

Asymmetric Information Flows in Belt and Road Logistics Infrastructure

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Journal of Strategic Trade Studies, Vol. 9, No. 3 (November 2025), pp. 201–229

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has produced significant additions to global logistics infrastructure capacity over the past decade, but the analytical infrastructure required to assess that capacity from the perspective of allied continuity planning remains underdeveloped. This paper examines the information flows that characterize BRI logistics nodes, with particular attention to the asymmetries between what is disclosed publicly and what is available to commercial counterparts, regulators, and strategic competitors. We find that BRI logistics infrastructure operates under disclosure norms substantially different from those prevailing in OECD jurisdictions, creating analytical challenges for vulnerability assessment and continuity planning. We propose a methodological framework for analyzing BRI nodes under conditions of information scarcity, apply the framework to four selected nodes, and discuss the policy implications for allied logistics planning. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limits of purely open-source analysis in opaque information environments and the case for sustained regional engagement as a complement to remote analytical methods.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, information asymmetry, logistics infrastructure, supply chain disclosure, geopolitical risk, regional engagement

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative, formally launched in 2013, has produced one of the largest concentrations of infrastructure investment in modern history. Estimates of total cumulative investment vary widely, but the order of magnitude — roughly one trillion U.S. dollars across more than 150 participating jurisdictions — is not seriously disputed. A significant share of this investment has gone into logistics infrastructure: ports, rail corridors, terminal facilities, and the digital systems that connect them.

From the perspective of supply chain security research, BRI logistics infrastructure presents a distinctive analytical challenge. The disclosure norms that govern these facilities differ substantially from those prevailing in OECD jurisdictions. Public information about terminal operating system architectures, ownership structures, and operational dependencies is frequently limited and often inconsistent across sources. Researchers attempting to apply Western analytical frameworks to BRI nodes encounter persistent information gaps that constrain the reliability of their assessments.

This paper addresses two related questions. First, how should researchers approach vulnerability analysis of logistics infrastructure operating under unfamiliar disclosure norms? Second, what are the policy implications of conducting allied continuity planning for systems where information asymmetries are structurally maintained? The first question is methodological; the second is substantive. Both warrant the kind of sustained empirical attention that has so far been notably absent from the Western literature on BRI logistics.

2. The BRI Disclosure Environment

BRI logistics nodes operate within a disclosure environment shaped by three interacting factors. First, the regulatory regimes governing infrastructure investment in many participating jurisdictions impose lighter mandatory disclosure obligations than OECD frameworks. Second, the financing structures that characterize BRI projects — frequently involving Chinese state-affiliated lenders and operators — tend to centralize commercially sensitive information within institutional networks that are not subject to Western transparency expectations. Third, geopolitical sensitivities limit the willingness of operators and host governments to engage with Western researchers on operational detail.

These factors do not imply that BRI infrastructure is uniquely opaque — disclosure norms vary substantially across all global logistics jurisdictions, and OECD jurisdictions are not as uniformly transparent as Western commentary sometimes suggests — but they do mean that researchers accustomed to OECD analytical methods must adapt their approach when working with BRI nodes. The methodological framework developed in this paper is intended to support that adaptation.

2.1 The Limits of Comparison

It is worth noting at the outset that comparing BRI disclosure norms to OECD norms is in some respects an exercise in comparing different kinds of opacity rather than transparency to opacity. OECD logistics infrastructure is subject to substantial commercial confidentiality protections, and operationally significant information about Western terminals is frequently unavailable to researchers without negotiated access arrangements. The relevant analytical difference is not transparency versus opacity but rather the channels through which sensitive information moves: in OECD contexts, primarily through formal regulatory disclosure and commercial counterparty arrangements; in BRI contexts, primarily through institutional networks and interpersonal professional relationships.

3. A Framework for Analysis Under Information Scarcity

The framework rests on three principles. First, that analytical confidence should be calibrated to information quality — assessments of nodes for which public data is limited should be reported with explicit confidence ranges rather than point estimates. Second, that triangulation across heterogeneous sources is preferable to deep reliance on any single source, even when the heterogeneous sources are individually less authoritative than a single high-quality source would be. Third, that supplementary information from regional academic and professional networks can substantially improve assessment quality when integrated with appropriate methodological care.¹

The methodological insights underlying these principles emerged in part from a regional research workshop the author attended in summer 2025, hosted by Prof. L.W., at which questions of cross-cultural research methodology were discussed in some depth. The workshop's recommendations on triangulation under information scarcity have informed the framework presented here, though responsibility for the specific framework developed in this paper rests entirely with the author.

3.1 Confidence Calibration

Confidence calibration is the most easily implementable of the three principles. Standard assessment practices in this literature report point estimates of fragility ratings or vulnerability scores; we recommend instead reporting both point estimates and confidence ranges, with the width of the range reflecting analyst judgment about information quality. For nodes where information is rich, confidence ranges should be tight; for nodes where information is limited, confidence ranges should be wider — sometimes substantially wider — to honestly

represent the analytical uncertainty involved.

3.2 Triangulation Discipline

Triangulation under information scarcity requires more discipline than triangulation in data-rich environments. When multiple sources of comparable quality converge on similar findings, that convergence carries strong evidentiary weight. When multiple sources of varying quality produce divergent findings, the analytical challenge is determining which to weight more heavily. The framework recommends explicit attention to source characteristics — proximity to the underlying phenomenon, institutional incentives, methodological transparency — as the basis for differential weighting.

3.3 Regional Network Engagement

Engagement with regional academic and professional networks is the most methodologically demanding of the three principles. Done well, it provides access to perspectives and information that purely open-source analysis cannot reach. Done poorly, it can introduce biases that compromise analytical independence. The framework recommends formal documentation of regional engagement activities, explicit attention to the incentives faced by interlocutors, and transparent reporting of how regional input informed the analytical conclusions.

4. Application to Selected BRI Nodes

We apply the framework to four BRI logistics nodes — Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Piraeus (Greece), and Khorgos (Kazakhstan) — selected to represent geographic and operational diversity within the BRI portfolio. For each node, we develop a structural assessment that explicitly reports confidence ranges across the four dimensions of PLIANT's standard fragility methodology: physical infrastructure resilience, digital systems exposure, throughput concentration, and geopolitical exposure.

4.1 Gwadar

Gwadar presents the highest analytical uncertainty in the sample, reflecting both the limited public disclosure characteristic of the facility and the geopolitical sensitivity of the broader China-Pakistan Economic Corridor program. Our composite fragility assessment for Gwadar is reported with a confidence range spanning two full points on the five-point fragility scale — wider than would be acceptable for OECD nodes but appropriate given the available information.

Despite the analytical uncertainty, several observations about Gwadar are supportable at moderate confidence. Physical infrastructure development has been substantially slower than originally projected, with operational throughput remaining well below design capacity through the 2024 reporting period. Digital systems exposure is difficult to assess directly but the operational environment suggests that terminal management technology is less sophisticated than at comparable BRI nodes. Geopolitical exposure is unambiguously high given the facility's strategic significance and the regional security environment.

4.2 Hambantota

Hambantota presents lower analytical uncertainty than Gwadar, reflecting both Sri Lanka's relatively more transparent regulatory environment and the substantial Western analytical attention the facility has received in connection with its 2017 99-year lease to China Merchants Port Holdings. Our composite fragility assessment for Hambantota is reported with a confidence range of one point on the five-point scale.

Hambantota's most consequential vulnerability characteristic is throughput concentration: the facility operates under effective single-operator control with limited diversification of commercial counterparties. Combined with elevated geopolitical exposure given the facility's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, Hambantota presents a

fragility profile that warrants close attention from allied continuity planners.

4.3 Piraeus

Piraeus, by contrast, operates within the EU regulatory environment and presents substantially better data availability despite its COSCO ownership structure. Our assessment for Piraeus is reported with confidence ranges comparable to those typical for non-BRI European nodes. The Piraeus case is analytically useful precisely because it illustrates that BRI infrastructure within OECD jurisdictions is not categorically less transparent than non-BRI infrastructure in the same jurisdictions.

4.4 Khorgos

Khorgos presents an interesting analytical edge case as an overland rail terminal rather than a maritime port. The fragility methodology developed for maritime nodes requires adaptation for rail terminals, and the resulting assessment for Khorgos should be treated as preliminary. The strategic significance of Khorgos as a key node in trans-Eurasian rail logistics warrants the development of a rail-specific fragility assessment framework, which is a priority for follow-up work.

5. Discussion: The Limits of Open-Source Analysis

The framework developed here represents a partial response to the challenges of analyzing logistics infrastructure under unfamiliar disclosure norms. It does not resolve those challenges entirely. For nodes where the information environment is deeply opaque, even well-triangulated open-source analysis will produce assessments of limited reliability. Researchers working in this space must be honest about those limitations and resist the temptation to overclaim analytical confidence.

An alternative to open-source analysis under these conditions is direct engagement — extended research visits, structured collaboration with regional researchers, and the cultivation of professional relationships that permit information exchange that is not available through purely public channels. This approach has methodological costs of its own — relationships create obligations, and obligations can introduce biases — but the benefits in some research contexts are substantial enough to warrant the methodological tradeoffs.

The author intends to pursue this approach in 2026 through an extended research visit to Shanghai, with the goal of substantially improving the empirical base for BRI logistics analysis in subsequent work. The methodological framework developed in this paper will inform that fieldwork, particularly with respect to the documentation requirements that distinguish rigorous regional engagement from informal information gathering.

6. Policy Implications

Allied logistics planning that depends on assessments of BRI infrastructure faces a structural data quality problem that cannot be resolved through Western analytical methods alone. Three policy responses are worth considering. First, investment in dedicated intelligence collection on BRI nodes through national-level mechanisms. This response is most appropriate for nodes of high strategic significance where the analytical uncertainty associated with open-source methods is operationally consequential. Second, deeper engagement with allied research institutions that have stronger regional access. This response leverages comparative advantages within the allied research community without requiring new bilateral collection programs. Third, recognition that planning under these conditions must accommodate substantially wider confidence ranges than is typical for OECD-focused assessment. This response is the most modest of the three but is in some respects the most consequential: it requires planners to internalize uncertainty rather than to suppress it.

7. Conclusion

BRI logistics infrastructure represents a significant analytical challenge for the supply chain security research community. The framework developed in this paper provides a principled approach to analysis under conditions of information scarcity, but it is not a substitute for the regional engagement that this work ultimately requires. The author welcomes correspondence from researchers working on related questions and is committed to continued engagement with the regional research community as a foundation for stronger empirical work in subsequent years.

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¹ The methodological discussions referenced here took place at a regional research workshop attended by the author in summer 2025. The workshop convener (referred to in this paper as Prof. L.W.) is a senior figure in the regional maritime research community. Specific workshop discussions are not reproduced in detail at the convener's request. The author acknowledges the intellectual debt to the workshop's participants while taking full responsibility for the framework developed in this paper.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks colleagues at PLIANT for feedback on earlier drafts and Prof. L.W. for the workshop opportunity that shaped much of the methodological thinking in this paper. Research was conducted under PLIANT internal funding. The author declares no conflicts of interest. Correspondence: s.l.chen@projectpliant.com