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CHINA'S EURASIAN CENTURY?

Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative

Nadège Rolland

Introduction

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China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become the organizing foreign policy concept of the Xi Jinping era.[1] From London to Canberra, Moscow to Cairo, Astana to Jakarta, cooperation under the BRI umbrella is now the main theme of discussions between Chinese officials and their local counterparts. And the initiative is making rapid progress. Merely one year after President Xi announced the creation of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road at the end of 2013, Beijing identified BRI as a top national priority, created specific financial institutions to fund it, and promised to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on infrastructure projects across Eurasia.[2]

China's 21st-century revival of the Silk Road harkens back to an era when ancient trade routes connected the Chinese and Roman empires through Mesopotamia and Central Asia.[3] Along with goods that merchants carried from country to country, ideas, religion, scientific discoveries, inventions, and art also traveled in both directions along the Silk Road.[4] Its closing in 1453 following the defeat of the Byzantine Empire by the Ottomans forced merchants to look for alternative routes on the sea. This search initiated the Age of Discovery and marked the dawn of commercial and civilizational interaction on a truly global scale. The term Silk Road conjures up images of camel caravans loaded with rare and precious goods, traveling across deserted areas from one opulent empire to another. For China, it evokes memories of glorious times when Chinese civilization was flourishing, and the Chinese empire was dominant and stood at the center of the known world—as *Zhongguo* (literally "middle kingdom"), its own given name, suggests. It should therefore come as no surprise that President Xi,

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[1] This monograph adopts the official English translation of *Yidai Yilu* approved by the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC)—"Belt and Road." This term is often translated as "One Belt, One Road." See National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce (PRC), "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," March 28, 2015, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html.

[2] The "belt" expands across the Eurasian continental landmass through Central Asia, Russia, the Caucasus, the Levant, and Eastern Europe and branches out to Southeast and South Asia. The "road" comprises a string of ports connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe through the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea.

[3] Not just one but many different routes stretched from China through India, Mesopotamia, and the African continent to Greece and Rome. The term Silk Road was coined by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877. Although all sorts of merchandise traveled along the Silk Road, the name comes from the popularity of Chinese silk in the West, especially with Rome.

[4] Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

the promoter of the "dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," chose the reference to the Silk Road for his vision of renewed regional interactions, as a symbol of China's resurgence as a world power.

Of course, the 21st-century version of the Silk Road will not bring back camel caravans. It will take shape instead around a vast network of transportation (railways, roads, and port facilities), energy, and telecommunication infrastructure, linking Europe and Africa to Asia and accompanied by strengthened monetary cooperation and increased people-to-people exchanges. Beijing sees physical infrastructure as a first step toward Eurasian integration, thanks in part to the creation of vast economic corridors that will enable greater regional policy coordination. Eventually, the BRI countries will be tied tightly to China in a vibrant and prosperous "community of common destiny." If this vision can be fulfilled, then all roads will eventually lead to Beijing, both literally and figuratively.[5]

To the 21st-century global citizen and denizen of the cyber age, Eurasian transportation construction might seem passé and reminiscent of the transcontinental railway projects of the 19th century. Yet the logic of physical connectivity is as powerful today as it was 150 years ago. The impact of more and better transcontinental links on the regional landscape could be huge, not only by boosting trade and commerce but also by easing flows of energy and other resources, stimulating technological development, influencing culture and politics, and shaping strategic choices. At the turn of the 20th century, observing the railroad lines being built across North America, the British geopolitician Halford Mackinder noted that "transcontinental railways are transmuting the conditions of land power."[6] Railways helped convert a patchwork of disparate rural and wild territories into a unified, powerful industrial nation. Transportation costs dropped, manufactured products flooded into remote areas, exploitation of natural resources increased, technical innovations were born, growth accelerated, and modern management methods were developed. Transportation connectivity can reduce psychological as well as physical space, changing what Chinese scholar Gan Junxian describes as "the way people live in their country and the mental map they have of

[5] "Yi zhang tu kandong 'Yidai Yilu'" [A Map to Understand the "Belt and Road"], Yicai, http://www.yicai.com/show_topic/4591483; and "Yidai Yilu yuanjing yu xingdong wenjian fabu" [Belt and Road Vision and Action Plan Revealed], Caixin, March 28, 2015, http://economy.caixin.com/2015-03-28/100795672.html.

[6] H.J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal* 170, no. 4 (1904): 434.

their region."[7] In post–Civil War America, railroads helped forge a renewed and strengthened sense of national identity. For countries along China's belt and road, newfound proximity could reinforce feelings of "Asian awareness."

After the end of the Cold War, several Western countries, including the United States, tried to promote infrastructure interconnectivity and economic development in the hope that prosperity would transform post-Communist Eurasia into a democratized and stable region. With BRI, China has now assumed the lead in promoting Eurasian integration, using similar arguments about the relationship between connectivity and development, but with very different economic, political, and strategic objectives in view. Beijing hopes to recycle some of its accumulated foreign reserves, utilize its overcapacity in construction materials and basic industries, and boost the fortunes of its state-owned enterprises by opening new markets. Promoting regional development is seen not as a way to encourage political liberalization but, to the contrary, as a means of strengthening and stabilizing existing authoritarian regimes around China. Both increased economic dependence on and tighter political ties to Beijing serve Chinese strategic interests. Transcontinental infrastructure will help hedge against possible disruptions to maritime supply in the event of conflict. Deepening China's strategic space will help counter alleged U.S.-led efforts to contain the country's rise. Above and beyond these concrete objectives, BRI is also meant to serve the broader regional ambition of building a Sinocentric Eurasian order. It reflects Beijing's newfound willingness to play a leading role in reshaping the world, starting with its extended periphery.

Despite the initiative's significance and the importance that Chinese policymakers clearly attach to it, the study of BRI in the West lags behind a rapidly emerging reality.[8] Moreover, most of the available studies look at BRI from the outside in and tend to focus on its observable physical manifestations, drawing conclusions about its viability and purposes without examining the motivations and calculations of its architects. In order to fully understand BRI, it is necessary to study more closely how the initiative is described by those who are working hard to make it a reality—in other words, the Chinese official and analytic communities.

The purpose of this monograph is to offer a comprehensive assessment of the Chinese conception of BRI, drawing mainly from Chinese-language sources and from field research in China. The chapters that follow will

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[7] Gan Junxian, "'Sichouzhilu' fuxing jihua yu Zhongguo waijiao" [The Plan for "Silk Road" Revival and China's Diplomacy] *Northeast Asia Forum* 19, no. 5 (2010).

[8] Please refer to the appendix for an overview of available Western reports dedicated to BRI.

examine the origins of the concept, its drivers, and its various component parts, as well as its accompanying ideational narrative and domestic and international objectives—all as seen through Beijing's eyes. Although BRI has both a land and a maritime component, this study focuses mainly on the Eurasian continent. For most of China's long history, its identity has primarily been that of a continental power. Given the constraints and opportunities that China faces on both its land and sea frontiers, BRI's continental dimension will likely once again emerge as particularly important. On the other hand, China's maritime and naval expansion is relatively recent and has received disproportionate attention in the West, both because of its novelty and because it has brought China into direct contact with the United States and its Asian allies.[9]

This study relies on official Chinese sources that speak for the Chinese leadership, as well as on what Carnegie researcher Michael D. Swaine classifies as "non-authoritative" sources—i.e., Chinese media and academic publications.[10] In order to gain a full appreciation of BRI, it is necessary to look beyond the official rhetoric relayed by China's propaganda machinery and pay close attention to "how the text can be understood in terms of the hidden content it discloses."[11] Public discussions are essential to gaining an understanding of that hidden content. Far from being remote from current affairs and isolated from the world of decision-makers, Chinese public intellectuals inform and contribute directly to the leadership's thinking about foreign policy.[12]

What follows is divided into six chapters. The recent publicity around China's BRI has overshadowed a number of earlier initiatives to improve

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[9] The U.S. literature related to China's maritime and naval developments is extensive. See, among others, Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, eds., *China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2009); Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Peter A. Dutton, "China's Maritime Disputes in the East and South China Seas," testimony before a hearing of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, January 14, 2014; Bonnie S. Glaser, "Conflict in the South China Sea: Contingency Planning Memorandum Update," Council on Foreign Relations, April 2015; and Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, "Responding to China's Rising Sea Power," *Orbis* 61, no. 1 (2017): 91–100. See also the National Bureau of Asian Research and Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, Maritime Awareness Project, http://maritimeawarenessproject.org.

[10] Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the U.S. Pacific Pivot," Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 38, Summer 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CLM38MS.pdf. Please refer to the appendix for a context-setting analysis of the Chinese sources used in this monograph.

[11] Michael J. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 29–30.

[12] David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); and Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, SIPRI Policy Paper, no. 26 (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2010).

regional infrastructure connectivity, some of which have been going on for decades. These will be described in chapter 1. Chapter 2 pulls together the various pieces of BRI as they have emerged since its launch, describing the initiative's top-level supervision, the financial and intellectual resources devoted to its success, and the early-harvest projects visible in each of the proposed economic corridors. Chapter 3 analyzes why Beijing launched BRI and examines both the economic and strategic drivers. Chapter 4 presents the initiative as an effort to shape Eurasia according to China's broader objective of achieving regional preponderance, in both material and normative terms, and speculates about what a new Sinocentric Eurasian order created by BRI might look like. Chapter 5 describes what Chinese policy experts see as the main challenges and discusses the solutions they envisage to avoid pitfalls. The concluding chapter analyzes BRI's overall political and strategic implications and considers the options that the United States and its allies have for dealing with the initiative.