

China's Belt and Road Initiative

China's Belt and Road Initiative seeks to revive the ancient trade routes that spanned from the Pacific Ocean to the heart of Europe, with epic investment and infrastructure proposals, in an effort to revitalize its own economy and help emerging economies blossom. The United States' course of action could determine the success or failure of such a venture. It is in the United States' best interest to be an active member, so it can benefit from the economic opportunities and oversee China's process along the way.

The earliest caravans traveling between China and Iran date back to as early as 106 BC. A network of multiple trade routes gradually emerged over centuries, connecting regions like China, central Asia and the Mediterranean. A spice route travelling on water was also developed. Goods, ideas, technology and even diseases travelled back and forth along these tracks. This cultural and commercial interaction allowed for the exchange of traditions, innovations, ideologies, religions and languages, connecting the East and the West for ages.

Reminiscent of the Silk Road's historical greatness and Admiral Zheng He's expeditions to the Red Sea and the east coast of Africa, with these two projects Xi laid out the grand scale initiative One Belt, One Road, later renamed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Economy 190).

In 2013, China announced its plan to once again connect the economies throughout Eurasia and East Africa; this time, with a series of infrastructure investments known as the Belt and Road Initiative. Just like the ancient Silk Road and Spice Route, there are two parts: the land corridors are referred to as the belt, and the marine parts which include the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, and the South China Sea are the road. The endeavor harkens back to Zheng He's

expeditions to the Red Sea and the east coast of Africa. With these two projects Xi laid out the grand scale initiative One Belt, One Road later renamed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Economy 190).

The massive endeavor is made up of many courses. One links Siberia, Mongolia, and China by rail. Another connects Xinjiang to Gwadar in Pakistan. In the south, the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor will develop a high speed rail and water ports for millions of Southeast Asia's residents. Two major rail projects will connect Sichuan and Henan provinces to the Netherlands, Poland, and Germany, through Central Asia and one more land bridge will link Europe to China, going through Russia. In Africa, Djibouti, Mozambique, Kenya, and Tanzania will connect through ports. One former Chinese official characterized the BRI as "the most significant" and far-reaching initiative that China has ever put forward (Economy 193).

Elizabeth Economy explains that Chinese officials initially described the BRI as an infrastructure project to connect China to other parts of the world. Gal Luft declares the stated purpose of the BRI is to help the developing Asian countries grow, since they could not otherwise afford to build the infrastructure on their own. Dr. Wu Xinbo also made a point during the Camden Conference that China's foreign policy has changed, and it now seeks to build relationships with its neighbors (having more than any other country) and that more attention and resources should be going to Asian countries, in an effort to make the "neighborhood" more prosperous and secure.

China's unspoken objective is to save the country from its economic decline (Luft 69); as China's economy slows down, and overproduction becomes problematic, the BRI will help by

creating new markets in the surrounding countries. Many countries have welcomed the Chinese initiative and its promise of significant trade and investment opportunities (Economy 194).

Pakistan its biggest supporter, however, India is a major opponent of the initiative and countries like Nepal and the Maldives face economic choices that might have political implications (Small 3).

The projects will include gas and oil pipelines, railways and highways, deep water ports, airports and fiber optic networks. By 2017, the BRI had invited participation from all the countries in the world (Economy 191). So far, state-owned Chinese construction and engineering firms have taken on the projects generated by the Belt and Road Initiative (Luft 70). Funding for the BRI will partially be provided by the Silk Road fund, the New Development Bank, and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, or AIIB (which was futilely opposed by the U.S.) which will be lending almost \$200 billion to future infrastructure projects.

Knowing that the success of the BRI rests largely on Middle Eastern stability, China has taken steps to ensure peace, an about-face approach from its previous lack of involvement in the region. President Xi Jinping has met with leaders in Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia; tried to mediate between factions in the civil war in Syria; supported the resolution to defeat the Houthi rebels in Yemen and passed legislation authorizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to aid counter terrorism work in other countries (Luft 73).

The massive undertaking will spark four trillion dollars in investment, bringing together nations that account for more than two-thirds of the world's energy reserves, and will affect 60% of the world's population; thus far, however, the United States has chosen to undermine the

initiative, by calling it a publicity stunt or Xi's vanity project, or has ignored it entirely, figuring it will never pan out (Luft 70).

The U.S. Congress has not held a single hearing concerning the BRI, nor has the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. At the highest level annual summit held between the two countries, the U.S. and Chinese officials detailed more than 100 areas of potential cooperation without mentioning the Belt and Road Initiative once (Luft 71); Elizabeth Economy and Gal Luft both agree this is the wrong course. Washington needs to be involved, so that it may have a say in the aspects which can benefit the U.S. and speak up against those that do not. The U.S. must realize it need not choose between involvement in Asia and its position as world leader. By voluntarily choosing to be an active participant, it can do both.

Disengagement would lead to American investors losing their opportunity to profit from what may be the largest economic market in the future. It would dampen a much needed boost to European and Asian economies. It may also antagonize some American allies who are in favor of the initiative.

Apparently it was the U.S. who caused China's interest in the BRI by excluding China from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, crushing its hopes for new markets. China had to look towards the West. The U.S. opposed a larger voting share for China in the International Monetary Fund, leading to the creation of the AIIB. Being the largest holder of U.S. debt, China decided to invest in its own infrastructure instead, after the U.S. economic crash of 2008.

Washington ought to recognize Beijing's initiative and the potential for good it encompasses. It must also ensure China's practices are fair and transparent and benefit the international participants, instead of only China. The two countries should talk about common

goals and the role the U.S. should play in the BRI. Luft offers the idea that the United States' military and defense contractors could be in charge of security, especially in the more dangerous zones, where they may already have an established military presence.

U.S. involvement would help ease the fears of India and Southeast Asian countries, portraying the initiative as an entity for economic development; and it would encourage the warier countries in Europe along with Japan and South Korea to fund infrastructure projects. The more funding the projects receive, the better the economic outcome will be for the global community. If the U.S. is involved, it could also make certain that appropriate labor and environmental standards are enforced.

American engagement would lead the way for co-investments by U.S., European and Japanese led institutions like the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, as well as drawing private investors (Luft 73).

Working together, the U.S. and China can achieve much more than if they work against each other. The U.S. must not, however, give free rein to China, trusting it to police itself. The results could be disastrous. China might try to advance its own interests, laying claims in the South China Sea and disrupting the status quo in the Middle East.

Russia and India are concerned about China's motives, and if the U.S. were to give it carte blanche to pursue its interests, Moscow and New Delhi could lash out in response. In both cases Washington needs to tread carefully to avoid creating the appearance of unwanted collaboration between China and the United States (Luft 74). Special attention will need to be given to Middle Eastern affairs, so as not to disrupt the delicate balance between the players in that region. Economic investments will need to benefit the Gulf States as well as Iran.

Beijing might try to build dual-use infrastructure that would further militarize the region and intimidate its rivals (75). The U.S. could not allow this situation to take place, as it must not compromise its Pacific alliances under any circumstances. Even though the U.S. being an active player and overseer would curtail some of China's ambitions, it would still find benefit from American cooperation.

The BRI has become the guiding force behind China's foreign policy in the foreseeable future. It is in China's best interest to seek initiatives that will benefit the U.S. and Beijing and to postpone self-serving projects for the future (Luft 73).

The BRI represents an important shift in the self-identity of China from East Asian country to a central country of Asia that includes North, South and West Asia. It also lets the Chinese economy open up outwardly but not inwardly. It is considered China's pivot to the West (Economy 194).

Some Chinese scholars argue that the Belt and Road Initiative may not be the best strategy for the country. The original Silk Road was started by merchants and traders, formed from the bottom up. The BRI is an effort launched by the Chinese leadership, from the top down. Some question whether these infrastructure investments will in fact make money, as these types of projects tend to be high risk and low returns. The projects within China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) further being jeopardized by security concerns and infighting within Pakistan. (Economy 196). China announced the Belt and Road Initiative would include CPEC, an investment with great economic potential. India has vehemently objected, given that the route crosses through disputed territory (Small 3).

Countries involved in the BRI will become closely linked to China economically, politically and maybe even regarding security. This raises concerns with Beijing's intentions and practices, like corruption and infrastructure scandals and a lack of transparency. Some complaints include: privileges for Chinese companies, Chinese workers taking all the jobs, and terms for loan repayment (Economy 194). As evidenced in Sri Lanka, who took on Chinese contracts and later wanted out of the deal, but the new president, Maithripala Sirisena, found that the terms were inflexible and had left the country with crippling debt. China was willing to negotiate a 99 year lease on Hambantota port (Small 2).

There's additional concern due to China's lack of sensitivity when dealing with issues in other countries, involving culture, ethnicity or the environment; Beijing's authoritarian approach may also impede effective cooperation with democratic countries (Economy 195). All this has contributed to an increase in anti-Chinese sentiment.

Xi isn't likely to give up his ambitions because of a few objections. His anti-corruption campaign, and removal of opponents, gives evidence of a leader willing to suppress those who do not conform. However, Beijing has recently undertaken a course correction, adjusting not BRI's objectives but its tactics (Rolland 2).

It would be advisable for the United States to also champion its own infrastructure initiatives in the region. As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had proposed with roads and pipelines connecting Pakistan, India, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan.

The world's bipolarity will not have countries choosing sides, supporting Washington as opposed to Beijing or vice versa. As Yan Xuetong explains it: rather than form clearly defined

military-economic blocs, most states will adopt a two-track foreign policy, siding with the United States on some issues and China on others (Xuetong 2018).

Being the top world powers, the U.S. and China have a responsibility to cooperate with each other and work for the greater good of the international community since global interconnectedness is our current reality; together, China and the United States are responsible for half of the world's economic growth; the BRI is too vast and expensive to rest on one country's shoulders (Luft 75). It will be quite difficult for the U.S. to put aside its pride and engage in a constructive way with China as equals. The future of the international order and the tone for subsequent U.S.-China relations is at stake.

Rolland declares: "Belt and Road reflects Beijing's vision of its role as a great power atop a China-centric regional order—one free of the liberal rules, norms, and values that Beijing rejects as relics of an unfair and obsolete order led by the West (4)." The project will take decades to come to fruition, so the U.S must keep the long-term goals in mind. The U.S. must be an active player on the world stage, planning a judicious engagement with BRI projects it wishes to support to benefit the nation as well as bring millions of people in the developing world out of poverty and learning to share the role of leadership with China.

The United States is a global leader. Its involvement with China's Belt and Road Initiative would prove beneficial to American citizens and inhabitants of other countries, since it would safeguard fairness and environmental stewardship and provide a counterweight to China.

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