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Mains Practice Questions

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Q. Examine the concerns and impacts associated with China's Belt Road Initiative, which has expanded itself from being just an infrastructural project. (250 words)

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Approach

- Briefly describe BRI.
- Analyze the impact of BRI project.
- Give Conclusion.

Introduction

- One Belt One Road (OBOR) is an ambitious project by China, that focuses on connectivity and cooperation among multiple countries spread across the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. According to official figures, OBOR currently involves 126 countries.
- When it was announced in 2013, the BRI was an initiative focused solely on building infrastructure projects; it now has a much broader framework, which includes financial and humanitarian aid projects.

Body

Concerns and impacts associated with China's Belt Road Initiative

- **Threat of 'Debt Trap':** OBOR's financing is through loans extended to member countries. Chinese Loans for infrastructure projects are made with understanding that the developing countries award construction contracts to Chinese companies. China benefits from both financing and construction of infrastructure projects, while developing countries will bear the financial risk. The Centre for Global Development in Washington reckons that eight belt-and-road countries are at risk of debt distress; among them are Laos, Mongolia and Pakistan.
- **Strategic loss to member countries:** China will acquire controlling interests in the OBOR ports if member countries fail to repay the loans. This situation can prove strategically disadvantageous to member countries.
- **BRI in disputed regions:** India has not supported OBOR. China's insistence on establishing the CPEC which is part of BRI project, through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) is seen by India as infringing its sovereignty. China is building roads and infrastructure in the disputed territory of Gilgit-Balistan, which is under Pakistan's control but which India claims as a part of Jammu and Kashmir.
- **Security Issues with BRI:** CPEC part of BRI passes through (PoK) and Baluchistan, both of which are home to a long-running insurgency where it faces terrorism and security risks.
- **Lack of transparency:** BRI project's lack of transparency and accountability is a cause of concern, as it may be skewed in favour of China economically and strategically. Chinese approach of not partnering with local companies will not help member countries create job opportunities.

- **Chinese Cultural domination:** China is using BRI to disseminate its ideology and culture in member countries e.g. in Pakistan through terrestrial distribution of broadcast TV, which will cooperate with Chinese media in the “dissemination of Chinese culture”. A similar Sinification is visible in the Mandalay town of Myanmar which has impacted local architecture and culture.

Conclusion:

- Even though China continues to pitch OBOR as project for regional development involving Infrastructure development to enhance transnational and cross-regional connectivity as a priority area for cooperation, the enormous concerns can lead to conflict and delays.
- China should allay the fears of international community regarding BRI through more transparency in funding and fixing its own accountability in case member countries face adverse circumstances due to BRI project.