

Advancing the Laos-China Shared Future Community through the Belt and Road Initiative: Laos' Strategic Relevance

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Abstract: The strategic relevance of the Laos-China Railway (LCR) in the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its main objective of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind is examined in this article. Positioned at the nexus of China's aspirations for regional connectivity and Laos' aim to become a land-linked nation, the LCR both reflects a necessary infrastructure development and a symbol of deepening bilateral ties. Through a variety of analytical lenses, the paper focuses on the railway's political impact on geopolitics and Laos' regional role, alongside its socio-economic impacts to growth and sustainable development. Using the LCR as a focal case, the paper contributes to the continuous discussions on regional connectivity and integration. In this context, the railway also serves as a testament to China's approach to strengthening strategic trust, enhancing regional cooperation, and integrating partner countries into its broader vision of shared regional prosperity under the CSFM framework.

Keywords: Laos-China Railway; Regional Connectivity; Belt and Road Initiative; Shared Future

I. Introduction

Originally launched in 2013, China's BRI has grown into among the most ambitious worldwide development projects of the twenty-first century. The BRI encompasses Asia, Africa, and Europe by means of huge expenditures on transportation, energy, and digital infrastructure, so promoting transcontinental connectivity, infrastructure-driven trade, and sustainable development (Nedopil, 2024). More than only a means of mobility, the BRI is a strategic tool for spreading China's normative vision of global governance, especially with regard to its concept of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind (CSFM). Supported by President Xi Jinping, this vision underscores as guiding ideas for global participation enduring peace, mutual respect, and cooperative development (Ji, 2023; MOFA-C, 2023a).

On this big canvas, Laos takes a strategically important place. Physical and infrastructure gateway to mainland Southeast Asia, Laos is key to China's BRI routes (Martinus & Lin, 2024). Mostly in energy, mining, and transportation, Laos executed 45 major BRI projects costing over US\$ 22 billion between 2013 and 2023 (Dayant & Stanhope, 2024). Of these, the LCR, worth around US\$ 6 billion, stands out as the most evolving. The LCR shows strategic value by tying Vientiane, the capital of Laos, to Kunming in Yunnan Province, China. The railway has greatly reduced travel times and logistical costs since it opened in late 2021, therefore improving trade flows and enabling closer economic integration. Apart from infrastructure, the LCR stands for boosting bilateral collaboration in line with China's regional development vision, therefore matching Laos' wish

for a land-linked economy with its landlocked one. Underlining on a recent trip to China how so develops a shared future, the Lao Prime Minister underlined on a national development viewpoint and improved Laos-China ties, which the LCR is crucial (CGTN, 2025).

Wang (2024) argues that by presenting an alternative development paradigm to Western-led models one that prioritises mutual development, respect of sovereignty, and inclusive growth, the railway helps China's wider overall diplomatic policy in Southeast Asia. Under China's BRI, it enhances regional interconnectivity and advances multilateral objectives for cooperative infrastructure development (Lampton et al., 2020; EIAS, 2024) in tandem with regional mechanisms including the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) and the developing Pan-Asian Railway Network.

For Laos, the LCR has more social transforming power than only strategic relevance. Restricted historically by its landlocked location, Laos has battled to fit into world value systems. The railway helps to offset this by improving overland access to Chinese and regional markets, therefore enabling trade, lower transportation costs, and foreign investment (FDI). New logistics hubs, special economic zones (SEZs), and export-oriented businesses are cropping up along the railway line (KPL, 2024). Moreover, the LCR has increased market access for rural people in northern Laos so that farmers may sell to China and thereby encourage more inclusive development (Onphanhdala, 2022; World Bank, 2022). Having said that, these benefits have drawbacks, particularly weak governance capability could compromise Laos' potential to properly manage advanced infrastructure and development results, so resulting in reliance over China (Kuik & Rosli, 2023; Nouwens, 2023). Correcting these institutional flaws will assist to guarantee fair and long-term benefits from the LCR.

This article investigates the BRI frameworks in Laos within the prism of LCR's help to advance China's ambition of a CSFM. By way of a multi-dimensional analytical approach, it investigates how the LCR enhances political alignment, promotes regional economic integration, and generates socioeconomic development in Laos. The study adds to more general discussions on infrastructure-led growth and its influence on regional order and governance in Southeast Asia in the middle of global instability, typified by unilateralism, growing protectionism and geopolitical fragmentation. Following a conceptual review of the infrastructure development and CSFM frameworks of the BRI, the paper first looks at the research methodology and strategic importance of the LCR. It then covers the political and socio-economic ramifications of the railway together with its debates and last conclusion.

II. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The BRI has attracted a wide range of scholarly interest because of its major consequences for China's geopolitical policies and evolving paradigms of global economic governance. China's ideal of a CSFM is fundamental to the BRI; it not only enhanced regional connectivity and benefit-based cooperation, so promoting interpersonal connectivity and stressing constructive debate; but it also stresses mutual respect, peaceful development, and shared prosperity (MOFA-C, 2023a). The BRI is progressively seen among the academic community of Southeast Asia and beyond as a development-oriented diplomacy tool rather than just an infrastructure investment plan (Bharti & Kumari, 2024). This initiative thereby raises China's chances to promote multilateral cooperation, boost regional connectivity, and strengthen ties to other nations (Yu, 2024).

Empirical data indicates that the BRI has

greatly helped to decrease infrastructure shortages, encourage regional connectivity, and boost economic development by means of changing projects involving transportation, logistics, and energy sectors (Nedopil, 2024). Still, the BRI has garnered plenty of criticism as well. Building on this more general discussion, the present work evaluates the BRI in Laos using a multi-dimensional analytical framework to assess the political and socioeconomic consequences of the LCR, so regarded as a concrete manifestation of China's CSFM objective. From Vientiane Capital to Yunnan Province, the LCR signifies a historic infrastructure development in tandem with broader regional projects as detailed. Yan and Qiu (2024) claim that the LCR is largely considered to be a strategic corridor indispensable to China's regional objectives. Moreover, Gu (2024) argues that the LCR shows increasing political unity and enhanced bilateral cooperation between China and Laos inside the BRI framework, therefore transcending its usage as a method of transportation. Crucially, the LCR is geopolitically driving China's vision of regional connectivity. Encouragement of overland integration with mainland Southeast Asia helps to drive the cross-border flow of goods, capital, and labor, key drivers of regional supply chains and economic interdependence (Edi, 2023). Such dynamics exactly match the CSFM objective, which accords regional stability and shared development first importance (Nong, 2023).

Academics and international institutions concur overwhelmingly that the railway has accelerated industrialization and trade in Laos, attracted FDI, and promoted expansion in the sectors of tourism, manufacturing, and agriculture (EIAS, 2024; World Bank, 2024a). The LCR offers considerable micro-developmental capacity for inclusive growth especially for rural agricultural areas and small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). Improved

connection links lower logistical costs, broader market access, and higher supply chain efficiency, all of which support more equal developmental outcomes with each other. Strong legislative control, according to supporters, can help the LCR promote the expansion of green infrastructure in line with China's and Laos' environmental targets (Yan & Qiu, 2024; Gu, 2024).

This project basically orientates the LCR as a concrete reflection of China's evolving approach to global development by using the CSFM as a guiding conceptual framework. The CSFM framework encourages ideals of mutual benefit, respect of sovereignty, and inclusive progress; its application to the LCR indicates a fresh approach of bilateralism based on shared developmental goals (MOFA-C, 2023b; CGNT, 2025). This normative emphasis is complemented by regional integration theory, which mainly uses infrastructure-led models seeing physical connectivity as basic for political and economic coherence. Liu, Xu, and Lim (2023) stress how infrastructure investments assist trade liberalization, cross-border industrial linkages, and the flow of goods and people, so strengthening stronger regional ties. This theoretical perspective matches Yu (2024), who sees infrastructure as both an enabler of regional integration and a driver of ongoing economic development. From a neo-functional point of view, infrastructure projects generate spillover effects needing more institutional and policy coordination, hence increasingly extending regional cooperation outside their original emphasis (Niemann, 2008). Therefore, the LCR is a strategic weapon advancing regionalism and the more general CSFM goals as well as a method of mobility.

Inside the multi-dimensional analytical approaches, the CSFM and infrastructure-led regional integration models imply that the LCR catches the

complex confluence of geopolitics and development in Southeast Asia. From this point of view, the railway best shows the numerous ways in which connective infrastructure influences national development pathways, regional alignment, and bilateral connections. This conceptual viewpoint helps to justify the analytical framework applied in the present work.

III. Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative research design emphasising content analysis to evaluate the strategic consequences of the LCR. Analysing the LCR's effects on national development integrates actual data with theoretical study on regional connectivity. Main data came from semi-structured interviews with policy advisers, think tank analysts, government officials, and regional specialists from Laos, China, and some Southeast Asia countries. Further guiding the study was participant observation at regional conferences on BRI cooperation and infrastructure development. Publications from companies and research institutes, ASEAN-China frameworks, Chinese white papers, Laos-China bilateral statements assist to capture the several parties' description of the LCR. The studies underline Laos' political and social aspects, therefore providing a whole picture of infrastructure as a weapon for statecraft, regional positioning, and development strategy inside the CSFM framework.

IV. Strategic Importance of the LCR

Beginning in the middle-1990s, the Lao government has followed a strategy converting landlocked to land-linked to increase regional connectivity and economic development. Nevertheless, inadequate resources and too much reliance on important partners hindered development. This approach got additional momentum in 2013 when Laos signed a memorandum of understanding with

China to perform a feasibility assessment, therefore permitting building starting in 2016 and completion as scheduled in 2021 (Sayavong, 2022). Considered as a symbol of modernism and connection, the LCR exposes a basic structural change in Laos' political economy and is becoming ever more crucial over the regional order in Southeast Asia. Apart from a simple physical rail link between Vientiane and Kunming, the LCR catches China's strategic financial, technological, and long-term vision into Laos' institutional and developmental scene (Yan & Qiu, 2024). By means of great tools for regional cooperation and mutual development, the railway shows how infrastructure investments help to improve bilateral reliance and impact regional dynamics, so connecting China to mainland Southeast Asia (Kuik & Rosli, 2023). Out of the BRI projects in Southeast Asia, the LCR is the most clear sign of growing Laos-China cooperation.

Unlike projects run by key partners stressing procedural processes and consensus-building, the LCR exposes China's pragmatic, results-oriented infrastructure diplomacy supported by foreign organisations such as the Asian Development Bank. China uses simplified bilateral agreements to provide strategic alignment with economic viability top priority, therefore allowing speed and efficiency. This strategy addresses geopolitical as well as economic needs as Yan and Qiu (2024) underline by combining rapid implementation with large financial outlays. Considered as the key artery for transregional trade and investment, the LCR supports Laos' long-standing ambition to shift from a 'land-locked to a land-linked economy,' hence improving its integration into regional and global supply networks (Sayavong, 2022). This increasing interconnection presents excellent chances for industrialisation, economic diversification, and regional integration even if it also implies additional

responsibility.

From a more generally regional viewpoint, the LCR sharpens the story of growing Southeast Asian interconnection. Apart from projects connected with economic corridors, Laos actively supports regional initiatives such the MPAC and other connected infrastructure projects. Complementing the BRI, the LCR offers a required logistical spine ensuring the worldwide flow of people, finance, and goods. China asserts that the LCR supports ASEAN-wide ambitions to erase development gaps, improve transportation efficiency, and raise regional economic resilience, while some voice worries on the bilateral character of the BRI. Other Southern railway projects stressing its prospective, thus underlining the LCR's potential as a continental economic spine to Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore (Lampton et al., 2020; Edi, 2023).

Knowing the changing regional dynamics, Laos makes wise foreign policy combining tight economic links to China with active involvement with other significant development partners. For Laos, other key partners like Japan remain vital providers of infrastructure, medical treatment, and education. Instead of picking between partners, Laos makes use of China's extensive infrastructure financing in tandem with the governance, experience in capacity-building, and sustainable development other countries offer (Lin, 2023; Sayalath, 2024). This strategy combines Laos' personal will with its more overall dedication to diplomatic balance, inclusive development, and defense of sovereignty.

Under least developed country classification, Laos aims to reach middle-income level equivalent by 2030. In this respect, the success of the LCR will depend on fair development, institutional strengthening, and national resilience in addition to faster trade volumes and lesser travel distances. Apart from its use for mobility, the railway actively assists

Laos to control the difficult relationship between national development and globalisation, increase regional involvement, and raise its profile abroad. The LCR basically announces a deliberate turning point. For China, it symbolises its changing position as a development partner with regional link, while for Laos, it provides a means of global connectivity and economic development. The LCR shows how reciprocal benefit can be attained outside of zero-sum scenarios when infrastructure improvements complement geopolitical vision and sustainable development goals. It is a great illustration of how small nations like Laos may deliberately use big initiatives like the BRI to steer towards development while maintaining agency and so furthering national interests.

V. Transformative impacts of LCR

Launched in December 2021, the LCR initially ran across operational issues. But it has then overcome these obstacles and begun generating increasingly more striking development outcomes for Laos. By boosting bilateral relations with China and thereby encouraging more general regional connectivity, the railway has significantly boosted the strategic relevance of the country. Though comprehensive study on the direct socio-economic impact of the railway is still limited and scattered, this paper offers a critical assessment of the main successes of the railway and investigates the possibilities it brings in building a shared future between Laos and China.

Regarding the political effects, the LCR goes well beyond its role as a project involving physical infrastructure. Considered generally as a strategic political tool, the LCR has drastically changed Laos' bilateral ties to China. Being the flagship BRI project in mainland Southeast Asia, it captures China's regional aspirations while also giving Laos a stage to boost internal legitimacy, hasten national growth,

and improve its international reputation (Kuik & Rosli, 2023). This dual-purpose project has greatly strengthened political ties between the two countries by including Laos more firmly into China's regional diplomacy but yet not without Laos' own agency (Yan & Qiu, 2024).

Consolidation of political trust and alignment forms the foundation of this metamorphosis. Laos has become among China's most consistent allies in mainland Southeast Asia over the last two decades (Sayalath, 2024). Shared governance systems, high-level dialogues, and reciprocal endorsement of political and developmental goals have institutionalised this increasing convergence (China Daily, 2023a; Wang, 2024). Especially by means of more intense cooperation between the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the LCR both reflects and promotes this growing cooperation. Regular party-to-party meetings, ideological debates, and cooperative planning systems have helped to build political consensus, therefore supporting government stability and validating Laos' state-led growth model (Kuik & Rosli, 2023; Yan & Qiu, 2024). Consistent high-level exchanges highlight this; in 2024 alone, 196 training programmes were carried out, so benefiting 2,068 participants across Laos and China and so demonstrating the clear results of this cooperation (KPL, 2025a).

The LCR also represents a rising strategic alignment, one that Laos actively shapes. Strong support of China's CSFM narrative by Vientiane indicates not passive acquiescence but rather active positioning as a partner sharing basic values including sovereignty, non-interference, and development-oriented cooperation. Both nations contend that the LCR reflects this common vision (MOFA-C, 2023b). Although asymmetries still exist, Laos has deliberately leveraged the relationship

to further its development goals, helping to shape stories about South-South collaboration and regional connectivity. Particularly in Vientiane, the political capital of Laos, this cooperation has resulted in ongoing financial support and improved diplomatic recognition for the country (Kuik & Rosli, 2023). Framed around the 'Four Goods' principle of good neighbours, good friends, good comrades, and good partners, this alliance helps Laos to ensure strategic gains despite differences in power (Wang, 2024; Sayalath, 2024).

Besides, the LCR has encouraged institutional and bureaucratic synergy. In sectors including transportation, trade, customs, and land-use policy, it has strengthened Laos' ability to collaborate with Chinese ministries, state-owned businesses, and planning agencies (Yan & Qiu, 2024). Through institutional collaboration, the Lao government is better positioned to carry out BRI-related projects, centralise authority, and further national development goals by improving administrative interoperability (Kuik & Rosli, 2023). This simplification helps to align policies more effectively and make decisions, therefore enhancing state capacity.

On home front, the LCR has evolved into a potent emblem of modernity. Strong Lao-Chinese ties and visionary party leadership enable the railway to be regularly framed by Lao state media as a historic accomplishment (KPL, 2024). Against Western development paradigms sometimes attacked for governance restrictions, it offers an alternative growth model based on infrastructure, stability, and mutual benefit. By doing this, the LPRP not only strengthens its own legitimacy but also presents itself as a supporter of modernisation and worldwide interaction (Kuik & Rosli, 2023; GCNT, 2025).

Furthermore, the railway has promoted Laos to recalibrate its political direction within ASEAN. Vientiane has reinterpreted its relationship with China

as a logistical and diplomatic conduit in mainland Southeast Asia, instead of as a passive receiver of outside influence (Lin, 2023). By increasing Laos' voice in regional projects, the LCR has fostered it to advocate a development-oriented foreign policy fit for its own interests. Support of Chinese-led projects, including infrastructure financing and connectivity, by Laos in ASEAN forums is based more on pragmatic and shared development aims than on ideological alignment (Yan & Qiu, 2024). As Laos keeps promoting balanced relations with important regional players, including Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan (Chu & Hoang, 2023), this represents a foreign policy anchored in diversification and strategic flexibility.

Unlike many ASEAN states approaching BRI projects with cautiously, Laos has aggressively embraced the LCR as a fundamental component of its national development strategy (Lampton et al., 2020). This proactive approach indicates confidence in the selected growth path and conviction on the long-term advantages of connection and regional integration. Participating in Chinese-led projects is not a compromise to foreign influence for Laos; rather, it is a calculated step to acquire key infrastructure, boost commerce, and pursue modernisation on terms of relevance. In this regard, Laos' ambitions for regional involvement and development revolve mostly on the LCR (Sayavong, 2022).

Frankly speaking, the LCR has had significant political effects on Laos-China relations. It has raised Laos' profile in regional diplomacy, given the LPRP more domestic legitimacy, promoted strategic alignment, and enhanced party-to-party cooperation with the CCP. Acting both as a diplomatic tool and a development engine, the LCR helps Laos to forward its more general national goals. It shows how smaller countries may use connectivity programmes to negotiate power asymmetries, improve political

agency, and contribute to form regional narratives. By achieving this, Laos becomes not a peripheral actor but rather a strategic and active participant in the changing scene of infrastructure-led diplomacy.

In parallel with its political impact, the LCR marks a turning point in national infrastructure development, resulting in generating significant social and economic advantages. The railway spans about 414 kilometres, linking the Vientiane Capital to Boten city on the northern border. It then runs roughly 621 kilometres from Boten to Kunming. Altogether stretching approximately 1,035 kilometres, the LCR, a joint venture, serves as a vital cross-border route. Originally introduced on April 13, 2023 (Xinhua, 2025), the LCR has rapidly taken front stage in Laos' development plan. Notwithstanding continuous difficulties, it promotes equitable development, improves regional connectivity, helps to lower poverty, modernises infrastructure, and strengthens people-to-people connectivity.

Transforming from a landlocked to a land-linked economy, Laos is using the LCR to hasten its integration into regional and global value networks. Especially with China and ASEAN economies, Laos' competitiveness in drawing FDI and increasing commerce has been strengthened by the railway's ability to shorten transportation time and logistics costs (EIAS, 2024). Encouragement of bilateral trade is among the most obvious effects of the LCR. With China, Laos' second biggest commercial partner after Thailand, trade volume with Laos has surged since the opening of the railway. While logistics expenses have dropped by 30-40% (Kuik & Rosli, 2023), transport time from Vientiane to Kunming has dropped from 48 hours to roughly 10-12 hours. The railway had carried more than 10 million metric tonnes of cargo as of September 2024; product categories had grown from 500 at launch to

around 3,000 (Sgueglia, 2025). These developments have made Lao exports more competitive, therefore putting Laos favourably against regional economies still mostly dependent on road or maritime logistics (World Bank, 2022).

Given the LCR's advantage, bilateral trade between Laos and China significantly increased from US\$5.68 billion in 2022, and US\$7.09 billion in 2023 to a record US\$8.23 billion in 2024, a year-on-year rise of 15.91%. While imports climbed by 9.8% to US\$3.68 billion, Laos' exports to China climbed by 21.4% to US\$4.56 billion (KPL, 2025). Beyond trade figures, the railway's broader impact is also evident in logistics and regional connectivity. In addition to trade figures, the railway has raised the efficiency of agricultural exports like rice, bananas, rubber, and cassava, by lowering spoilage and hence increasing access to Chinese markets, (World Bank, 2024b). More broadly, the LCR is a central hub for China's BRI, enhancing marine trade with overland infrastructure connections across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The LCR provides a faster and less expensive substitute for established sea-based trade paths (Nikkei, 2022).

Beyond Laos, Thailand has aggressively used the LCR to increase the scope of exports to China and other countries. Nowadays, perishable items like tropical fruits, including durians, reach Chinese markets 4-5 days by rail instead of 8-10 days by sea (China Daily, 2024b). Moreover, the LCR links to the China-Europe goods train system, so enabling Southeast Asian products, including from Laos and Thailand, to arrive Europe in about 15 days (SCIO, 2024). In this regard, the LCR not only increases regional trade efficiency but also helps Southeast Asian economies to be included into China's larger Eurasian rail network (Lampton et al., 2020). As Sgueglia (2025) emphasises, the LCR is essential for Lao-China strategic cooperation and best reflects

Beijing's more general BRI aspirations. Along its route, the railway has improved Laos' position as a regional logistics hub, therefore boosting not only export but also industrial growth. Established to take advantage of growing train traffic and cross-border trade, key infrastructural zones have designed to simplify freight movements and increase operational efficiency and openness are linked customs processes and e-trade systems.

Linking with China's high-speed rail system, the LCR forms a vital part of the 'Eurasian land bridge,' allowing products from Southeast Asia to be effectively transported from China and on into Central Asia and Europe. China's global supply chain plans are strengthened by this overland corridor, which also provides a quicker substitute for sea transportation, which has long dominated world trade (World Bank, 2020). More recently, Malaysia and Laos have created a strategic rail-sea trade corridor to improve their economic linkability (ANN, 2025). Using this multimodal route, Malaysian products can reach China via the LCR from sea to Thailand's Laem Chabang Port and then by rail through Laos. The project not only diversifies trade routes for Malaysia but also increases the LCR's regional relevance by proving its capacity to link landlocked Laos to more extensive maritime trade routes.

For Laos' long-term development, the LCR is thus a strategic asset. The World Bank (2020; 2024) claims that better connectivity through the LCR paired with incorporation into the larger BRI framework could increase Laos' GDP by 15-20% over time. Integrated with the Pan-Asian rail system, the LCR improves links between Laos and Chinese industrial hubs and supports ASEAN-China supply chain integration (Lampton et al., 2020; EIAS, 2024). These dynamics highlight the railway's larger importance in not only improving bilateral trade but also in furthering regional economic cooperation

and integration.

Apart from encouraging regional connectivity and economic development, LCR has assisted in creating industrial zones and logistical centres, therefore drawing significant FDI, especially from China investors. China is the biggest investor in Laos, having made around US\$18 billion in investments in 927 approved projects between 1989 and 2024 (Sgueglia, 2025). China accounted for about 80% of the US\$986 million in FDI inflows to Laos through 17 projects in early 2024 alone, almost doubling the US\$ 339 million recorded in 2022, including 30 projects. Mostly centred in electricity, mining, services, and agriculture (Sgueglia, 2025; KPL, 2025), these investments also include The operationalization of the LCR helps to explain much of the recent FDI explosion.

To increase trade, improve competitiveness, and assist local industrialisation and economic diversification, the Lao government has built logistics parks, export processing zones, and SEZs close to important LCR stations (Yan & Qiu, 2024). Export-oriented manufacturing and processing sectors dependent on effective transportation systems have drawn these areas as magnets. Strategically close to important railway hubs, they provide jobs and assist to lessen Laos' historical dependence on mining and subsistence farming (Nikkei, 2022). Among these, one especially noteworthy FDI draw is the Saysettha Development Zone (SDZ). Comprising 1,149 hectares close to the city, the US\$350 million zone is jointly supported by China (75%) and the Vientiane municipal government (25%) (AidData, n.d.). Designed starting in 2010, Phase I of the SDZ is currently fully developed with necessary infrastructure to enable industrial expansion. Agreements to operate inside the zone have been signed by 127 Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Malaysian, Singaporean, Laotian, American, and

Swiss enterprises thus far. Of them, 64 enterprises have started manufacturing lines, creating around 6,000 jobs, more than 4,000 of which are held by Lao citizens (VT, 2023). Once completely running, these companies expect to generate a combined yearly production worth around US\$1.8 billion.

This strategic cooperation reveals China's commitment to fulfil Laos' development objectives in addition to strengthen bilateral relations. Apart from its national relevance, the LCR is a required venue for promoting regional trade and allowing investor integration all throughout Southeast Asia. Utilizing China's financial resources, technical expertise, and industrial capacity in the development of economic zones along the railway corridor, it especially matches Laos' needs for industrial upgrading and economic diversification. Zhang and Wang (2025) present the LCR as a dynamic platform integrating infrastructural development, corporate cooperation, and enhanced market access. Thus, the railway enhances local industry in Laos as well as supply systems all throughout the ASEAN area. Infrastructure developments linked to the LCR and its neighboring economic zones have especially showed considerable employment potential with approximately 3,500 direct jobs and over 100,000 indirect jobs generated, especially in the fields of logistics, manufacturing, and construction (China Daily, 2023b). About 1,000 Lao nationals comprised 61.3% of the whole labor hired along the railway, increasingly playing major positions in railway safety management, passenger and freight operations, equipment handling, and maintenance as of October 2024 (Sun & Yang, 2024).

Apart from promoting economic development, the LCR's capacity to reduce poverty by improving connectivity, especially in rural and hilly areas, defines one of its main advantages. Better transportation allows smallholder farmers and local

producers to reach bigger markets in China and Laos, therefore enabling the sale of value-added goods and higher household earnings. By lowering logistical costs and generating new economic opportunities, the LCR has greatly increased market access for smallholders and companies, therefore enabling rural communities to break the cycle of poverty. Farmers in hitherto isolated places like northern Laos now gain from quicker and more reasonably priced access to markets. While studies by Wichitphongsa and Ponanan (2022) show that agricultural output has risen by 10-15% in areas with improved infrastructure, while Onphanhdala (2022) also emphasises how this change has helped lifestyles. The LCR increases profit margins and increases commercial possibilities by including rural farmers into regional supply chains. This emphasises the research conducted by the 2020 World Bank, which shows through better infrastructure and access to basic services the railway could raise typical rural incomes by 15-20%. In this way, especially in the areas of infrastructure improvement, poverty reduction, and sustainable development, the LCR complements Laos' larger development plan (Gu, 2024).

The LCR is also rather important in helping to correct development differences between rural and urban areas. Laos has traditionally shown considerable geographical disparities in governmental services, infrastructure, and economic possibilities. For example, just about 25% of rural communities had direct access to paved roads before the LCR's completion, compared to about 80% in metropolitan areas (World Bank, 2020). Through better physical connectivity between rural areas and big cities, the railway helps to close this divide. Sayavong (2022) data shows that travel time from northern Laos to Vientiane dropped by 40% in the first year of operation, therefore leading to a 15%

rise in rural-to-urban migration for education and jobs. This improved mobility makes access to better education and healthcare as well as to employment easier. Gu (2024) claims that visits by rural patients to metropolitan hospitals have sharply risen since the LCR started operating.

In this regard, especially with regard to infrastructural development, inclusive economic growth, and poverty reduction, the LCR helps Laos towards reaching the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The LCR supports Laos' long-term development plan to turn from a least developed country into a middle-income nation by 2030 by including rural and urban populations into a more coherent national transportation network. By connecting villages and supporting cultural interaction, the railway also fosters social cohesiveness, hence enhancing national unity (Wu et al., 21). Improved connectivity promotes person-to-person contacts both inside Laos and with outside nations, therefore fostering cultural understanding, cooperation, and mutual respect. Particularly helpful for formerly underprivileged groups isolated because of poor infrastructure is this social integration. The LCR helps to create a more inclusive and harmonic society by closing social and geographical gaps.

Apart from reducing poverty and inequality, the LCR has greatly increased tourism by increasing accessibility to Laos, especially for Chinese visitors who are used to train travel. This improved accessibility is helping Laos to become a more appealing and reachable place. Providing a quicker and more reasonably priced travel alternative, the train links main tourist destinations including Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The average daily count of passenger trains on the Lao segment has risen from 4 to 14 since its opening three years ago; daily passenger journeys have skyrocketed from just over 1,000 to almost 15,000 (Sun & Yang, 2024).

The LCR has handled 42.92 million passenger trips overall by November 2024; the Lao segment accounted for 7.41 million of these (ibid.). With monthly ridership climbing from 600,000 in its first phase to around 1.6 million across the whole route today, early 2025 estimates show that the LCR has exceeded 50 million passenger trips (SCIO, 2025).

In 2024, Laos welcomed over 1.04 million Chinese visitors, a 63% rise from 2023 (KPL, 2025). Given China's enormous outbound travel industry, the LCR should help to increase arrivals even more. By linking Laos with surrounding ASEAN countries and enabling multimodal travel, the railway also boosts regional tourism. With Thailand, Vietnam, and China leading the top source nations, Laos reported over 4.12 million international arrivals in 2024, up 21 percent year-on-year, generating US\$1.13 billion in revenue. Concurrent with this, domestic tourism reported over 3.90 million visits, a remarkable 102% increase from 2023, so supporting the USD 632 million economic growth (ibid.).

This tourism explosion also helps nearby companies, especially SMEs in services, transportation, and hotels, thereby increasing employment and cash generation. The Lao government is investing in infrastructure along the LCR corridor, including hotels, transportation hubs, and cultural centers, while merging these with other forms of transportation (ADB, 2024), thereby supporting this momentum. Furthermore, the LCR promotes closer cultural interaction between China and Laos, hence improving mutual understanding by means of more person-to-person links (Gu, 2024). It also establishes Laos as a major stop on the regional tourism routes of Southeast Asia, therefore increasing the nation's visibility on the ASEAN travel map. Thus, the LCR is a strategic asset for Laos' tourism-led development since it supports a sustainable and inclusive growth model by means of

economic, cultural, and diplomatic benefits as well as by means of strategic value.

All things considered, the LCR has turned into a transforming factor on the socio-economic scene of Laos. It has hastened regional development, helped to reduce poverty, and advance inclusive growth. Through improved connection, industrialisation encouragement, and support of sustainable development, the railway is guiding Laos towards a more varied and strong economy. Although obstacles still exist, the LCR clearly has beneficial effects and plays an unquestionably major influence on the direction of the nation. By means of its integration into the BRI, the railway has shown to be an indispensable instrument for realising long-term development targets of Laos.

VI. Discussion

The LCR has come to represent for Laos increased access to economic possibilities. Particularly in tourism, manufacturing, and agriculture, the LCR purposefully positions to turn the nation from landlocked to land-linked, thereby facilitating faster logistics, wider market access, and cross-sectoral investment. These advancements not only provide employment but also provide Laos' path to fully participate in regional and international value chains. Moreover, the railway keeps Laos' strategic relevance in the economic geography of mainland Southeast Asia and stimulates FDI. On the LCR's financing strategy and long-term consequences for national economic autonomy, this story of opportunity must thus be evaluated from a more sceptical perspective. Chinese loans and equity account for more than 70% of the project's funding; Chinese companies control operations and development (Ermylina, 2023). This structure encourages dependency and inhibits local regulatory control even while it provides Laos access to financial

and technological talents otherwise unachievable (Nouwens, 2023). The outcome is infrastructure design more reflecting China's strategic influence than of Laos' autonomous development ambition.

Complicating this even more is Laos' growing national debt, which in 2022 comes to 107.1% of GDP and almost half of which is owing to Chinese creditors (Bhatt, 2023). There are quite clear consequences from this debt exposure. According a 2025 Lowy Institute analysis, Laos is among the 75 countries with the lowest debt loads among countries seeing a record increase in debt repayments. The study highlights that high debt loads, mostly related to BRI-linked infrastructure like the LCR, are already limiting budgetary flexibility for basic services including health, education, and climate adaption. China is simultaneously negotiating a self-inflicted conundrum: while domestic political pressure on Chinese quasi-commercial lenders to pay back current debt rises, international requests for debt restructuring are growing as well. This double strain on borrowing nations like Laos creates a precarious terrain. Originally a strategic potential, financial weakness and less economic freedom define what turns out to be a strategic opportunity. The LCR thus catches the paradox of BRI participation since infrastructure-led growth is crucial for landlocked developing countries and its benefits are frequently combined with opaque terms, asymmetric cooperation, and the probable erosion of national policy space.

Moreover, worsening these structural problems is the geopolitics background. Since the West leaves less options for developing nations, its retreat from significant trade deals and aid programmes has greatly raised China's influence. For Laos, this means a limited strategic horizon where the debt reliance concerns are substantial yet the means of diversified development financing remain limited.

In this respect, the LCR should be regarded as an instrument for economic development as much as a litmus test for the feasibility of China's 'Shared Future Community' rhetoric. The project's strategic value stems from its redefining of resilience, agency, and sovereignty for recipient nations such as Laos as well as from its physical construction. Recalibrating these mechanisms helps one to make sure that economic cooperation does not compromise national autonomy and long-term viability, hence defining a real shared future.

Additionally, institutional weaknesses limit the viability of these financial achievements. Loan arrangements' opaque character and insufficient means of domestic debt management limit policy autonomy and openness (Kuik & Rosli, 2023). Critics fear that such inequalities will cause Laos to grow overly dependent on Beijing, with consequences in political and institutional arenas outside of simply economic ones. Laos is thus positioned by the LCR at a crossroads: it might be a modernising agency as well as a structural vulnerability source. Smaller BRI participants contrasting fast growth advantages against long-term sovereignty and resilience will know this conundrum (Himmer & Rod, 2023).

Another urgent concern is social fairness. With China the major market, agricultural exports from Laos exceeded USD 1.4 billion in 2023 (Xinhua, 2024b). Still, much of this output comes from Chinese-invested farms using contract farming techniques that periodically marginalise local farmers, who provide land and labour but lack access to money, new technology, and market power (RFA, 2024). Without inclusive development policies, that is, accessible finance, technical training, and institutional support, the LCR risks the possibility of increasing rather than reducing social inequalities (World Bank, 2020; Ermylina, 2023). As the CSFM sees it, a truly shared future calls for social inclusion

and fair opportunity to match infrastructure growth.

From structural perspective, the LCR gives Laos a road towards industry rather than only diversification from hydropower. However, constraints on human capital, education, and technological capacity reduce this potential. Without deliberate investment in skills development and innovation, Laos could find itself a low-cost manufacturing base or passive transit corridor for outside supply chains (World Bank, 2024b). Nearly US\$ 1 billion in Chinese investment in 2024, largely in infrastructure, mining, and energy, has fueled economic activity; yet, the low spill-over in terms of job creation and knowledge transfer asks questions about sustained local capacity-building (China Briefing, 2024).

Combine with these structural issues present shortcomings of contemporary government. Nevertheless, a lack of openness, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and widespread corruption hinder efficient control and public accountability (Kuik & Rosli, 2023). Reflecting continually high degrees of perceived corruption, Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index ranks Laos 114th out of 180 countries. Such shortcomings of government have major consequences on Laos' economic development as well as on its involvement in global projects like the BRI. High corruption impressions could discourage international investment and impede the development and management of significant infrastructure projects, therefore undermining their long-term viability and efficiency (TI, 2024). Regarding the LCR, these problems run the danger of lowering the developmental influence of the project. Inefficiencies, mismanagement, elite control, or large institutional changes absent would nullify the LCR's advantages (Kuik & Rosli, 2023). Furthermore, putting doubt on the equitable distribution of gains is the exclusion

from the promised economic potential of rural and underdeveloped communities (World Bank, 2024a). Thus, improving governance is not only a complementing policy objective but also a basic necessity for making sure that infrastructure projects like the LCR support inclusive and equitable development.

VII. Conclusion

With improved connectivity, increased access to rural markets, and stimulation of manufacturing, tourism, and agriculture, the LCR has significant potential to accelerate Laos' economic development by means of transformation of the country. Aligning with the CSFM's objectives, the LCR provides a route for even more economic diversification and poverty reduction as well as helps Laos achieve infrastructure-led development. However, the whole realisation of these advantages depends on addressing important issues including weak governance, low institutional capacity, and the risk of overdependence on China, which would compromise Laos' strategic autonomy and long-term resilience. Strategic planning, institutional enhancements, transparency and inclusive development practices, supported by robust international cooperation, are imperative. By means of active design and management of this transformational effort, Laos can move from a passive recipient to a competent development partner using the LCR not only for financial gains but also for safeguarding of its sovereignty and advancement of fair national development.

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