

# Viktoriia Ivanova

## The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative

### Perceptions of the Malaysian and German Governments (2013-2022)

#### Topic and Research Question

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, builds on the Great Western Development strategy of 1999/2000, aiming to expand global connectivity and influence. While China presents it as a win-win project, some analysts perceive it as a geopolitical tool. Malaysia, a key Southeast Asian hub, benefits from the BRI while balancing its ties with both China and the United States. Similarly, Germany, as a major European Union (EU) actor, prioritizes economic transparency and connectivity in its engagements with China, as demonstrated by its cooperation on the China-Europe Railway Express.

This study examines the evolution of Malaysia's and Germany's perceptions of the BRI between 2013 and 2022, analyzing the role of economic interests, strategic considerations, and political shifts in shaping their views. Particularly, it assesses the extent to which these perceptions align with China's BRI vision, addressing the main research question: *How and why has the perception of the BRI by the governments of Malaysia and Germany changed and developed since 2013?*

By addressing this research question, this study moves beyond the conventional economic analyses to highlight the influence of national interests, leadership dynamics, and political change in shaping BRI engagement.

#### State of the Art

Most studies examine China's rise and its geopolitical, economic, and strategic significance in East Asia, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe, with a particular focus on in Malaysia and Germany. These works further explore China's use of economic diplomacy and infrastructure investment as mechanisms of influence (Gerstl & Wallenböck, 2021; Yan, 2019; Garlick, 2020) and analyze how states have recalibrated their responses from initial enthusiasm to increased scrutiny due to concerns regarding financial dependency, security risks, and sovereignty (Razalli et al., 2020; Miao, 2021; Cai & Efstathopoulos, 2023).

Meanwhile, theoretical debates remain polarized between realist frameworks, which characterize China as a revisionist power intent on challenging the liberal international order (Mearsheimer, 2010; Callahan, 2016), and liberal perspectives, which emphasize China's integration into international institutions (Buzan, 2010; Stephen & Skidmore, 2019). Nye (2004), in turn, introduces the concept of *"liberal realism,"* arguing that

China's integration requires a balance between power and cooperation. Consequently, scholars such as Li et al. (2009) and Larson (2020) highlight *soft power* and *trust-building* as key means through which China shapes its global influence. Most recent works on Malaysia's and Germany's responses to the BRI provide insights into policy shifts, yet significant gaps persist in quantifying the evolution of governmental perceptions in both countries.

#### Methodology and Approach

This research employs analytical framework composed from Constructivist approach, that emphasizes how state perceptions and interests are constructed through language, norms, and identity, and from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawn from constructivist epistemology. CDA serves as the methodological tool for analyzing political language, particularly key narratives of the selected states regarding the BRI. Its foundation relies on the works of multiple scholars, including Fairclough (1992, 1995), Louw (1993), Stubbs (1996), van Dijk (1998), and Wodak & Meyer (2009). Building on this foundation, the analysis is structured around key CDA criteria: Textual Analysis (key terms, frequency, and tone); Contextual Analysis (historical, political, and cultural influences); Collocational Analysis and Semantic Prosody (linguistic connotations); Discursive Strategies (rhetorical patterns and ideologies); and Framing Analysis (the BRI as an opportunity, a threat, or a neutral initiative).

Accordingly, this study compares thirteen positive Chinese keywords (KWs), extracted from China's NDRC (2015) document and Xi Jinping's speeches, with the Malaysian and German government representatives' discourse, analyzing their usage and framing to identify alignment with or divergence from China's narrative. Furthermore, triangulation—incorporating political speeches, media reports, and academic literature—enhances the study's credibility. Finally, the KWs used by Malaysian and German representatives will be classified as *positive*, *neutral*, or *negative*, reflecting each country's perception of and response to the BRI.

#### Main Facts

##### Malaysia

Under Prime Minister (PM) Najib Razak, Malaysia welcomed China's BRI, significantly boosting trade, investment, and infrastructure, thereby making China its primary ASEAN partner. His tenure was marked by the 1MDB corruption scandal. As a result, under PM

Mahathir Mohamad (2018–2020), Malaysia recalibrated its approach, pausing projects over debt and sovereignty concerns, though they were later resumed under *"better terms"*. Subsequently, under PM Ismail Sabri (2021–2022), Malaysia reaffirmed its strong economic ties with China. The dominant narratives include *"connectivity," "economic cooperation," "win-win," "opportunities,"* and *"investment,"* while Mahathir introduced critical KWs like *"selling sovereignty"* and *"gain something for Malaysia."* Overall, Malaysia pursued pragmatic hedging, balancing economic benefits with national interests while emphasizing local employment and technology transfers.

##### Germany

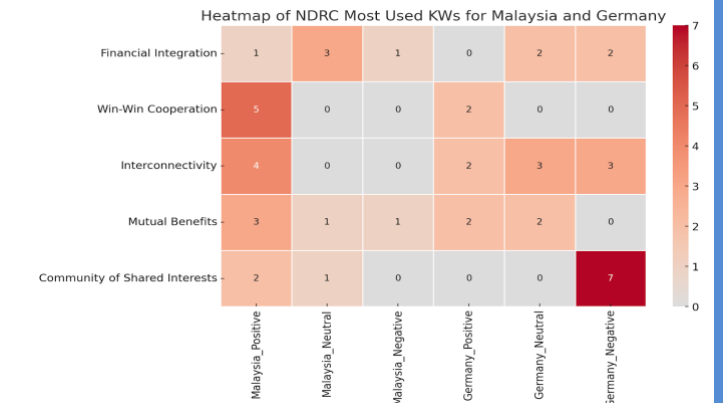
Under Chancellor Angela Merkel (2005–2021), Germany viewed the BRI as economically beneficial yet remained cautious about dependency on China. Following Merkel, Chancellor Olaf Scholz (2021–2025) intensified this caution, advocating for diversified partnerships, adherence to European norms, and environmental sustainability, while also balancing Germany's economic reliance on its business elites, particularly in the automotive and manufacturing sectors (e.g., VW and BMW). Key German narratives include *"trade routes," "cooperation," "investment,"* and *"reciprocity,"* along with critical discourses framing the BRI as a *"Sino-centric project"* requiring strategic *"balance."* Germany's cautious stance is further evident in the Port of Hamburg case, where the state limited Chinese stakes to protect critical infrastructure and maintain EU unity.

#### Results

Malaysia's BRI perception evolved from enthusiasm under Najib Razak to critical recalibration under Mahathir Mohamad and pragmatic engagement under Ismail Sabri. Germany maintained cautious pragmatism from Merkel to Scholz, balancing economic cooperation with strategic autonomy and EU regulatory oversight.

More specifically, the research yielded the following findings: Textual analysis highlighted shared key terms, *"investment," "trade," "cooperation,"* and *"opportunities,"* reflecting Malaysia's focus on economic growth, while Germany stressed strategic oversight and EU alignment. Contextual analysis indicated that Malaysia prioritized infrastructure and development through initiatives such as the East Coast Rail Link, whereas Germany focused on strategic autonomy within the EU framework and geopolitical caution. Collocational analysis revealed Malaysia's use of *"development"* to underscore economic priorities, while Germany employed *"geostrategic"* to highlight concerns over China's

influence. Discursive analysis framed Malaysia's BRI engagement as complementary to the *"ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan,"* serving *"national and regional interests,"* while Germany characterized the BRI as *"not a sentimental reminder of Marco Polo,"* thus insisting on transparency and legal oversight. Framing analysis revealed Malaysia's positive portrayal of the BRI through such KWs as *"connect cities"* and *"ease of travel and communication,"* stressing economic expansion. While Germany acknowledged the BRI as a *"major project,"* it remained cautious, emphasizing *"forward-looking policies"* and concerns over its *"Sino-centric"* nature.



The heatmap above illustrates Malaysia strong alignment with Chinese KWs *"win-win cooperation," "interconnectivity,"* and *"mutual benefits,"* albeit with sovereignty concerns. Meanwhile, Germany partially aligns with *"mutual benefits"* and *"interconnectivity"* but diverges on *"community of shared interests."*

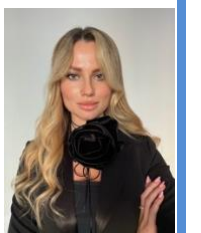
In conclusion, future research presents opportunities for examination of public opinion, leadership transitions, regional comparisons, and long-term impacts of the BRI.

#### References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://ubdata.univie.ac.at/AC17467273>.

#### About the Author

Viktoriia Ivanova holds a BA in International Relations and has a professional background in organizing international forums and events. She has previously worked at institutions such as CIIC Group in China and European Law Institute in Austria, specializing in high-level discussions and cross-border collaboration.



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