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The Many Faces of China’s Belt and Road Initiative

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The emergence of COVID-19 initially loomed as a catastrophe for the leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Although Beijing later tried to change the narrative of the pandemic’s origins, the first major outbreak of the novel coronavirus occurred in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province and the largest city in central China. Early in 2020, the PRC leadership faced a domestic crisis as people in the afflicted region panicked and accusations flew over mismanagement of the outbreak. President Xi Jinping, seemingly worried that his reputation might be affected by association with the disaster, dispatched Prime Minister Li Keqiang to serve as the face of the official response. The time-worn strategy of blaming local leaders was deployed; a range of Wuhan officials was condemned and punished in quick succession. All the while, Beijing stayed above the fray, seeking to absolve itself of responsibility.

As time passed, and as health authorities in Wuhan (and around China) brought the outbreak under control, Beijing switched its approach. The leadership had come to see COVID-19, which by then had become a global pandemic, as an opportunity for China to show a positive face to the world. Having quietly accepted aid from other countries in the early days of the outbreak (privately requesting that European powers refrain from publicizing the assistance they provided), China decided to champion the aid it had begun to distribute around the world.

China’s “medical diplomacy” (sometimes called “mask diplomacy”) focused on sharing expertise and sending doctors and medical

equipment to countries that were struggling to control the virus. This was all wrapped together and labeled a “Health Silk Road.” Beijing was relying on the diplomatic playbook that had come to typify the Xi era. Almost everything China does outside its borders increasingly is incorporated into a Silk Road narrative.

By doing so, Beijing is associating a variety of policies with its overarching vision for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a foreign policy framework that Xi first articulated in 2013, when he spoke of creating a Silk Road Economic Belt across Central Asia. Soon after that, he called for creating a twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road. The two schemes together make up the foundation of the BRI.

This Silk Road talk may appear to be empty rhetoric, but it encapsulates a reality of the BRI that is often overlooked. The BRI is not simply a massive set of infrastructure projects, or a strategy for geopolitical domination. It is an articulation of foreign policy that provides China with a way of offering a positive vision for deep engagement with virtually every aspect of daily life in its partner countries.

The BRI is often portrayed by critics as a form of “debt trap” diplomacy, and even as a key part of a geostrategic plot to conquer the world. But many poorer countries take China’s offerings at face value—as a foreign policy vision that is focused on improving connectivity and trade links with the aim of bringing prosperity for all. As Xi put it in a September 2013 speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan’s capital, Astana (since renamed Nur-Sultan), where he first articulated his plan for a Silk Road Economic Belt:

To forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation, and expand development space in the Eurasian

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region, we should take an innovative approach and jointly build an economic belt along the Silk Road. This will be a great undertaking benefiting the people of all countries along the route. To turn this into a reality, we may start with work in individual areas and link them up over time to cover the whole region.

Xi followed that speech with another a month later in Jakarta, where he unveiled the idea of creating a Maritime Silk Road in partnership with Indonesia and other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This, too, would be focused on developing a range of links, such as upgrading the ASEAN–China Free Trade Area and building greater transportation connectivity with ASEAN members. Xi also used the speech to announce the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a China-led international financial institution that would be focused on giving “priority to ASEAN countries’ needs,” as he put it.

Xi concluded both speeches by focusing on youth and the future, emphasizing his forward-looking vision for the BRI. The Silk Road Economic Belt announced in Astana and the Maritime Silk Road outlined in Jakarta fused together to become the Belt and Road.

This vision is based on the idea that international relations are structured around a web of contacts that penetrate deep into societies, from public policy and infrastructure to cultural fields. The United States may have its Hollywood-branded soft power (which, notwithstanding the damage done by the Trump administration, continues to be influential around the world), but China offers people in other countries a funded web of scholarships, tours, educational institutions, links, and contacts. This creates a range of new connections with Beijing through individual students, teachers, and the institutions that they represent.

By articulating its foreign policy in this way, China is projecting a positive image, extending a range of opportunities—trade deals, infrastructure, scholarships, and more—to potential partner countries, all wrapped in the rubric of striving for joint prosperity. However its motivations or outcomes might be questioned, this is an attractive vision that some countries appreciate, and not just poor developing nations that lack other options. Countries like Italy, Hungary, the Arab

Gulf states, and the more developed nations of North Africa have all sought to participate. Much more than just a set of trade agreements, this is a way for China to create a web of engagement with partner countries, enmeshing Beijing with its host countries across industries and economic sectors, as well as political, educational, and social institutions.

This vision for the Belt and Road has been most clearly manifested in the proliferation of policies and business initiatives that incorporate “Silk Road” in their name. To mention just a few, there is the Digital Silk Road (also known as the Information Silk Road), first mentioned in a Chinese policy white paper in 2015; the Health Silk Road, introduced in a 2016 speech delivered by Xi in Uzbekistan; the Polar Silk Road (also known as the Ice Silk Road), which is to reach across the Arctic and was first highlighted in a 2018 white paper; the Green Silk Road Fund, created by Chinese private investors to promote environmentally positive projects; and the Space Silk Road, a planned international expansion of Beidou, the Chinese satellite navigation system.

The United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party, which seeks to extend the party’s influence both at home and abroad, tries to consistently promote the BRI brand through the multitude of Silk Road labels. For a time, it seemed that every visit to China included an obligatory stop at an institution for a meeting with someone who was working on something Silk Roads–related. The merged Silk Roads/Belt and Road brand even got its own cartoons and theme song.

GRAND DESIGNS

Although such grandiose ambitions may have seemed comical and unrealistic to some, the BRI has given China a single, overarching foreign policy vision reaching into almost every facet of the nation-state in both China and its foreign partners. There is nothing new about that. Powerful nations have long used foreign aid and investment to develop relations with their external counterparts across a range of institutions.

But China has offered its ambitious vision as the core of its foreign policy. Its lofty proclamations about rebuilding the world around a new network of links that would lead to guaranteed opportunity

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and prosperity for all were always going to vastly overpromise and ultimately underdeliver. Yet it has proved to be an effective way for China to reach out to the world. From Beijing's perspective, it is also a way to lay out a path to achieve Xi's ultimate goal, which is to restore China to what he has called its rightful place as the preeminent power on the world stage, at the heart of a new network of global trade and connectivity.

Assessing how this vision has played out in practice is complicated. In some respects, it has amounted to very little. Some countries that signed on to BRI schemes may have had little interest in much beyond the project at hand. Similarly, among the Chinese participants (a heterogeneous mix of state-owned firms, private enterprises, and policy actors), some may have had the narrow goal of trying to associate a pet project with Xi's grand vision. After all, the BRI timeline stretches well into the future, with a target completion date of 2049 (coinciding with the hundredth anniversary of the PRC), an endpoint beyond the likely lifespan of many of the officials now driving the initiative forward.

China's BRI partners may simply be parroting a line they believe Beijing wants to hear, in hopes of securing more investment. It is not uncommon for recipient countries to build institutions or echo perspectives that they think fulfill donors' expectations. When dealing with China, those expectations can include breaking off relations with Taiwan, signing up formally to the BRI, or supporting authoritarian Chinese domestic policies in Xinjiang or Hong Kong.

Yet these mushrooming partnerships also entail big risks for China, as its financial institutions lend heavily to countries that may have given little consideration to paying off their debts or properly managing projects. Nonetheless, forging ahead with BRI projects creates deep relationships between China and host countries—and that is the point. The Belt and Road Initiative is not simply about building infrastructure; it is intended to set the stage for broader cross-societal engagement. China is building links not only with highways, railroads, pipelines, and ports, but also through digital technologies, educational institutions, security services, and political and social networks, creating a latticework of ties that will last well into the future.

Again, in some respects this is not unlike how other leading nations have operated. Rich world powers like the United States, Japan, the European

Union, and the larger individual European nations all regularly engage their foreign partners with a range of diplomatic tools and institutions. But the way China organizes all of its engagement under a single banner suggests a more comprehensive approach of a kind that has not been seen before, making its longer-term consequences harder to gauge.

PROBLEM PROJECTS

Infrastructure projects, the most visible and well-known parts of the BRI, are a good place to start any effort to understand Beijing's vision. Infrastructure gained most of the attention as details emerged following the pair of 2013 speeches in which Xi first unveiled the broad outlines of the plan. As analysts began sketching out what they thought the initiative would actually entail, maps showed road and rail networks and pipelines radiating from China and enveloping the globe. On the ground, this resulted in a proliferation of large infrastructure projects, built by Chinese construction companies and financed with earmarked loans issued by Chinese government-controlled banks. Chinese leaders circled the globe, signing billion-dollar deals left and right.

In fact, the routes were never as comprehensive nor as newly charted as they seemed on the maps. Patchworks of old infrastructure were supplemented with new projects and concepts, then offered to host countries. In some cases, there was back and forth between the host government and Chinese institutions about the nature of a particular project.

In Pakistan, the Ministry of Works and Planning and the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission formed a Joint Cooperation Committee to help select and manage projects to be included in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Repeatedly touted by officials on both sides as the BRI's flagship project, the CPEC carries an enormous price tag of around \$50 billion. In reality, this number is an exaggeration. The investments made in Pakistan to date are far more modest. The larger vision for the CPEC, as with much of the BRI, is intended to materialize over a longer period. The big numbers brandished by the leaders touting the deals are sum totals of old, new, and aspirational projects.

In some cases, ideas that had long been contemplated were simply resurrected and brought under the BRI umbrella. The Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) was first

discussed following an economic summit in Yunnan in 1999. Little came of it until it was revived in the surge of activity surrounding the BRI. Reflecting the fickle nature of this approach, the BCIM-EC was formally excluded from the BRI grouping at one point in an attempt to entice India to participate. India was refusing to engage with the BRI because the CPEC was part of it: the China–Pakistan corridor's route ran through territories claimed by India but occupied by Pakistan, crossing a red line for New Delhi. India never relented, and the whole BCIM-EC enterprise was eventually scuttled in favor of a more limited China–Myanmar Economic Corridor, which was already getting off the ground under the auspices of BRI engagement on China's southern borders.

The fundamental Chinese approach was (and sometimes still is) to extend loans through its state or policy banks to partner countries, which would use the funds to employ Chinese firms to build infrastructure. It was not always clear to what extent the recipient countries were involved in developing these plans, or whether they were already fully developed by the time Beijing presented them. Nor was it always clear whether the projects were needed by recipient countries with any degree of urgency.

Some projects appeared to have been cooked up in Beijing and presented as *faits accomplis* to the host countries, along with funding from a state bank and a Chinese state-owned construction firm ready to do the work. This was an approach more readily apparent in projects involving resource extraction rather than infrastructure construction, but the two are sometimes interlinked. Whatever the case, the net result of the wave of development associated with the BRI was that large pieces of critical national infrastructure were built by Chinese firms with Chinese money. This became the pattern for BRI investments. It also meant that a growing number of countries around the world found themselves owing large debts to China.

This trend changed China's position within host countries on a number of levels. At a practical level, it meant that Chinese operating methods and technical standards were widely adopted, since telecommunications components and other equipment required to complete infrastructure projects were sourced in China. Political elites in host

countries often warmly welcomed Chinese investment because Chinese entities would carefully design projects to ensure that they satisfied local leaders' personal interests or favored key political constituencies. In some cases, this was accomplished through outright corruption; in others, through building unnecessary but politically desirable structures, including prestige projects like stadiums, palaces, and monuments.

At the level of public opinion, the response has been mixed. Complaints are frequently heard, but they are not always well founded. There is a common gripe about Chinese companies bringing in Chinese labor, yet surveys show that this is not always the case. Some Chinese firms only send senior staff to oversee projects, and hire locals for many jobs. Moreover, the resulting infrastructure is not always seen as useless, nor is the debt incurred necessarily unsustainable.

In parts of Tajikistan near the Chinese border that have historically received limited support from Dushanbe, the capital, locals praise Chinese firms for actually building roads, unlike local contractors who tend to take the money and disappear. In other contexts, Chinese firms have found ways to court local support, making their own attempts at corporate social responsibility and cultivating key constituencies in

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communities where they need to operate. This is a lesson they learned the hard way from catastrophic experiences in places like Myanmar, where construction of the Myitsone Dam sparked repeated clashes with locals, leading to a suspension of the massive project. To avoid repetition of such problems, the Ministry of Commerce has sought to promote best practices like undertaking and following up on feasibility studies, and better understanding and engaging with the communities that will be impacted by their projects.

Major problems have ensued nonetheless, including clashes between Chinese workers and locals, cultural disputes, and poor conditions and late pay for local workers. Some projects have gone catastrophically wrong. In Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, a thermal power plant that was refurbished by Chinese contractor TBEA stopped working in the middle of a cold winter.

The Sri Lankan port of Hambantota is often cited as an example of debt-trap diplomacy. When Sri Lanka was unable to pay back the debt from the

project, it handed over control of the port to a Chinese company in the form of a 99-year lease. But it is not clear whether this was the Chinese plan from the outset. Nor is it uncommon for states to offer assets, such as mineral rights, in exchange for investments. Such decisions are often controversial within host countries, but they are choices governments are entitled to make.

Some Chinese investments have generated transformative projects. While it is still a bit early to make such judgments about BRI projects, earlier Chinese infrastructure has had this effect. In Turkmenistan, for example, building pipelines to China broke Turkmen dependency on Russia (though it created other problems in terms of reliance on China). In Africa, though there have been questions about debt sustainability and mismanagement of Chinese loans, there is no doubt that some of the new rail infrastructure is connecting communities with greater efficiency than before.

The Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road was a foundational part of the broader BRI vision. Yet for the most part it has been seen as simply an assortment of maritime projects that would connect up to form some of the many routes that China was developing under the broader initiative. The Polar Silk Road, designed to cut through the Arctic and provide China with a shorter northern route to Europe, involves not only ports and ships, but also a closer alliance with Russia. Although it will have to contend with all the complexities of the Moscow–Beijing axis, the polar route would add another strand to the BRI vision of enveloping the Eurasian landmass with connections.

The value of all these projects is difficult to calculate, and it is clear that local elites often benefit more than local communities do. In sum, the results for host countries appear mixed. Yet countries that were previously unable to attract investment now have an opportunity, through the BRI, to fill that gap. And China's relationships with host countries have been transformed, now that it is seen as a source of investment.

DIGITAL DOMINANCE?

There is a potentially more complicated long-term consequence of Chinese infrastructure investment, which is most conspicuous in the initiative known as the Digital Silk Road. Through the construction of digital infrastructure, China is providing the foundation on which national economies will be built in the future. This raises concerns not only about competition from

Chinese firms, but also regarding possible covert Chinese access to critical national infrastructure.

These suspicions are most often aired in relation to Huawei, the world's largest telecom equipment supplier, which is leading the way in the transition toward next-generation 5G wireless communications networks. Huawei is just one of many Chinese technology companies that have become players on the global stage. They offer everything from the hardware used to build high-speed digital networks to the services that will utilize those networks to sell goods, process payments, enhance communications, and deliver entertainment to consumers over the Internet.

This package of projects comes in many different forms. Sometimes it is via the same model as large infrastructure projects, with countries offering project financing to develop “smart cities” (a term for the growing use of digital and cyber technology to smooth the management of traffic and other mechanics of everyday urban life) or telecom infrastructure, employing Chinese firms to do the work. More often than not, however, these firms themselves are the driving forces.

ZTE, Huawei, Hikvision, and Dahua are all ambitious companies, constantly seeking new markets and aiming to tap global demand for low-cost digital technology. Some of them also offer surveillance technology, which they have been developing as part of China's domestic security apparatus. In addition, they have a risk threshold that sets them apart from their Western counterparts—they are more willing to move into unstable environments or circumvent international sanctions. The telecom and cyber industries are among the most dynamic in China, able to spot opportunities abroad without necessarily having to be told about them by authorities.

The bigger problem that these companies face in delivering BRI projects is falling into the crosshairs of the US push, under the Trump administration, to decouple China from the global economic system. Through sanctions and criminal prosecutions, Washington has created a context whereby countries choosing to work with Chinese technology companies risk damaging their relations with the United States and other Western countries that are increasingly avoiding projects with Chinese tech firms.

Nonetheless, China's tech sector continues to grow rapidly. Alibaba, China's answer to Amazon, has become a behemoth that is increasingly dominating the cybercommerce space in China's

immediate periphery and farther afield. In most countries bordering China, websites and traders offer portals to tap into Alibaba or Taobao to buy and sell products, making it easier for locals in the host countries to gain access to Chinese platforms that they may find confusing to navigate on their own. Operating in the local language, these middlemen act as the interface with China for a local company's dealers and products. Huge volumes of postal traffic between China and its neighbors now consist of packages shipped in fulfillment of sales on Alibaba.

Before such investments were suspended due to tensions between China and India, Alibaba had plowed some \$2 billion into Indian start-ups since 2015. The deals covered the gamut of Indian online firms—including Paytm, a payments start-up valued at over \$1 billion, food delivery services Zomato and BigBasket, and e-commerce company Snapdeal.

In August 2019, Alibaba's founder Jack Ma held a meeting with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Secretary General Vladimir Norov, trumpeting the news that his company was planning a massive global expansion, a substantial part of which would be in the countries of Eurasia that belong to the SCO. The expansion would create around 100 million jobs and fuel the growth of 10 million small businesses. This is a new direction for the SCO, an organization founded in 2001 as an alliance focused on border delineation and counterterrorism in Central Asia.

Alibaba's Alipay platform facilitates a growing number of global transactions. The international activities of Alibaba (along with other Chinese tech giants, including JD.com and Giushi Technologies) have helped deepen China's economic links with many countries. The company has even led the way in providing medical aid in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Alibaba has also hosted online sessions where Chinese doctors explain to their counterparts in SCO countries how they have contained the spread of the virus.

China's push into the technological future extends into space as well. Via the Space Silk Road, Beidou will offer its satellite navigation services around the world. The development of the Beidou system back in the mid-1990s was intended to provide China with a capability that would not be dependent on American satellite

systems. Over time, this grew into an international project, and it has now been swept into the BRI, lending eyes in the sky to the global vision. More than 30 countries have signed up to play varying roles—some will use Beidou as a replacement for or alternative to existing GPS services or other domestic facilities, whereas others will host installations to support the satellite system.

LASTING LINKS

The BRI is also reaching into countries through culture, education, and language, building an array of links that are meant to last much longer than any physical project. China has long offered generous scholarships and subsidies to foreigners who want to study in Chinese universities. This approach has been expanded to include programs for training journalists, security officers of all ranks, and other officials from foreign governments. Many of these projects are promoted with BRI rhetoric, or are attached to companies that participate in the initiative.

BRI imagery is also ubiquitous in the global network of Confucius Institutes, which offer scholarships and Chinese language training. Adjacent to (and sometimes blended with) the activity of Confucius Institutes, the task of connecting with researchers, journalists, civil society actors, and others has been assigned to the United Front Work Department, which also seeks to build connections with political leaders. Some companies offer more specialized training and education; Huawei's "Seeds for the Future" program, for example, offers future middle managers an opportunity to work at the company's headquarters and receive language training.

In many such ways, China's global campaign under the BRI umbrella is far more substantial than a typical geopolitical stratagem. By wrapping the seas and land together in his two 2013 speeches, Xi articulated a vision that merged concepts developed by a pair of influential geostrategists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder. In Mahan's view, maritime power controlled the world, whereas Mackinder believed that dominating the Eurasian heartland was the path to global hegemony. These were often interpreted as competing strategic models.

China's relationships with host countries have been transformed.

Xi's vision, combining elements of both, is grander. It goes beyond simply aiming to control waterways or continents with brute power. Beijing's plan is to build not only the routes, but also the tools to make the routes of the future—and to train and win the loyalty of the rising generations that will use them.

The Belt and Road Initiative is designed to return China to what it believes is its rightful place at the heart of a globe-spanning network, and to ensure that these links penetrate deep into the host communities. The intent is not necessarily to change local political orientations; rather, it is to make these places more pliable to Chinese interests. Through the sinews of infrastructure, China has been insinuating itself into local economies, societies, and politics.

By offering an all-encompassing vision for development, China is putting a friendly face on its ambitions. Yet the reality is that the BRI vision vastly overpromises and is largely unattainable. The transformational projects that it proposes to developing countries will require far more money than even China has, and far more effective governance oversight than Beijing can provide.

These contradictions make the BRI not dissimilar to the development model that has been promoted by Western powers until now. Many development projects have been stymied by myriad local issues in developing nations. Rather than overcoming these obstacles, China has joined the

roster of global powers that have claimed to offer a superior development model. The difference is that China has articulated a vision based on links and connectivity, and it has laid deep roots in host countries through its multifaceted approach. Thus, unlike previous efforts in these countries, China is leaving a presence and footprint that will help maintain its influence into the future.

It is also notable that this vision has been handed down by a leader who presents himself and his thought as the next step in China's own development. This means that the BRI will be a major feature of Chinese foreign policy rhetoric for some time. It also gives Chinese institutions a strong incentive to continue to tout their BRI participation as a means of demonstrating their connection with the leader.

The BRI is creating a web of links around the world that will guarantee some form of pervasive Chinese influence for generations to come. The vision has been articulated with such vague and broad terms that it is almost impossible to say exactly where it will end. This helps insulate the BRI from failure: since its parameters have never truly been defined, the goalposts can constantly be moved—except that it is supposed to conclude in 2049, by which time its originators may well be dead. But the Belt and Road will persist, reaching far and deep, tying China to the world and helping it develop the influence to shape the world's future. ■