to reinforce the 'Asian Dream' and 'Asian Pacific Dream' (Miller 2017).

China's outbound investment under BRI has gained traction in many countries because of its concessional lending (Johnston 2019), and no 'aid' conditionality associated. As BRI entails bilateral cooperation between China and the BRI governments, the funding sources are China-led institutions such as the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM), China Development Bank, Silk Road Fund, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) among others. Under BRI, China aims to enhance its cooperation with the BRI partner countries along with six main priority areas: (i) policy coordination; (ii) infrastructure connectivity; (iii) unimpeded trade; (iv) financial integration; (v) people-to-people

ties; and (vi) industrial cooperation (Belt and Road Portal 2019). By tracking China's financial footprint under BRI since 2013, the primary focus of the BRI cooperation has been geared towards enhancing economic and development pursuits i.e., infrastructure investment and construction, bilateral trade, industrial cooperation, and so on. However, China has also enhanced its engagement along with other aspects i.e., strengthening social linkages, educational and cultural exchanges, media partnerships, as well as military ties. Specifically, Asia has been the epicenter of the BRI cooperation as it hosts myriads of projects along the road and rail transportation routes of the six economic corridors namely, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor; Bangladesh-China-Myanmar Corridor; China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor; China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor; and the New Eurasian Land Bridge.

As BRI projects in Asia span across various countries, their reception, responses, and outcomes vary significantly. In some countries, the BRI has been perceived as a blessing from China to help in economic growth, while in other regions, it has been regarded as a 'debt-trap' diplomacy, to benefit the Chinese-centered-world, or even to aggravate ethnic tensions (see Tower 2017; Davidson 2018; Anderson and Yang 2018). Nonetheless, the BRI has been well-perceived in many BRI countries in China's neighborhood. According to the quantitative study conducted by a Belgium-based think tank Bruegel, the perceptions of the sub-regional analysis of the BRI indicated country-level differences among the BRI countries in Asia – Laos had a positive tone of media sentiment, whereas, Maldives, India, and Bhutan had negative tones (García-Herrero and Jianwei 2019, 6). With the more frequent mention of trade in the media, the perception of the BRI became more negative, however, the frequency of mention of investment had no significant impact on the BRI country's perception (García-Herrero and Jianwei 2019).

The countries in Asia provide a great variance in terms of relations with China and the economic dependence on China. In Southeast Asia, where Cambodia and Laos receive substantial Chinese aid, Singapore and Brunei do not receive any aid from China. In South Asia, the story is similar yet different. While India did not join the BRI owing to security implications, Pakistan has been one of the biggest recipients of Chinese investments under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Other South Asian countries namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, and Sri Lanka have also joined China's BRI, but India and Bhutan remain the non-BRI members. Overall, South Asia constitutes the highest density of the 'Early harvest projects' of the BRI (Singh 2019). The BRI projects in Pakistan fall within the comprehensive economic cooperation of the CPEC, initiated in 2013 and formally launched in 2015, with an initial investment amounting to US\$46 billion (Shah 2015). Hence, in Asia, the Chinese engagement under BRI has been multifaceted and complex with the establishment of various logistic hubs, networks, and exchanges along with increased bilateral trade, social mobility, cultural activities, communication, and intergovernmental interactions.

Given this, I put forth a multidimensional concept of 'Chinese Linkage' to understand various layers and levels of analysis of Chinese engagement under the BRI. Linkage has been considered a powerful predictor for understanding different mechanisms of international influence. Levitsky and Way, in their seminal work on (Western) linkage and leverage, defined international linkages to be the cross-border connections among countries across various socioeconomic and political aspects (Levitsky and Way 2010). While the 'Western linkage' is associated with strengthening democratic actors, the 'autocratic linkage' has been understood to support autocratic leaders reducing space for democratic practices and encouraging the autocratic regime survival (Cameron and Orenstein 2012; Tolstrup 2013; Vanderhill 2013; Tansey, Koehler and Schmotz 2016). However, less attention has been given to the Chinese linkage concept thus far. It has been used in some qualitative studies for understanding the authoritarian linkage politics and regime survival in the case of Cambodia (Loughlin 2021), or to trace the linkage effects of the U.S. and China on political development and regime changes in Myanmar and Thailand (Wong 2019). While these studies use Chinese linkage for the qualitative assessment with a case study approach, there is a lack of systematic regional analysis to understand the Chinese engagement. The theory of Chinese linkage allows us to analyze China's involvement from a wider regional and comparative perspective as well as to categorize cases of high and low linkage to China.

Thus, it provides a comprehensive conceptual framework to grasp the implications of Chinese engagement at the domestic and regional levels.

2. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CHINESE LINKAGE IN ASIA

The concept of 'linkage' is not new and has been defined and used by many scholars of political science and international relations (see Oye, Rothchild, and Lieber 1979; Stein 1980; Li 1993; Keohane and Nye 1989). It is used as 'linkage politics' when government attempts to project power "from an area of strength to secure objectives in areas of weakness" (Oye, Rothchild, and Lieber 1979, 13); as 'linkage diplomacy' (Li 1993) or as highlighted by Stein as "the central analytical problem with an issue approach to international politics" (Stein 1980, 81). However, the conceptualization of Levitsky and Way's linkage draws more closely on Keohane and Nye's work on 'complex interdependencies' that includes multiple channels of support (Keohane and Nye 1989). It is also similar to Kopstein and Reilly's usage of 'flows' and geographic diffusion (Kopstein and Reilly 2000) and Li's conception of 'penetration' (Li 1993). For this paper, I build on the concept of linkage used by Levitsky and Way and adapt it to the case of China. I define the referents of the Chinese linkage concept by drawing on the theoretical bounds identified by their work, though they are modified as per relevance for understanding the linkage to China.

Linkage enables us to understand numerous mechanisms of international influence – be it in the form of 'diffusion', 'penetration', or 'flows'. As linkage is rooted in various historical factors, including colonialism, military occupation, and geopolitical alliances, it enables to capture the subtle and long-term diffusion processes of regime change (Levitsky and Way 2010, 44). Although linkage is strengthened by cross-border economic activity, communication, and mobility, the major source identified by Levitsky and Way is 'geographical proximity' as it enhances interdependencies among states, their interactions, and exchanges. The countries that share geographical proximity are prone to more economic and diplomatic ties, cross-border mobility, the flow of information, resources, networks, and organizations, and hence, such linkages serve as a source of international influence (Levitsky and Way 2010, 44).

As countries in Asia share close geographical proximity to China, being in the immediate neighborhood and under the 'sphere of influence' of China (Brinks and Coppedge 2006), I expect a high degree of Chinese linkage for most of the sample countries in Asia.¹ For defining the Chinese linkage, I include five linkage dimensions as the core attributes, and define the Chinese linkage in Asia as:

the density or deepening of ties such as economic, social, cultural, communication, and intergovernmental ties in terms of diplomatic and military cooperation among countries and China along with the participation in China-led regional or multilateral institutions.

Through these dimensions, China creates a multitude of networks and interdependencies over the road and rail transport hubs along the economic corridors and maritime routes under the BRI. Therefore, examining the above linkages between China and the BRI countries will allow unpacking the multiple levels of Chinese engagement and their political impact on the partner countries. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual logic and the core attributes of Chinese linkage.

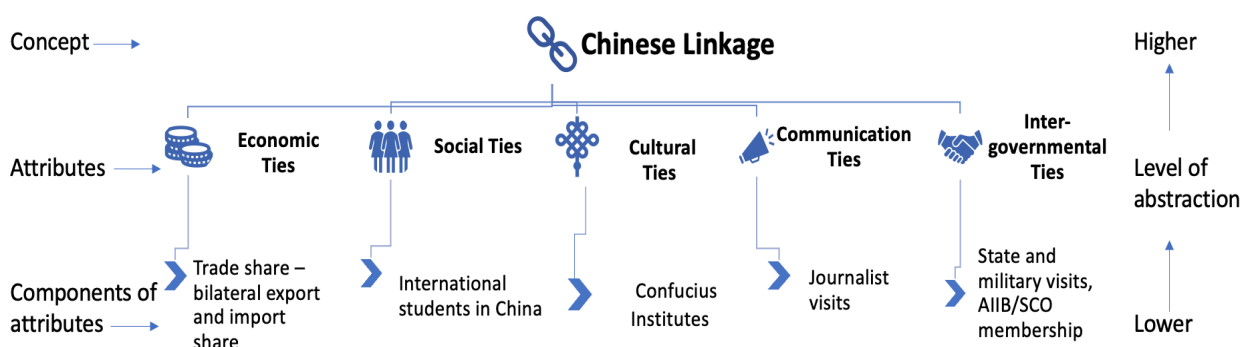


Figure 1. Chinese Linkage – Conceptual Logic and Measurement (Source: Author's contribution based on Munck and Verkuilen, 2002)

3. OPERATIONALIZATION OF CHINESE LINKAGE IN ASIA

As with the concept specification, the measurement of Chinese linkage has also been adapted to suit the requirements of the theory of linkage relevant to China. Therefore, I construct the Chinese linkage indicator along these five linkage dimensions as follows:

$$\text{Chinese Linkage} = \text{Economic linkage} + \text{Social linkage} + \text{Cultural linkage} + \text{Communication linkage} + \text{Intergovernmental linkage}$$

3.1. Economic Linkage

As the BRI consists of Chinese infrastructure investments, loans, grants, and other development finance packages with a primary goal of enhancing trade and economic integration, the economic ties constitute the main pillar of the Chinese linkage. I measure economic ties by bilateral trade between China and BRI countries as a share of the total trade of the partner country. The annual bilateral trade data for 32 countries in Asia is taken from the UN Comtrade database which consists of goods traded, including the total of all commodities from 2000 to 2020 (UN Comtrade database 2020), while total trade data is from the World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI) dataset (World Bank 2020). I use two indicators of Export share and Import share as they allow to measure the individual relative impact of bilateral trade flows as most countries in Asia depicted more imports from China than exports to China.

3.2. Social Linkage

Through BRI projects, many Chinese workers and engineers are residing in the BRI countries as one of the BRI's policy focus areas has been to enhance people-to-people interactions (Belt and Road Portal 2019). China has expanded its cooperation in tourism by signing cooperation mechanisms such as "the Silk Road Tourism Promotion Union, Maritime Silk Road Tourism Promotion Alliance, and Tea Road International Tourism Alliance", and by adopting mutual visa exemption agreements with BRI partner countries (Belt and Road Portal 2019). The number of Chinese tourists has also increased in many BRI countries in Asia. For instance, around 15 million Chinese visited Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos in 2017, whereas Thailand received the majority of Chinese tourists (Chai 2018). According to official China's Tourism report, the total outbound tourists from China to BRI countries increased from 15.49 million in 2013 to 27.41 million in 2017 amounting to a 77% increase in five years (Chen 2019).

Furthermore, for promoting people-to-people exchanges, the Chinese Government has set up various education and training programs under the 'Silk Road Program' for many BRI country students

(Belt and Road Portal 2019). The Chinese Ministry of Education reported that in 2016 more than 200,000 students studied in China from BRI partner countries as the Chinese Government Scholarship (CGS) scheme offered 10,000 spots each year for the students of BRI countries (Dawn 2017). These scholarships have encouraged an increasing number of foreign students to choose China for pursuing their higher education degrees such as graduate degrees and doctoral degrees across different disciplines (Belt and Road Portal 2019).

Given the internationalization of higher education and increased student mobility under the BRI-related scholarships, I measure the social linkage by the annual number of BRI country students studying in China from Asia as a share of total students abroad from 2000 to 2020 using China's Public Diplomacy dataset (AidData 2021). The data for the total number of students abroad is taken from the Education policy indicators from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) dataset (UNESCO 2021).

3.3. Cultural Linkage

Culture has been an important component of the BRI's focus policy area of promoting 'people-to-people ties' that emphasize the promotion of cultural exchanges with the BRI countries (Belt and Road Portal 2019). One of the essential platforms for enhancing China's cultural ties in Asia has been the Confucius Institutes (CIs). The Confucius Institutes (CIs) are educational institutes for the cultural promotion of China abroad operating under the Chinese Ministry of Education, and overseen by Hanban, officially serving as the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban 2020). The first CI in Asia was established in 2004 and since then various institutes have been working in collaboration with the local colleges and universities overseas. Although the Confucius Institutes (CIs) have existed in the pre-BRI period, the number of CIs has drastically increased after BRI since 2013. Under BRI, China established 134 Confucius Institutes and 130 Confucius Classrooms in the BRI countries (Li 2017). This number increased to 153 Confucius Institutes and 149 Confucius Classrooms in 2019 for the 54 BRI partner countries (Belt and Road Portal 2019).

Although the primary goal of the CIs is to promote Chinese culture and language abroad, they have been regarded as China's soft-power tools in foreign policy (Zhou and Luk 2016), and to portray and strengthen the image of a 'peaceful rise' of China to the world (Hartig 2016). Therefore, I measure cultural ties by recording the cumulative number of Confucius Institutes in the BRI countries from 2000 to 2020 using China's Public Diplomacy data (AidData 2021).

3.4. Communication Linkage

Under BRI, China has not only enhanced its investments in Information and Communications technology (ICT) such as 5G telecommunication networks but also cultivated more presence on various media and communication platforms through media partnerships in the BRI countries in Asia. China's media broadcasting has increased in TV, radio, and print as many countries have China's state-run media channels such as CGTN/CCTV, and Xinhua TV; radio broadcast under the China Radio International (CRI); and the print circulation of Chinese print media such as China Daily Global Weekly or China Daily Global Edition (Samantha Custer et al. 2019). This has enabled the local media outlets in the BRI countries to print and circulate the Chinese news as China signed 73 partnership agreements within East Asia from 2000 to 2017 (S Custer et al. 2019).

Furthermore, as part of the enhanced media cooperation and partnerships with BRI countries, many journalists are also visiting China and vice versa. There has been an increase in the number of state-sponsored press trips in which journalists traveled from BRI countries to China (Samantha Custer et al. 2019). Therefore, I use the annual number of journalists visits (AidData 2021) to measure the communication ties between China and the BRI countries in Asia.

3.5. Intergovernmental Linkage

As BRI entails bilateral and government-to-government agreements in the form of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), it has strengthened the diplomatic linkages of China. The official state visits and military visits of China and the BRI partner countries have enhanced as well as the participation of the partner countries in China-led international organizations such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Therefore, this indicator includes three indices.

First, I include state visits to capture the frequency of high-level official visits between China and the BRI countries in Asia (AidData 2021). Second, I record the number of military visits as several BRI countries in Asia have enhanced the military and defense cooperation involving high-level military exchanges, joint exercises, training of military personnel, joint ventures for defense production, and trade of military equipment, aircraft, submarines, and tanks (AidData 2021). Third, I construct a dichotomous variable to record the BRI country's membership in the China-led multilateral and regional organizations such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The selection of these two institutions is based on their relevance regarding the development finance within the BRI scope. Moreover, they are indicative of the geopolitical transitions and alliances with the China-led 'World order'.

4. CHINESE LINKAGE INDEX: COUNTRY RANKINGS IN ASIA

After the individual linkage dimensions, I develop an aggregated Chinese Linkage Index (CLI) that allows the ranking of all the countries according to their relative linkage to China. For the rankings, all linkage dimensions have been assigned a score according to the data distribution per variable for each country-year observation. Using the range of highest and lowest scores as per the data distribution per variable, the linkage scores have been assigned to each country. These individual linkage scores have been aggregated into the final ranking showing which country 'outperforms' another. The total ranking score of a country is an additive aggregated score where each variable has equal weightage. Furthermore, the scores have been rescaled to range from 0 to 1 where a score of '0' represents the lowest Chinese linkage value and '1' represents the highest Chinese linkage value. Figure 2 displays the ranking of Chinese linkage for 32 countries in Asia including the BRI and non-BRI partner countries.

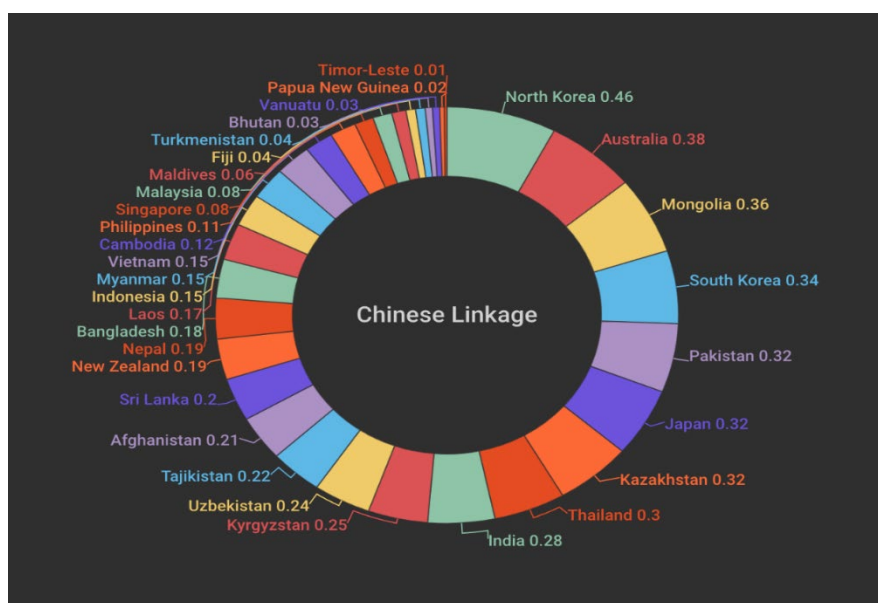


Figure 2. Chinese Linkage Index Scores(a)

As the ranking scores range from 0.01 to 0.46, the cut-off point at 0.22 seems reasonable to differentiate the high linkage countries from the low/medium linkage countries. According to the above ranking, the highly ranked Chinese linkage countries are North Korea (0.46), Australia (0.38), Mongolia (0.36), South Korea (0.34), Pakistan (0.32), Japan (0.32), Kazakhstan (0.32), Thailand (0.3), India (0.28), Kyrgyzstan (0.25), Uzbekistan (0.24), and Tajikistan (0.22). Out of these 12 countries, four are non-BRI countries – North Korea, Australia, Japan, and India. It is not surprising that North Korea ranks the highest as nearly all of North Korea's trade is with China (due to heavy sanctions otherwise), and consequently, it pulls more weight in the ranking as compared to other countries. Moreover, the economic linkage dimension is also high for advanced democracies, particularly, Australia, and that partly explains the high score. Due to this reason, the ranking scales have been re-calculated, and the weighted average has been altered based on their relative importance depending on their potential impact. For instance, it may not be adequate to allocate more importance to the AIIB/SCO membership in comparison to the presence of Confucius Institutes or the intergovernmental visits. As Confucius Institutes are regarded as the most significant variable out of all individual dimensions, followed by the state visits, especially for the BRI partner countries in Asia, I assign the following weightage: Confucius Institutes with a weight value of 0.3, thereafter, government visits with 0.2, international student share, journalist visits, military visits (all 0.1), whereas, the export share, import share, AIIB, and SCO (all 0.05). Figure 3 displays the ranking of Chinese linkage for the BRI and non-BRI partner countries.

According to this revised ranking of the Chinese Linkage Index (CLI), the scores range from 0.12 to 0.39, and I put the cut-off point at 0.20 to differentiate the high linkage countries from the low/medium linkage country scores. This ranking formula shows the highly ranked Chinese linkage countries to be: South Korea (0.39), Australia (0.38), Thailand (0.37), Japan (0.37), Kazakhstan (0.27), Pakistan (0.26), India (0.26), North Korea (0.24), Kyrgyzstan (0.22), Mongolia (0.22), New Zealand (0.22), Indonesia (0.21), Uzbekistan (0.20), Sri Lanka (0.2), and Tajikistan (0.20).

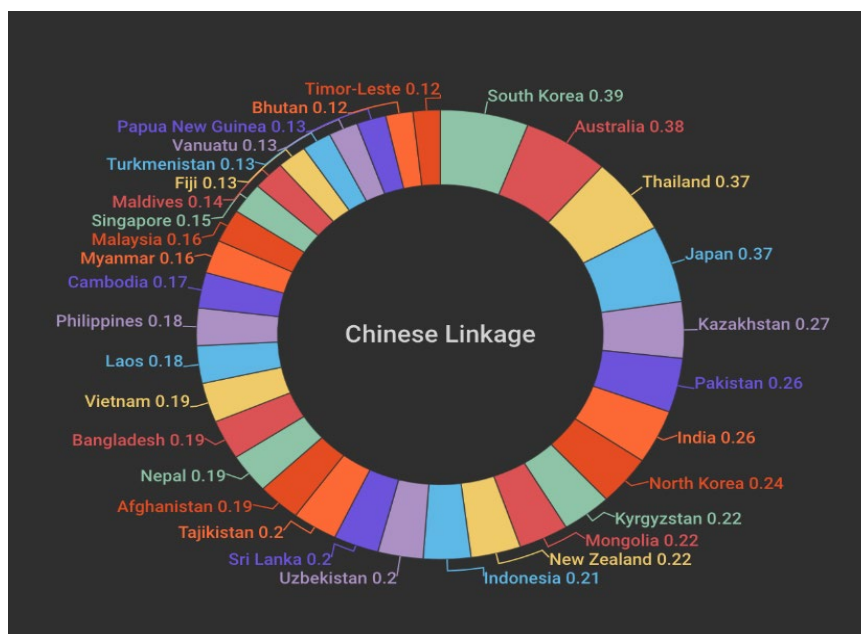


Figure 3. Chinese Linkage Index Scores (b)

The top BRI countries with high Chinese Linkage Index (CLI) scores are South Korea, Thailand, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan whereas, the previous Chinese linkage scores showed the top BRI countries

to be Mongolia, South Korea, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan. Despite the different aggregation formulas, the comparison for both specifications of the highest Chinese linkage score does not differ vastly. Therefore, we can infer that South Korea, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan can be regarded as relatively robust cases of high Chinese Linkage Index as per the above two aggregation rules adopted.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the proposed multidimensional concept of Chinese Linkage specifically focusing on China's BRI engagement and cooperation in Asia. By conceptualizing the Chinese Linkage in Asia along the five dimensions, it has elaborated on the economic, social, cultural, communication, and intergovernmental linkages between China and 32 countries in Asia including both the BRI and non-BRI countries. Furthermore, the operationalization and measurement of these linkage dimensions allowed us to measure the degree of Chinese linkage in the countries involved. The Chinese Linkage indicators provided a comprehensive assessment of the deepening of ties in the partner countries. Lastly, the aggregated Chinese Linkage Index (CLI) scores allowed to rank the Asian countries according to their relative CLI scores. Although some of the non-BRI countries ranked higher on the CLI scores, the rankings for the BRI countries did include countries in China's geographical proximity with a high degree of linkages such as South Korea, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan. Be that as it may, this is the first attempt at conceptualizing and aggregating the Chinese Linkage Index, an alternative operationalization, ranking, and aggregation scheme will yield different results.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The 32 countries in Asia include: Australia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Maldives, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, North Korea, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, and Vietnam.