

# STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*The Belt and Road Initiative is a revival of the centuries-old Silk Road, which has been in use for over two thousand years. China has designed BRI as a new strategic framework for its foreign policy and economic ambitions, concentrating directly on the neighboring countries along its southern and western borders. China aims to foster cooperation at the regional levels through BRI by leveraging the enormous financial and economic potentialities of China. The primary objective of China with respect to the BRI is to "divert Beijing's strategic attention and resources toward engagement with countries on China's western flank, including Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia, and beyond," while avoiding direct and high-intensity conflict with other major Asia-Pacific powers. BRI addresses China's long-standing post-Cold War Aussenpolitik anxieties, primarily, mitigating the potentially negative geopolitical implications of hegemony by the US and establishing a credible deterrence concerning global political order led by the US, as well as to present Beijing as a substitute leader in world' economic affairs. With the execution of BRI to the extent that it fosters peace and harmony, a multi-polar world will emerge and that it is associated to nurture mutual relationships based on win-win cooperation and reciprocal benefits.*

**Keywords:** Silk Road Economic Belt, Maritime Silk Road, Infrastructural Connectivity, Commercial Growth, Geopolitics, Soft Power.

## INTRODUCTION

The idea of Asia and European connectivity by land is not novel (Manoj, 2018). China views itself geographically and geopolitically as the "Middle Kingdom" and a centre of the global trade for centuries ago since Marco Polo's times (FRANK, 2019). Zhang Qian, China's imperial ambassador, initiated the ancient Silk Road about 2000 years ago, which has since served as a trade route to the Arab and Central Asian nations (Sarker, Hossin, Hua, Anusara, Warunyu, Chanthamith, Sarkar, Kumar & Shah, 2018). Primarily known as the One Belt One Road (OBOR), (Hussain & Hussain, 2017) which is now called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a revival of the centuries-old Silk Road, which has been in use for over two thousand years (Sarker, Hossin, Anusara, Chanthamith & Kumar, 2018). Officially termed as BRI (Michael, 2018) is a maritime component of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) (Manoj, 2018).

The BRI is a "changyi" which is translated as an 'initiative' or a 'proposal' and literally it is not a 'project', 'plan' or a 'strategy' as mostly interpreted by media and

academic sources (Xie, 2015). The official Chinese media avoids using the term ‘initiative’ whereas academics and non-official sources both from within and outside China prefers to use ‘strategy’ or ‘plan’. It was presented for the first time in September 2013 (Shichor, 2018), while addressing on September 7, at Nazarbayev University in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan (Michael, 2018), Xi Jinping announced China's proposal to jointly build an “economic belt” along the Silk Road with Central Asian partners to “intensify cooperation and expand development in the Euro-Asian region” (Hussain, Ahmad, Rafiq, Rubab & Hussain, 2021).

Initially, the BRI was thought to be an ambiguous concept, reflecting a political desire for strengthening China’s collaboration with neighboring states rather than a well-defined set of methodologies and aims, on accounts of which, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) as well as the MSR had been declared individually in Indonesia and Kazakhstan for first (Zhang, 2018). China's determination to advance the BRI was demonstrated at the platform of (BRF) “Belt and Road Forum” in a mega show, organized in Beijing for International Cooperation from May 14-16, 2017, which was participated by 29 heads of states, officials from more than 130 countries and representatives of about 70 world organizations (Manoj, 2018). China has designed BRI as a new strategic framework for its foreign policy and economic ambitions, concentrating directly on the neighboring countries along its southern and western borders, as well as China also desire to expand it to the Persian Gulf, Europe and Africa (FRANK, 2019). The BRI seek out to compress a big area encompassing the Indian Ocean region and the Eurasian belt through roads, tracks of high-speed railway, oil and gas pipelines, and oceanic links. It is estimated that Eurasia accounts for 70% of inhabitants of the world, 75% of the resources of world’s energy needs, and 70% world’s total GDP (Manoj, 2018).

Some of the experts of foreign policy view BRI mainly through the spectrum of geopolitics, interpreting it as an attempt by China to gain political leverage over its neighbors (Cai, 2017). It will be seen from side to side with the prism of activities of Beijing in Central Asia by Russians, whereas India views BRI using the colored lens of China’s investment in (CPEC) “China-Pak Economic Corridor” (Manoj, 2018). Chinese officials and analysts have argued that BRI may be used in the broader strategic perspectives, as a geostrategic tool to counterbalance the US ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy by Obama administration (Cai, 2017).

BRI aspires to link the Chinese dream (zhongguomeng) organically to its global dream (Manoj, 2018) and that it is often misinterpreted as a geopolitical rather than an economic approach (Cai, 2017). BRI is Xi's most ambitious theoretical "master narrative" of "great national rejuvenation" (zhongguomeng) translated into diplomatic (Callahan, 2015) and economic policies (Cai, 2017). China's BRI has the potential to catalyze a global liberation movement by assisting African and Asian nations in attaining growth and development and, as a consequence to gain economic independence (Shichor, 2018). Xi views China's enormous economic resources as a critical tool in his efforts to maintain regional peace and promote China's leadership in the region (Cai, 2017).

The spirit of the historic Silk Road motivates contemporary political leadership of China to establish the BRI for promotion of the worldwide commercial growth, regional and economic integration, and global governance through a better understanding of complex international politics (Cheong, 2017). Its objective is to provide general coherence and direction for a diverse range of previously established and continuing Chinese state-owned commercial investments in the targeted areas of the South, Central, and Southeast Asia, East Africa, as well as the Middle Eastern, and the region of Indian Ocean (Manoj, 2018). Beijing's ambitious BRI is motivated by a convergence of Innenpolitik (literally, internal politics' primacy) and Aussenpolitik (external politics' primacy) goals, together with an aspiration for counterbalancing apparent supremacy of the US, and portray Beijing as a possible alternative leader of the world (Michael, 2018).

Beijing wants to utilize Central Asia to connect the underdeveloped hinterland of the nation to Europe, which route is dubbed as SREB (Cai, 2017). BRI is well-thought-out to be a strategy for attaining not only prosperity and security at home, but also China's rise to the "center of the world stage" (Michael, 2018). As China's economy modernizes, one of BRI's main objectives is to address the country's increasing regional inequalities (Cai, 2017). China desires for becoming a bridge as well as a hub for connecting a broader area comprising Japan, ASEAN, India and Russia (Wang, 2015). The successful execution of BRI will have the potential to assist in the growth of economies ranging from China through Central Asia, Europe, and Africa (Sarker, Hossin, Anusara, Chanthamith & Kumar, 2018). The modernization of BRI does not lie in its infrequent influence in the direction (from East to west), but it will also be accomplished using Chinese rather than Western techniques (Shichor, 2018). With the execution of BRI to the extent that it fosters peace and harmony, a multi-polar world will emerge (Sarker, Hossin, Anusara, Chanthamith & Kumar, 2018). The BRI's official mission statement enunciates that it is associated to nurture mutual relationships based on win-win cooperation and reciprocal benefits (Manoj, 2018).

### **XI'S Strategic Vision of the Belt and Road Initiative**

China's ambitious plan of BRI aims to revive ancient land and marine trading routes (Xue, 2020). The BRI's political, economic, and military roots stretch back decades before its formal announcement (Manoj, 2018), which is motivated by the CCP's aim to sustain economic development. BRI is not only President Xi's signature foreign policy initiative, but also the CCP's as a whole (Michael, 2018). It was included in the Party leadership's overall reform plan and approved as a strategic policy objective for the period before 2020 (Mark, 2018). The CCP revised its constitution in 2007, to mark the aim of transforming China into a "moderately prosperous society" by 2021, the year of the party's centenary celebrations (Rolland, 2017). According to tradition, each new leadership of China's Communist Party presents a roadmap of global strategy concerning the global and domestic challenges (Zhang, 2018). The prime objective of China's leadership is to induce asymmetric commercial dependency of other states on China (Mark, 2018).

President Xi much-admired BRI as a "century-defining initiative" that will "benefit people worldwide" as he addressed an assembly of foreign leaders and dignitaries (Michael, 2018). While the BRI was suggested in 2013, significant policy debate ensued in 2014, the top-level design was emphasized in 2015, and the launch of key projects in 2016 demonstrated widespread international contracts (Zhang, 2018). In mid-2017, BRI had to be designated a century's project (Saleh, 2019). Representatives from different countries and international organizations from across the world in May 2017 joined BRF in Beijing, during which China unveiled world's largest project of the history. Several nations have expressed reservations about China's motives behind BRI (FRANK, 2019). The second component of Xi's plan is to build a 21st Century MSR, which would connect China's southern provinces to the rapidly expanding Southeast Asian region through ports and railways (Cai, 2017). Xi Jinping has been speaking about the prospects for revitalizing the renowned 'ancient Silk Route' and other historic trading paths which had to be once a symbol of Beijing's age-old commercial significance in the regional framework of Asia (Mark, 2018).

China's President Xi Jinping suggested a novel vision regarding regional security for Asia, based on the idea of "an Asia for Asians" (Xue, 2020). Xi initiated BRI at a time when China's foreign policy has turned out to be more assertive (Johnson, 2016). President Xi wasted no time in promoting China as the world's new champion of free trade (Cai, 2017). Xi Jinping has inscribed his imprints on China's interaction to the world in international affairs (Mark, 2018). BRI is a massive network of economic and commercial links between China

and other regions of the world which have become a hallmark of the Xi administration's flagship foreign policy (Chaziza, 2021).

BRI exemplifies the Chinese leadership's fervent ambition to initiate a fresh cycle of modifications to integrate China completely into global economy, and to bolster China's predominant part in political and commercial affairs of the world (Zhang, 2018). The BRI has been driven by geopolitical aims of Beijing for breaking the alleged "encirclement" of the U.S in the region of Asia-Pacific and to contain the rise of Indian influence (Michael, 2017). China will be able to challenge hegemony of the U.S and reclaim its own strategic space in the regional domains on accounts of enhancement of its influence over neighbors (Tang, 2013). With the evolving grand strategy of China, the BRI will arguably reach its full potential as a means of achieving internal security and commercial growth while mitigating the danger of the U.S retribution (Michael, 2017).

The BRI's strategic objective is to establish safe maritime routes connecting China's coast to the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, as well as alternative supply routes overland, to ensure diversification of oil and gas supplies, as well as commercial trading, and admittance to global economic markets in the event of disruption of maritime supplies (FRANK, 2019). Beijing is worried regarding susceptibilities of the Strategic Lines of Communications (SLOC's) transient through the Strait of Malacca (Hussain & Hussain, 2017), the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean Region (Hussain, 2020). BRI's long-term security implications lie in its capacity to facilitate enhanced security collaboration amid BRI-covered states and Beijing, thus with the development of new mechanisms of security independent to the U.S preponderance (Zhang, 2018). While the PLA Navy's first mission was protection of China's ships from attacks of pirates in the Gulf of Aden and offshore waters of Somalia, it has taken advantage for utilization of opportunity to strengthen the status of its maritime influence. China has built first of its overseas military post in Djibouti, which will assist aircrafts and warships, during activities of security missions for the establishment of peace and stability in Africa (FRANK, 2019). The BRI is often misinterpreted by Western countries as a hidden geopolitical strategy by China to ultimately dominate and rule the world (Zhang, 2018).

China's political leadership is using the prospects for projects of infrastructural networks to expand bilateral collaboration and bolster influence of Beijing in BRI countries (Rolland, 2017). China aims to foster cooperation at the regional levels through BRI by leveraging the enormous financial and economic potentialities of China (FRANK, 2019). China's BRI has potential for enhancement of Beijing's sphere of influence to its continental boundaries of Eurasia (Michael, 2018). The structure of China's domestic institutions have changed to the extent that it had to be integrated into worldwide entrepreneur market of economy, which was dominated by the United States, it established after WWII (Breslin, 2007). China is trying for establishing a geostrategic equilibrium of power alongside the continental borders of Eurasia through BRI to offset the US continued dominance in nautical zone of the Indo-Pacific (Michael, 2018).

The BRI stands for most of the defensive ambitions, which is responding directly to the Obama administration's 2011 "strategic rebalance" policy in the region of Asia Pacific (Xue, 2020). The aggressiveness of China is motivated by estimation concerning prevailing order which depicts and establishes a kind of US supremacy that is contrary to the interests of China and is designed for containment of the influence of China in the international sphere (Zhao, 2013). As a consequence, the BRI is "central to Beijing's indirect approach for acquisition of regional preponderance in the face of increasing competition from the United States" (Michael, 2018). China's ascent necessitates a reconsideration of its authority and supremacy in the present-day political system of the world (Mark, 2018). The BRI is a response for resolving the geopolitical difficulties created by China's "hybrid" strategic orientation, and a retort to prospects regarding contests exacerbated by the US "pivot" or

"rebalance" stratagem towards zone of the Asia-Pacific since the year 2011 (Xue, 2020). Additionally, the BRI addresses China's long-standing post-Cold War Aussenpolitik anxieties, primarily, mitigating the potentially negative geopolitical implications of hegemony by the US and establishing a credible deterrence concerning global political order led by the US, as well as to present Beijing as a substitute leader in world' economic affairs (Michael, 2018).

China's elites are growing in confidence in their abilities and their right to greater involvement in the system of global governance (Zhao, 2013). Additionally, Chinese companies have stated their intention to invest US\$102 billion in the development or acquisition of infrastructure for transmission of power in 84 countries through BRI across the world (FRANK, 2019). China has gained significance in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI) and has established connections with countries ranging from Latin America to Africa, and traditionally Chinese-dominated region of Asia (Das, 2009). China's belief regarding BRI that it is established based on the principle of "development, mutual collaboration, and peace as a win-win relationship" is a "soft power" ideational policy in the regional domains. By and large, it is estimated that the rise of China and expansion of BRI will be beneficial to regional and global security, rather than detrimental (Michael, 2018). The BRI is an outgrowth of Beijing's increasing desire to complement its rising economic and geopolitical dominance with a "soft power" (Hussain, Ahmad, Rafiq, Rubab, & Hussain, 2021) narrative portraying China as a viable alternative to the United States' global hegemony (Michael, 2017).

### **Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative**

China's BRI has been seen as a means of expanding its influence throughout East and Southeast Asia (Colin & Cuiping, 2018). The BRI's ultimate goal is to promote mutual development based on the principles of free choice participation and fair consultation, rather than through a state-centered approach seeking power or control (Zhang, 2018). Beijing has not only been trying for adjoining the mechanism of globalization as well as to establish novel principles for globalized world through BRI (Saleh, 2019). BRI is principally considered essential in China's strategic circles for establishing as a "window of strategic opportunity" for the diplomatic progress of country (Zhang, 2018).

The BRI will push many countries in the Indo-Pacific maritime zone to improve their relations with the US to oppose China (Michael, 2018). China's economic routes, mainly those which traverse the Strait of Malacca, remain susceptible to supremacy of the US naval power, and as a consequence, CPEC and BCIM corridors are portions of BRI, which being elements of Beijing's policy for "self-extrication" by "Malaccan Dilemma" (Shaofeng, 2010). China has succeeded in connecting its continental and maritime interests through Gwadar and CPEC (Michael, 2018). Beijing's substantial venture for construction of over forty seaports in the thirty-four states, including Piraeus in Greece, Sri Lankan Hambantota, and Gwadar in Pakistan, will result in China for acquisition of control of these ports as host countries' financial dependence on China grows, as well as assisting China in implementing its Indo-Pacific "String of Pearls" strategy (Zhang, 2018). Pakistan and Afghanistan are conjointly viewed as critical connectors amidst the BRI's MSR as well as SREB ventures, as demonstrated by China's commitment for building a CPEC (likely to be extended towards Afghanistan) connecting Kashgar region of China's Xinjiang province and Gwadar being deep-water seaport of Pakistan, as well as its novel interests in the economic corridor of "Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar" (BCIM) (Michael, 2018).

The primary objective of China with respect to the BRI is to "divert Beijing's strategic attention and resources toward engagement with countries on China's western flank, including Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia, and beyond," while avoiding direct and high-

intensity conflict with other major Asia-Pacific powers (Li, 2016). It is due to the China's substantial political and commercial growth, on the basis of which its profile is established to the spans of Eurasia, Africa and the Indian Ocean (Manoj, 2018). Chinese corporations under BRI, particularly those manufacturing end-user industrial products, will have to be exhilarated in addition to be estimated for striving in the more competitive world's commercial markets (Cai, 2017). Xinjiang is critical to BRI because it serves as a fulcrum regarding three "economic corridors" connecting China to the regions of Middle East, South Asia, and CARs (Michael, 2018). China believes that the BRI will help reducing the likelihood of insurgency or terrorism flowing into Xinjiang by providing infrastructure connectivity and economic development to neighboring countries (Rolland, 2017).

The aim of China regarding safety of uninterrupted supplies of energy is usually associated with strategic aims vis-à-vis resource-rich countries of Central Asia and Middle East. BRI led by Beijing in CARs, stresses enhancement of crucial infrastructural webs of gas and oil pipelines, highway roads, trains, and systems of telecommunications associated to Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's long-standing ambitions of diversifying not the routes of oil and gas exports, but also their economic markets (Nargis, 2017). Xinjiang was envisioned as agricultural and the industrial backbone of the Chinese economy, as well as a trade and energy conduit connecting China to resource-rich CARs and the Middle East states (Michael, 2018).

China's funding of foreign financial institutions is consistent with the focus of the BRI vis-à-vis trans-Eurasian infrastructural development and commercial "connectivity" (Beeson & Fujian, 2016). BRI is a giant human endeavor to enhance global connectivity, communication, and collaboration among nations, specifically in light of the US and other major countries' growing unilateralism and protectionism (Zhang, 2018). The security interests of China will be broaden significantly to the global levels as the BRI focuses on enhancement of the trans-Eurasian commercial and infrastructural connectivity (Michael, 2018).

China will soon become the dominant regional force in East and Central Asia, and by the 2030s, it will be a major player in the Indian Ocean (Manoj, 2018). BRI established a comprehensive framework for the country's efforts to institute a connected, integrated Eurasian continent by 2050 (Rolland, 2017). By 2049, China wants to be the political and economic center of a unified Eurasia, and a geopolitical rival of the US (Manoj, 2018). BRI is "central to Beijing's indirect approach for regaining regional supremacy in the face of increasing competition from the US" (Michael, 2018). It is a possible vehicle for regional integration and the reshaping of the global political, economic, and security order (Colin & Cuiping, 2018). China's political and economic transformation is defined by its leadership beginning to express itself internationally in the same way the US has done over the preceding half-century (Ren, 2017).

The BRI implies an increased economic dependence on China (Manoj, 2018). The BRI, which includes economic ties and political collaboration, is an integral component of China's geopolitical agenda (Colin & Cuiping, 2018). China's authorities are experimenting with a range of techniques and projects aimed at accomplishing comparable geo-economic goals, but with distinguishing characteristics of Beijing (Mark, 2018). China is pursuing a trajectory toward economic liberalization which will result in the continuation of socialism with Chinese features (Rolland, 2017). The BRI's primary objective is to enhance connectivity, which includes the construction of pipelines, fiber optic links, roads, railways, and ports (Manoj, 2018). The BRI as a project will reshape local economies and, perhaps, the global geopolitical environment (Colin & Cuiping, 2018).

The BRI's objective as a project for economic incorporation to catalyze the commercial growth is intimately tied to geopolitical consequences (Manoj, 2018). BRI is China's flagship connectivity initiative, to promote international cooperation (Colin &

Cuiping, 2018). If implemented successfully, the BRI will effectively bolster Beijing's position as hub for production networks at regional level, thereby increasing China's overall economic and geopolitical significance (Beeson & Fujian, 2016). It is no exaggeration that if the BRI is successful, it will turn out to be one of the most important geopolitical and economic development of the twenty-first century (Mark , 2018).

It is estimated that BRI remains to be a combination of long-standing projects, new-fangled initiatives, and forthcoming infrastructural development schemes, all layered on top of joint trading agreements boosting Chinese business throughout Europe and the region of Indian Ocean (Manoj, 2018). Infrastructure investments undertaken as part of the BRI are important for economic growth because they "generate substantial market demand" for Beijing's surplus manufactures (Rolland, 2017). Since its start in the late 2013, China's BRI has produced huge tangible outcomes which may have long-term effects for host countries' social and economic growth, as well as for dynamics of the geopolitics in global affairs (Zhang, 2018).

The BRI is a massive endeavor for the Chinese, and a multi-layered strategy meant for transforming China into a true global power by 2049, the PRC's second centenary. China needs continuous economic growth, although at a slower pace than in the past, but enough to lift the country out of the middle-income trap and defeat international competition (Manoj, 2018). The architects of BRI hope that the initiative's expanding network of regional economic ties will eventually assist in resolving any remaining "contradictions" amid China and its neighbors (Rolland, 2017).

BRI is gaining momentum, enhancing China's regional and international influence (Zhang, 2018). The BRI project's significance cannot be emphasized due to its proactive role in promoting economic growth and mutual peace (Lim, 2018). Due to the benign character of the BRI, which includes reciprocal collaboration, connectivity, and interdependence, its advantages will be available to all people worldwide (Sarker, Hossin, Anusara, Chanthamith, & Kumar, 2018). To maintain conducive environment for BRI's ongoing expansion, China must adequately explain both the initiative's details and its place within the country's grand development strategy, as well as the international community's trust and support in joint implementation of BRI, China must continue to strive to align its words and deeds in global forums (Zhang, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

It is imperative to conclude that China's ambitious plan of BRI aims to revive ancient land and marine trading routes. Xi Jinping announced China's proposal to jointly build an "economic belt" along the Silk Road with Central Asian partners to "intensify cooperation and expand development in the Euro-Asian region". BRI is a massive network of economic and commercial links between China and other regions of the world which have become a hallmark of the Xi administration's flagship foreign policy. China has designed BRI as a new strategic framework for its foreign policy and economic ambitions, concentrating directly on the neighboring countries along its southern and western borders, as well as China also desires to expand it to the Persian Gulf, Europe and Africa. The BRI's strategic objective is to establish safe maritime routes connecting China's coast to the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, as well as alternative supply routes overland, to ensure diversification of oil and gas supplies, as well as commercial trading, and admittance to global economic markets in the event of disruption of maritime supplies.

The BRI has been driven by geopolitical aims of Beijing for breaking the alleged "encirclement" of the U.S in the region of Asia-Pacific and to contain the rise of Indian influence. The BRI is "central to Beijing's indirect approach for acquisition of regional preponderance in the face of increasing competition from the United States". With the

evolving grand strategy of China, the BRI will arguably reach its full potential as a means of achieving internal security and commercial growth while mitigating the danger of the U.S. retribution. The BRI is an outgrowth of Beijing's increasing desire to complement its rising economic and geopolitical dominance with a "soft power" narrative portraying China as a viable alternative to the United States' global hegemony. The BRI is a massive endeavor for the Chinese, and a multi-layered strategy meant for transforming China into a true global power by 2049. If implemented successfully, the BRI will effectively bolster Beijing's position as hub for production networks at regional level, thereby increasing China's overall economic and geopolitical significance. It is no exaggeration that if the BRI is successful, it will turn out to be one of the most important geopolitical and economic development of the twenty-first century.

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