

# **Exploring Mass Media's Role in Shaping Public Perception of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

In a period dominated by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it's pivotal to understand the mass media's role in shaping public perception. This study focuses on how Sri Lanka's media portray BRI Projects in Sri Lanka and its impact on the public perception. This research has three objectives; to examine how media portrays BRI in Sri Lanka, identify its impact on public perception, and eventually to understand how it affects Sri Lankans' view of BRI. This study will bridge knowledge gaps regarding the interplay between mass media, public perception, and the BRI while offering insight of media's role in shaping public perception and foreign policy. The research methodology used is a mixed-method approach combined with Norman Fairclough's critical Disclosure Analysis (CDA) with surveys to examine the media's impact on public perception. CDA examines different media from 2014-2022, such as TV and newspapers in Sri Lanka to identify prevailing themes, narratives, and patterns in BRI coverage. Surveys measure the media's influence on public perception, assaying Sri Lankans' views toward the BRI. The findings reveal a shifting public perception of China's BRI in Sri Lanka. Originally, from 2014 to 2017, the media portrayed the BRI as a positive force for Sri Lanka's economic development. The Hambantota port lease in 2017 triggered concerns about debt traps, leading to a more negative view. From 2018 to 2022, amongst the COVID-19 epidemic and economic crisis, the media's criticism of Chinese BRI investments intensified. The research emphasizes how the media's criticisms significantly influenced the public perception, with varying impacts based on individual demographics which contributed to a shift toward more negative views of the BRI in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** *BRI, China, Debt-trap, Media, Perception*

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