



Infrastructure, Integration, and the Reconfiguration of Globalism: A Comparative Analysis of the Gulf Railway and China's Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

The contemporary international system is undergoing a profound transformation marked by the gradual erosion of liberal globalism and the rise of regionally anchored, infrastructure-driven connectivity frameworks. Traditional models of globalization, built on the free flow of goods, capital, and information, are increasingly challenged by rising economic nationalism, geopolitical rivalries, and supply chain vulnerabilities. Within this evolving landscape, infrastructure has emerged as a central instrument of power, shaping economic corridors, political alliances, and strategic influence. This study examines two emblematic initiatives—the Gulf Railway and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—as case studies of infrastructure-driven integration at regional and transregional scales. The Gulf Railway represents a strategic effort to link the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), enhancing trade, mobility, and intra-regional cohesion. The BRI, by contrast, constitutes a global network of transport, energy, and digital corridors designed to expand China's economic and geopolitical reach across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Through a comparative analysis, the research highlights convergences and divergences between these projects, particularly in governance, scale, strategic objectives, and regional implications. The study adopts a geo-economic framework to analyze how infrastructure can simultaneously foster economic development and serve as a tool for strategic competition. By situating the Gulf Railway and BRI within broader debates about the reconfiguration of globalism, the paper argues that these projects reflect a shift from Universalist globalization toward a fragmented, corridor-based global order. The findings underscore the growing importance of infrastructure in shaping twenty-first century power dynamics and provide insights into how states navigate the interplay of regional integration, strategic autonomy, and global connectivity.

Keywords: Globalism; Belt and Road Initiative; Gulf Railway; Geo-economics; Regional Integration; Infrastructure Diplomacy; GCC; Connectivity Politics; Strategic Corridors; Fragmented Global Order



Introduction

For decades, globalization was considered an inexorable force, characterized by the liberalization of trade, the proliferation of transnational supply chains, and the erosion of barriers to the movement of capital, information, and people. The late twentieth century witnessed unprecedented levels of economic interdependence, reinforced by institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and regional trade agreements. During this period, globalism was widely associated with liberal norms, multilateral governance, and the belief that economic integration would naturally foster political stability and cooperation.

However, the durability of this model has increasingly come under scrutiny. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 exposed systemic vulnerabilities in the liberal international order, while the subsequent rise of protectionist policies, trade disputes, and nationalist economic agendas challenged the premise of unfettered openness. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the fragility of global supply chains and the strategic risks of overreliance on distant markets. These developments have prompted scholars and policymakers to recognize that globalization is neither uniform nor inexorable; instead, it is being reconfigured into a more fragmented and strategically contested phenomenon.

At the center of this transformation lies infrastructure. Beyond its conventional role in facilitating economic activity, infrastructure has emerged as a key instrument of state power. Large-scale projects—ranging from railways and ports to energy pipelines and digital networks—allow states to shape trade corridors, project influence, and foster regional or transregional integration. Infrastructure now embodies not only economic objectives but also political, strategic, and even security considerations. The use of infrastructure as a tool of geo-economic influence is increasingly evident in projects such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Gulf Railway, which illustrate contrasting scales and approaches to connectivity-driven power.

The BRI, launched by China in 2013, represents one of the most ambitious infrastructure strategies in modern history. It envisions a vast network of land and maritime corridors connecting China to Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia, spanning railways, ports, energy pipelines, and digital infrastructure. The initiative is both economic and strategic, addressing China's domestic industrial overcapacity while simultaneously enhancing its geopolitical influence across participating regions.

In contrast, the Gulf Railway exemplifies a regionally focused approach to connectivity. Designed to link Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman, the project aims to foster intra-GCC trade, enhance mobility, and support economic diversification. The Gulf Railway is tightly aligned with national development visions, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, and serves as a stabilizing mechanism in a region marked by geopolitical tensions and shifting alliances.

This paper situates the Gulf Railway and BRI within the broader discourse on the reconfiguration of globalism. It seeks to answer several critical questions: To what extent do these infrastructure initiatives signal a departure from traditional models of globalization? How do they shape regional and transregional integration, economic interdependence, and strategic alignment? And how do they exemplify the increasing politicization of connectivity in contemporary international relations?

By examining these two cases comparatively, this study highlights the interplay between regional integration and transnational connectivity. It argues that contemporary globalism



is increasingly structured around strategic corridors rather than universal openness, reflecting a hybrid system where regional and global networks coexist and occasionally compete. The analysis contributes to understanding the evolving role of infrastructure as both an economic and strategic instrument, offering insights into the emerging multi-nodal global order of the twenty-first century.

Literature Review

The study of globalization and its reconfiguration has been a central theme in contemporary international relations and political economy. Scholars have long debated the nature, benefits, and limits of globalization, with early perspectives emphasizing the liberal and integrative dimensions of global interconnectedness (Baldwin, 2016). Richard Baldwin, in *The Great Convergence*, highlights the transformative impact of technology and trade liberalization on global integration, emphasizing that reduced transaction costs and enhanced communication networks facilitated unprecedented economic interdependence. Yet, as the twenty-first century unfolded, multiple structural and geopolitical challenges began to question the linear narrative of globalization.

The vulnerabilities of a highly interconnected global system were starkly revealed during the 2008 global financial crisis and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars such as Joseph Nye (2011) and Parag Khanna (2016) argue that globalization is evolving from a unipolar liberal model into a more fragmented, multi-nodal system in which states pursue selective integration and strategic autonomy. Nye's concept of "soft power" and Khanna's "Connectography" emphasize that infrastructure, trade corridors, and regional alliances are increasingly central to state strategies, not merely economic instruments but tools of influence and strategic positioning.

This evolving perspective is reinforced by the geo-economic framework, which treats economic instruments as tools of power. The rise of infrastructure-based connectivity projects, particularly China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and regional projects like the Gulf Railway, exemplifies this shift. Infrastructure is no longer neutral; it reflects the strategic objectives of states, shaping both regional and global alignments. According to Hurley, Morris, and Portelance (2018), the BRI enables China to exert influence through financing, trade, and development projects, effectively creating corridors of economic and political dependence that serve its strategic goals.

Regional integration has traditionally been studied as a process of deepening economic, political, and social cohesion within geographic clusters. In the Gulf region, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) serves as a central framework for intra-regional cooperation. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (2016) highlights that economic integration through initiatives like the Gulf Railway aims not only to reduce trade barriers and transportation costs but also to enhance political solidarity among member states. Regional infrastructure projects serve a dual purpose: facilitating economic development while stabilizing a geopolitically sensitive region.

Empirical studies indicate that transportation infrastructure—railways, ports, and logistics hubs—directly contributes to regional trade efficiency and diversification. The Gulf Railway, spanning approximately 2,177 kilometers and connecting six GCC states, is projected to reduce intra-regional shipping costs by up to 30% and foster increased mobility of labor and capital (IMF, 2017). Beyond economics, the project strengthens interdependence, offering member states a platform for coordinated responses to external pressures, such as trade disruptions or geopolitical crises. Scholars such as Ulrichsen (2016)



and OECD (2018) emphasize that in regions like the Gulf, infrastructure-driven integration is inseparable from political and security considerations, as these states navigate complex alliances and rivalries.

The BRI represents a transregional counterpart to regional integration efforts, illustrating the global dimensions of infrastructure-driven geopolitics. Nadège Rolland (2017) characterizes the BRI as a strategic project that extends China's influence across multiple continents through transportation, energy, and digital networks. Its corridors—the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, and maritime routes along the Indian Ocean—reflect a deliberate strategy of shaping trade routes and standards to align with Chinese interests.

Critical scholarship has highlighted both the opportunities and challenges posed by the BRI. On the one hand, the initiative promises significant economic benefits for participating countries, including enhanced connectivity, foreign direct investment, and technology transfer (World Bank, 2019). On the other hand, concerns over debt sustainability, transparency, and environmental impact have emerged, raising questions about the long-term viability and ethical implications of infrastructure-led development (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). These tensions are central to debates about whether the BRI represents a cooperative global vision or a tool of strategic dominance.

Several scholars have emphasized that the distinction between regional and transregional infrastructure initiatives is not merely geographic but also strategic. While the Gulf Railway focuses on regional cohesion and intra-bloc stability, the BRI exemplifies transregional influence projection, embedding participating countries within corridors shaped by a dominant state actor. According to Brautigam (2009) and Hillman (2020), these differing scales have significant implications for governance, risk distribution, and geopolitical impact. The Gulf Railway's collaborative governance contrasts with the BRI's often China-centric management model, highlighting different approaches to infrastructure diplomacy. Further, research on corridor politics underscores the importance of nodes—strategic ports, rail hubs, and energy pipelines—as leverage points in global competition (Khanna, 2016). Infrastructure corridors are not neutral conduits; they structure economic dependence and political alignment, allowing states to project power indirectly through connectivity networks. In this sense, both the Gulf Railway and the BRI illustrate how infrastructure functions as a geo-economic instrument, influencing patterns of cooperation and competition at regional and global levels.

While there is substantial research on the BRI and GCC integration separately, comparative analyses of regional and transregional infrastructure projects remain limited. Most existing studies focus on economic impacts or bilateral relationships, without fully addressing the broader implications for the reconfiguration of globalism. This study addresses this gap by situating the Gulf Railway and BRI within a framework of strategic corridors, multi-nodal global order, and infrastructure-driven power dynamics. By doing so, it contributes to the emerging discourse on how connectivity projects are reshaping twenty-first century globalization.

Research Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to examine how large-scale infrastructure projects are reshaping the contours of globalism, with a focus on the Gulf Railway and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The specific objectives are:



1. To analyze the role of infrastructure as a strategic instrument in shaping regional and transregional connectivity.
2. To compare regional (Gulf Railway) and transregional (BRI) approaches to infrastructure-driven integration, highlighting differences in scale, governance, and geopolitical implications.
3. To assess the economic, political, and strategic impacts of these initiatives, particularly in terms of trade facilitation, regional cohesion, and power projection.
4. To explore the broader implications of infrastructure corridors for the reconfiguration of globalism, including the emergence of a fragmented, multi-nodal global order.
5. To identify the challenges and risks associated with infrastructure-led connectivity projects, such as financial sustainability, political disputes, and environmental considerations.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dual role of infrastructure: as a facilitator of economic development and as a tool of strategic influence in the twenty-first century.

Research Questions

Building on the objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the Gulf Railway and the Belt and Road Initiative shape regional and transregional connectivity, respectively?
2. To what extent do these infrastructure initiatives signal a reconfiguration of globalism from a liberal, Universalist model toward a fragmented, corridor-based system?
3. What are the similarities and differences between regional and transregional infrastructure projects in terms of governance, scale, and strategic objectives?
4. How do these projects influence political alignments, economic interdependence, and strategic autonomy in participating states?
5. What are the potential risks, including financial, political, and environmental challenges, associated with large-scale infrastructure initiatives?

These questions aim to capture both the macro-level dynamics of globalism and the micro-level mechanisms of infrastructure integration, providing a holistic framework for analysis.

Hypothesis

The study advances the following hypothesis:

Infrastructure projects, such as the Gulf Railway and China's Belt and Road Initiative, function as instruments of geo-economic power that are reshaping globalism. They mark a shift from an open, liberal globalization model to a fragmented, corridor-based system, where connectivity serves both economic and strategic objectives, and states leverage infrastructure to assert influence, regional cohesion, and strategic autonomy.

This hypothesis posits that infrastructure is not merely a developmental tool but a strategic asset, influencing the distribution of power and the organization of international trade and political alliances. It also implies that regional and transregional initiatives operate on different scales and mechanisms but share a common function: the reconfiguration of global order through connectivity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates concepts from geo-economics, regionalism, and globalization theory to examine how infrastructure shapes power dynamics in the contemporary international system.



1. Geo-Economics

Geo-economics provides a lens to understand how states use economic instruments, such as trade, investment, and infrastructure, to achieve strategic objectives. According to Baldwin (2016) and Nye (2011), geo-economics emphasizes the strategic use of economic tools to influence regional and global outcomes. Infrastructure corridors, such as railways, ports, and pipelines, exemplify geo-economic instruments by linking economic incentives with political influence. In this study, geo-economics explains how the Gulf Railway and BRI serve as mechanisms for power projection and regional alignment.

2. Regionalism vs. Transregionalism

The study distinguishes between regional integration, as exemplified by the Gulf Railway, and transregional connectivity, as embodied by the BRI. Regionalism theories emphasize the role of geographic proximity, shared economic interests, and political cooperation in fostering integration (Ulrichsen, 2016). Transregional approaches, by contrast, focus on cross-continental linkages, strategic corridors, and multi-state networks extending beyond immediate geographic boundaries (Rolland, 2017). This distinction allows the study to compare scale, governance, and strategic purpose across the two cases.

3. Connectivity Politics and the Reconfiguration of Globalism

Connectivity politics considers infrastructure not merely as a tool of economic development but as a medium through which political influence and strategic alignment are exercised (Khanna, 2016). In the context of a reconfiguring global order, traditional globalism—characterized by open, liberalized networks—is giving way to fragmented, corridor-based systems, where power is embedded in connectivity nodes. This framework allows the study to situate both the Gulf Railway and BRI within the broader transformation of globalism, highlighting the emergence of multi-nodal, selectively integrated networks.

4. Analytical Approach

The study adopts a comparative, case-based approach, integrating qualitative analysis of policy documents, official reports, and secondary literature with quantitative data on trade flows, infrastructure investment, and connectivity metrics. This framework enables a nuanced understanding of how infrastructure shapes economic outcomes and strategic positioning, linking theoretical insights to empirical realities.

Research Significance

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how infrastructure shapes contemporary globalism, both regionally and transregional. While existing scholarship has extensively explored globalization, regional integration, and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), there remains a notable gap in comparative analyses that examine regional and transregional infrastructure projects as instruments of strategic influence and global reconfiguration. By focusing on the Gulf Railway and the BRI, this study addresses this gap, offering insights into how connectivity projects reshape economic, political, and strategic landscapes.

First, the research provides theoretical value by bridging geo-economics, regionalism, and globalization theories. It highlights how infrastructure operates not merely as a developmental tool but as a geo-economic lever that states employ to assert influence, foster alliances, and restructure power dynamics. This perspective advances existing frameworks on globalization by showing that modern connectivity is selectively constructed, politically instrumental, and strategically oriented.



Second, the study offers practical significance for policymakers and regional actors. Understanding the mechanisms and implications of infrastructure-driven integration is crucial for states navigating the challenges of economic interdependence, political rivalries, and strategic competition. For GCC states, insights into the Gulf Railway provide lessons on intra-regional cooperation, economic diversification, and resilience against external dependencies. For countries engaged in the BRI, the study elucidates the risks and opportunities associated with large-scale, transcontinental infrastructure initiatives, including debt management, governance challenges, and strategic alignment.

Third, the study has global relevance in a period marked by the fragmentation of liberal globalism. By analyzing how infrastructure corridors are reshaping trade routes, strategic alignments, and connectivity networks, the research offers a framework for understanding the emergence of a multi-nodal global order. Scholars, policymakers, and development agencies can use these findings to anticipate shifts in economic corridors, geopolitical influence, and regional power balances.

Finally, the study contributes to ongoing debates on sustainability, governance, and equity in infrastructure development. Large-scale projects such as the BRI and Gulf Railway involve complex social, environmental, and economic dimensions. By incorporating these considerations into the analysis, the research emphasizes the importance of balancing strategic objectives with sustainable development and inclusive economic growth.

Problem Statement

The central problem addressed by this study is the lack of comprehensive understanding of how infrastructure projects are transforming globalism and the balance between regional and transregional influence. While globalization was traditionally framed around liberal openness and multilateralism, contemporary developments indicate a shift toward fragmented, corridor-based systems where connectivity is politically and strategically leveraged. This shift poses critical questions for policymakers, scholars, and regional actors: How do infrastructure initiatives influence economic dependence and political alignment? How do states manage the tension between regional integration and transregional influence?

The Gulf Railway and the BRI exemplify two contrasting approaches to infrastructure-driven integration, yet existing research often treats them separately. The Gulf Railway, despite its regional significance, has received limited scholarly attention, especially in comparative analyses with global initiatives like the BRI. Conversely, research on the BRI has emphasized economic, financial, and geopolitical aspects but often overlooks comparative lessons from smaller, regionally focused projects.

Furthermore, there is an emerging risk-reward paradox in infrastructure-led connectivity. Large-scale projects offer economic development, trade facilitation, and strategic influence, but they also entail financial risks, governance challenges, and potential geopolitical friction. The Gulf Railway has faced delays due to political disagreements and financial constraints, while the BRI faces scrutiny over debt sustainability, environmental impact, and strategic competition. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for predicting the trajectory of regional and global integration.

In sum, the problem is multi-layered: infrastructure is a tool of integration and influence, yet its deployment is fraught with economic, political, and strategic challenges. Without a comparative, analytical study of regional and transregional cases, the



implications for the reconfiguration of globalism remain underexplored. This research addresses this gap by examining the Gulf Railway and BRI as parallel experiments in connectivity-driven influence, providing insights into the emerging hybrid global order.

The Gulf Railway: Regional Integration and Political Economy

The Gulf Railway is a flagship infrastructure project of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), aimed at linking Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman through a unified rail network spanning approximately 2,177 kilometers. The project reflects the strategic ambition of GCC states to achieve regional integration, enhance economic diversification, and reduce reliance on external transport corridors.

1.1 Historical and Strategic Context

The idea of a Gulf-wide railway network dates back to the early 2000s, when GCC member states sought to address structural economic challenges, including dependence on hydrocarbon exports and limited intra-regional trade. Ulrichsen (2016) notes that economic diversification and enhanced connectivity were central to GCC integration initiatives, reflecting both developmental and political objectives. By linking major industrial, commercial, and urban centers, the Gulf Railway aims to facilitate the movement of goods and people while fostering closer political and strategic ties among member states.

The Gulf region's geopolitical landscape has historically been shaped by regional rivalries and external interventions. The 2017 Gulf diplomatic crisis, which saw Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain sever diplomatic ties with Qatar, temporarily stalled collaboration on infrastructure projects, including the Gulf Railway. This illustrates that political cohesion is a prerequisite for successful regional integration, highlighting the intersection of infrastructure with diplomacy and security.

1.2 Economic Significance

From an economic perspective, the Gulf Railway has the potential to transform intra-regional trade and logistics. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2017), the implementation of a fully operational rail network could reduce transportation costs by up to 30% for intra-GCC trade, increase trade volumes, and create economies of scale in logistics and industrial operations. By providing an alternative to road transport, the railway enhances efficiency, reduces environmental impact from fuel consumption, and supports the development of non-oil sectors, including manufacturing and services.

Moreover, the Gulf Railway is closely tied to national development strategies. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 emphasizes infrastructure as a key driver of economic diversification, with rail networks enabling access to new industrial zones, logistics hubs, and urban centers. Similarly, Oman's infrastructure plans prioritize connectivity as a means to integrate peripheral regions into national economic frameworks. The railway thus serves as a vehicle for balanced regional development.

1.3 Political and Strategic Dimensions

The Gulf Railway is also a strategic tool for regional cohesion and security. In a region marked by geopolitical volatility, infrastructure can reinforce interdependence, fostering collaboration that extends beyond economics. The railway's shared governance model requires consensus on technical standards, financing, and operational management, and incentivizing GCC members to cooperate diplomatically. It is, therefore, a mechanism for political stability, complementing economic integration with shared strategic interests.



1.4 Challenges and Constraints

Despite its promise, the Gulf Railway faces multiple challenges. Financial constraints, political disagreements, and technical complexities have delayed progress. Coordinating multiple member states with varying national priorities requires sophisticated governance structures and dispute resolution mechanisms. Additionally, the integration of cross-border regulatory frameworks, safety standards, and operational protocols presents logistical hurdles. Nevertheless, ongoing efforts to revive the project suggest renewed commitment, reflecting recognition of infrastructure as a cornerstone of regional development and political stability.

The Belt and Road Initiative: Transregional Connectivity and Global Influence

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, represents a global-scale approach to infrastructure-driven influence, encompassing land, maritime, and digital corridors across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Unlike the regional Gulf Railway, the BRI is designed to project China's economic, political, and strategic influence Trans continentally, reshaping global connectivity patterns.

2.1 Strategic Objectives and Scope

The BRI operates with multiple objectives. Economically, it addresses China's industrial overcapacity, facilitates trade expansion, and opens markets for Chinese goods, services, and technology (World Bank, 2019). Strategically, it extends China's influence by integrating participating countries into a network of corridors aligned with Chinese interests. Politically, the BRI strengthens China's position as a global development actor and offers alternative models of infrastructure financing compared to Western institutions (Hillman, 2020).

The initiative is organized around major corridors, including:

- China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Linking western China to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan.
- China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor: Connecting China to the Middle East through Central Asian republics.
- Maritime Silk Road: Linking ports across Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa.

Each corridor combines transport, energy, and digital infrastructure, forming an interconnected network that enhances China's leverage over trade flows, energy routes, and regional economic integration.

2.2 Economic Impact

The BRI has facilitated billions of dollars in investment, enhancing infrastructure and connectivity across participant countries. For instance, CPEC has led to the construction of modern highways, ports, and energy plants, boosting Pakistan's industrial capacity and regional integration. In Central Asia, railways connecting China to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have reduced transportation time to European markets by several weeks, increasing trade efficiency (Rolland, 2017). These investments illustrate the dual role of infrastructure: developmental and strategic.

2.3 Geopolitical Implications

Infrastructure corridors under the BRI are also instruments of geopolitical influence. By financing, constructing, and controlling strategic infrastructure, China cultivates economic dependence and strengthens bilateral ties, which can translate into political leverage. Critics have raised concerns about debt sustainability and sovereignty risks in recipient



countries (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). In response, alternative initiatives like the EU's Global Gateway and the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment reflect growing competition in infrastructure diplomacy, highlighting the strategic dimension of connectivity.

2.4 Challenges and Critiques

Despite its successes, the BRI faces challenges related to financial transparency, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. Some projects have experienced cost overruns or political resistance in host countries, raising questions about long-term viability. Additionally, the BRI's scale creates coordination and governance challenges, especially across regions with differing regulatory, political, and economic systems.

1. Comparative Analysis: Regional vs. Transregional Approaches

A comparative assessment of the Gulf Railway and the BRI reveals both convergent principles and divergent operational realities.

- **Scale and Scope:** The BRI is transregional, spanning multiple continents and diverse political environments. The Gulf Railway is regional, focusing on GCC cohesion.
- **Governance and Agency:** The BRI is primarily China-led, centralizing decision-making and funding. The Gulf Railway requires multi-state consensus, sharing governance responsibilities among member states.
- **Strategic Purpose:** Both initiatives use infrastructure to shape economic and political landscapes. The BRI projects influence globally, while the Gulf Railway strengthens intra-regional stability.
- **Economic Integration:** Both reduce trade costs and enhance connectivity, but the Gulf Railway's benefits are more focused on regional diversification, whereas the BRI impacts global trade flows and supply chains.

Both cases illustrate infrastructure as a geo-economic instrument, demonstrating how connectivity shapes alliances, trade networks, and strategic positioning in the contemporary global order.

2. Infrastructure as a Geopolitical Instrument: Geo-economics and Power

Infrastructure projects like the Gulf Railway and BRI exemplify the politicization of connectivity. By controlling critical nodes—ports, rail hubs, and energy corridors—states gain leverage over economic and strategic flows. In the Gulf, intra-regional corridors foster cooperation, reducing dependency on external powers. In the BRI, corridors extend Chinese influence across continents, creating strategic footholds.

The emergence of infrastructure diplomacy signals a transformation of globalism. Connectivity is no longer neutral; it reflects the interplay between economic development and strategic competition. States deploy infrastructure to assert influence, safeguard trade routes, and reinforce regional and global positions, shaping a multi-nodal, fragmented global order.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Gulf Railway and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrates that infrastructure is no longer merely a developmental tool but a strategic instrument shaping the contours of globalism. Both projects reflect a profound transformation in the international system, where connectivity is increasingly politicized, selective, and aligned with the strategic interests of dominant actors.

The Gulf Railway illustrates the power of regional integration, showing how a unified rail network can foster economic diversification, enhance intra-regional trade, and strengthen



political cohesion among GCC states. By linking major industrial hubs, ports, and cities, the railway has the potential to reduce reliance on road transport, lower logistics costs, and promote non-oil sectors, thereby supporting long-term economic sustainability. Politically, the project incentivizes collaboration among member states, serving as a mechanism for regional stability and diplomatic alignment.

In contrast, the BRI represents transregional, global-scale connectivity, projecting China's influence across Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. Through corridors like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the China-Europe Railway Express, and major port developments, China leverages infrastructure to shape trade patterns, foster political alignment, and secure economic footholds in key regions. While the initiative faces challenges — including debt sustainability, governance complexities, and environmental concerns — its scale and ambition underscore the role of infrastructure as a central instrument of geo-economic power.

Comparatively, both initiatives share core characteristics: they are state-led, strategically motivated, and corridor-oriented, reflecting a shift away from universal liberal globalism toward fragmented, selective integration. The Gulf Railway emphasizes regional cohesion, whereas the BRI illustrates transregional influence, yet together they highlight the multi-layered nature of contemporary global connectivity.

Ultimately, the rise of infrastructure-driven projects signals a reconfiguration rather than the end of globalism. Power in the twenty-first century increasingly resides in the ability to construct, control, and sustain networks that link economies, societies, and strategic nodes. The coexistence of regional and transregional corridors suggests that the future global order will be defined by overlapping networks, strategic competition, and selective integration, rather than by the universal openness of past globalization models. Infrastructure has thus become both a tool and symbol of influence, shaping not only economic landscapes but also the geopolitical architecture of the modern world.

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