Adapting or Atrophying?  
China’s Belt and Road after the Covid-19 Pandemic

Min Ye

MIN YE is an Associate Professor at the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University (United States). She is the author of The Belt Road and Beyond: State-Mobilized Globalization in China: 1998–2018 (2020) and can be reached at <ye@bu.edu>.

KEYWORDS: CHINA; BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE; COVID-19; MIDDLE POLITICS; SOFT INSTITUTIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article analyzes Chinese policy discourse and activities before and after the Covid-19 outbreak and evaluates the prospects of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

MAIN ARGUMENT

From January to June 2020, China experienced the full cycle of Covid-19: outbreak, containment, economic reopening, and return of political life. The country’s policy discourse and activities during the cycle show that the BRI strategy maintains a high level of continuity after the pandemic. Specifically, motivations for the initiative today are similar to those at its launch in 2013, and interests developed during its implementation have grown following the Covid-19 outbreak, albeit with different emphases. Overall, Chinese “middle elites” will continue to help stabilize BRI and globalization during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified geopolitical and societal tensions between China and other countries. Yet beyond political and popular rhetoric, Chinese policy elites are pragmatic and remain committed to BRI and globalization. They offer a stabilizing force against the potential “deglobalization” wave in a post-pandemic world.

- China’s motivations and activities behind BRI have continued during the Covid-19 cycle. As the country recovers from the pandemic, it is likely to pursue BRI with more deliberation at home and more opportunities abroad.

- Inevitably, post-pandemic globalization will have different priorities. In BRI, plans for some hard infrastructure projects are likely to give way to softer and more socially inclusive areas of cooperation, such as information technology, medicine, education, and the environment.

- Going beyond the pandemic, we need to pay attention to discourse and activities by professional and policy communities in China and other countries. The “middle elites” are likely to foretell and shape future trajectories in BRI and globalization.
The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in late 2013, has faced challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. First, the pandemic gave rise to travel restrictions across countries, damaging a globalization strategy that focuses on infrastructure and connectivity. BRI-associated infrastructure and projects have thus experienced varying degrees of delays and cancellations.¹ Second, the virus, initially breaking out in China, has significantly strained relations between the Chinese government and other world powers, as well as caused hostile public opinions against China in both BRI and non-BRI countries. Furthermore, the pandemic has exerted such severe strain on the Chinese economy that its financial commitment to BRI is uncertain. Even though China was one of the first countries to relax measures imposed to contain the pandemic, emerging as an essential player in fighting against the virus, these challenges have not moderated, as countries continue to struggle with the pandemic and battle a lengthy economic recession.²

Will the Covid-19 pandemic mark the decline of BRI and turn China’s development strategy inward? Will BRI adapt or atrophy quietly after the pandemic? Undoubtedly, the virus has presented mounting difficulties for the initiative, as well as globalization in general, rendering pre-pandemic priorities and projects unsustainable. However, the domestic motivations behind the launch of BRI are still influential today; the interests and institutions that emerged during its implementation over the past few years remain robust in China. Hence, despite external and internal challenges, BRI is likely to continue as China’s globalization strategy after Covid-19 abates.

From January to June 2020, China went through the full cycle of Covid-19: outbreak, containment, economic reopening, and return of political life, as indicated in the convening of the Two Sessions.³ Its experience as the virus epicenter, efforts to swiftly contain the spread of the virus, and difficulties in reviving its economy provide valuable lessons to other countries still in the cycle. The continued appeal within China of BRI and globalization more generally suggests that there is still interest in global efforts to fight the pandemic and resist a “deglobalization” urge.

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³ In March each year, Beijing holds the Two Sessions [lianghui], which are consecutive meetings of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. At the meetings, the top ruling bodies announce major policy guidelines and personnel reshuffles. In 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Two Sessions were delayed until late May. The convening of these meetings indicated the return of political life in China after the initial outbreak.
During the pandemic, political rhetoric in many countries has been antagonistic toward China, and popular sentiments are increasingly hostile toward globalization. This article shows that there are communities of policy actors that will continue to advocate practical and proactive measures within China to save national prosperity while maintaining global engagement. Looking beyond strategic competition at the top, we can see that interests and coalitions for interdependence persist and are adapting to the shifting needs of globalization. Notwithstanding grassroots societal animus, “middle elites”—professionals, companies, and local governments—strive to strengthen joint programs and projects. Such actors and activities constitute what this article calls “middle politics,” separate from the “high politics” of national government and strategies and the “low politics” that pervades popular sentiment. Middle politics has been less studied in foreign policy and is typically underreported in news media. In today’s contentious but interdependent world, however, middle politics is robust and pivotal in evaluating globalization’s long-term prospects and shifting priorities.

This article finds that the BRI strategy continues to enjoy supportive discourse and robust actions within China. Just as at the launch of the initiative in 2013, Chinese discourse today demonstrates a strategic imperative to de-escalate the U.S.-China rivalry, a diplomatic imperative to search for partners, and an economic imperative to revive the global economy following the pandemic. Chinese actions demonstrate that vested interests in BRI are working to continue, expand, and adapt projects to a Covid-19 world. Furthermore, “soft” and scientific BRI projects in health, medicine, technology, higher education, and the environment have gained momentum. China’s efforts to stimulate the domestic digital economy and technology sectors are likely to have applications in overseas BRI projects. This article is divided into four sections:

- pp. 69–74 provide an introduction to BRI, its moderation and soft institutionalism in recent years, and its recent milestones.
- pp. 74–84 analyze policy discourse in China concerning BRI and globalization, revealing the strategic, diplomatic, and economic priorities that still support the initiative within China.

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4 Classical liberal theories separate high politics and low politics in international relations. In today’s world, the real low politics can be seen in social media sentiments, and the conventional low politics in interdependence is more aptly understood as middle politics. See Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977).

5 In the past, BRI focused on hard infrastructure projects, such as the construction of power plants, railways, and ports, that were conducted by the state and state companies. Soft BRI projects refer to cooperative mechanisms that involve nonstate and institutional building efforts.
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pp. 84–93 address actions within China that seek to continue BRI while reorienting to areas that will better fit the post-pandemic realities.

pp. 93–95 discuss drivers and patterns in BRI before and after the pandemic and shed light on globalization’s trajectory in a post-pandemic world.

BRI Before COVID-19: Drivers and Evolution

In late 2013, President Xi Jinping launched BRI in two connected propositions: the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. The initiative has rapidly become the most studied policy in China as well as abroad.6 Outside the country, observers have portrayed BRI as China’s grand strategy to achieve its strategic interests in the region and expand its global power. The mechanisms for Beijing to pursue these interests, foreign observers argue, are economic statecraft—using economic instruments to achieve security goals—and debt entrapment—making predatory loans to enhance a recipient’s dependence on China.7 Given such mechanisms, the Covid-19 pandemic could pose severe challenges that endanger BRI’s survivability. On the one hand, China’s resources are contracting, limiting its ability to finance projects abroad; on the other hand, external resistance at both the government and societal levels is so severe that it reduces the acceptability of these projects and the initiative as a whole.

However, within China, BRI represents a globalization strategy that features Chinese capital and infrastructure. Since 2013, the initiative has incorporated local governments, think tanks, universities, and social groups in work ranging from trade and investment to cultural exchange and scientific collaboration. Previous studies have established that BRI was rooted in China’s economic, diplomatic, and geostrategic priorities and implemented by Chinese actors with developmental, commercial, and societal interests in globalization.8 According to such domestic logic, the variables to assess BRI’s trajectory after the pandemic should be China’s national motivations for globalization and Chinese actors’ priorities in a post-pandemic world.

8 See, for example, Ye, The Belt Road and Beyond.
The foreign logic and domestic logic, to be sure, coexist and interact with each other. This section shows that external criticism has contributed to BRI’s moderation and encouraged softer institution-building in recent years. Furthermore, before the Covid-19 pandemic, the strategy had focused on domestic priorities and coalition interests. This section provides background for the analysis of Chinese discourse and actions during the pandemic, which is essential to evaluate BRI’s post-pandemic trajectory and China’s future globalization more generally.

External Scrutiny Shapes BRI Moderation

External, and generally critical, views of BRI have worked to shape the strategy toward moderation and soft institutionalism in recent years. To placate external critiques of the initiative’s ambitions and provide guidance to domestic actors, Beijing announced in early 2020 that the strategy has evolved from an “abstract painting” (xiyihua) to a “meticulous drawing” (gongbihua). The announcement underscores that China’s agencies, researchers, and businesses have established joint mechanisms, partnerships, projects, and platforms to link with their counterparts in both BRI and non-BRI countries.9

BRI’s moderation was clear from its first summit meeting in 2017 to the second in 2019. At the first Belt and Road Forum, Chinese leadership promoted the strategy as “the project of the century” and announced financial pledges amounting to $1 trillion. At the second, Xi Jinping reframed BRI as striving for sustainable development and high-quality connectivity. In Beijing, national agencies established frameworks and institutions with international organizations to address external concerns about BRI’s financial and environmental risks. For example, the Ministry of Finance worked with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to launch the Belt and Road Sustainable Financing Framework. The National Development and Reform Council (NDRC) and the UN Development Programme announced the Belt and Road Green Energy Action Plan. The Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) initiated the Private Entrepreneurs’ Forum.

To make BRI more sustainable outside China, Beijing in 2019 boosted various flagship mechanisms in the strategy.10 Among them, the Asian

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Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) increased its membership to one hundred countries and began issuing Chinese government bonds in global indexes. The Silk Road Fund raised its capital limit to $300 billion. Furthermore, to build collaboration with advanced economies, BRI has promoted a third-market cooperation mechanism. In 2019, China reached agreements with fourteen countries through this mechanism, including Japan and Australia. Diplomatically, it added new foreign government signers to BRI and expanded cooperation with non-signatories. In short, BRI’s trajectory in 2019 was positive and practical. Taking into account external critiques, the initiative embarked on a path of moderation and focused on developing soft institutions.

**Domestic Logic Still Prevails**

Inside China, BRI’s internal logic continues to prevail, with consistent priorities in the national economy, diplomacy, and geopolitics. Implementation is led by domestic groups that have active and diverse programs in the name of BRI but that also serve their own development and support globalization.\(^\text{11}\) Table 1 summarises BRI milestones identified by Beijing in 2019. These include international conferences and forums to showcase BRI’s broad reach, key documents and political conferences that confirm top-level commitment to the strategy, and new linkages between China and the regions where BRI projects are being implemented. Most of the milestones, however, have pertained to China’s domestic development initiatives, economic liberalization, and regional economic planning and do not have an immediate impact on foreign policy. As such, foreign observers have largely ignored them. Nevertheless, it is precisely these domestic interests that have made BRI attractive and durable within China before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.\(^\text{12}\)

Chinese documents show that Covid-19 has not altered the domestic rationale behind BRI but rather intensified the justification for the continuity and expansion of the initiative. First, from the Chinese perspective, the pandemic exacerbated the U.S.-China rivalry to a dangerous level, making it imperative to preserve BRI as an alternative platform of globalization.


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<tr>
<th>Activities and actors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>International conferences and forums</strong></td>
<td>The Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held, and the “Joint Communique of the Leaders’ Roundtable of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation” was released.</td>
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<td>The Conference of Dialogue on Asian Civilizations focused on civilizational construction in BRI.</td>
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<td>The Fourth BRI Summit was held in Hong Kong and attended by more than 5,000 participants.</td>
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<td>The second meeting of the BRI Advisory Council of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held.</td>
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<td><strong>Top-level commitments</strong></td>
<td>The State Council Premier Central Government work report highlighted BRI five times.</td>
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<td>The BRI Small Leading Group published “Jointly Construct One Belt, One Road Initiative: Progress, Contribution, and Vision.”</td>
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<td>The CCP Central Economic Work Meeting announced the intention to “solidly advance the joint development of the Belt and Road” to enhance investment policy and services in BRI projects and improve China’s openness to maintain foreign trade and attract inbound foreign investment.</td>
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<td>Xi Jinping’s 2020 New Year Address highlighted actively and jointly building the Belt and Road.</td>
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<td><strong>Domestic development</strong></td>
<td>The Central Committee and the State Council unveiled a plan designating development of the Greater Bay Area as an important BRI pillar.</td>
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<td>The State Council published a new foreign capital negative list, reduced from 45 to 37.</td>
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<td>The NDRC announced plans to realize economical, efficient, convenient, green, and safe transportation by 2025 and to establish world-class customs, logistics, and infrastructure connectivity in western China by 2035.</td>
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and diplomacy. Second, although politicians and the public in some BRI-participating countries are critical of China, their overall criticism is more moderate than that of the United States and its allies. Furthermore, the demand for medical equipment, e-commerce, technology, and logistics across the region has risen rapidly. Finally, soft institution-building between China and BRI countries has continued and BRI projects have been adjusted to meet new realities in China and abroad.

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Before proceeding, some clarifications are in order. First, in this article, the Chinese writings cited are not all focused on BRI per se but China’s globalization. Since Beijing has promoted BRI as its core globalization platform, such pro-globalization discourse underscores the initiative’s continuity. Second, there are nativist counterarguments in China that are hawkish or advocate for “strategic contraction” (*zhanlue shousuo*).¹⁴ Thus far, they have not featured strongly in Chinese discourse on BRI, nor do they capture activities by the middle groups studied here. Last, while Chinese policymaking remains opaque, the discourse on BRI both influences policy deliberation and reflects the government’s preferences. Such discourse is consistent with activities by local governments, businesses, and scientific groups in the country (i.e., the middle elites).

### CHINA’S POLICY DISCOURSE AFTER COVID-19

China has a centralized, authoritarian polity. Yet there are persistent and vibrant policy communities in Beijing and beyond that play significant roles in the country’s policy debates and policymaking. The opinions of these communities reflect and influence the viewpoints of decision-makers with whom they interact through formal and informal channels.¹⁵ The most recent decade, in particular, has witnessed a proliferation in the size and vibrancy of China’s research community driven by three factors: (1) changing issues that require popular input and policy debates, (2) domestic and international education that has produced a large number of analysts, and (3) China’s leapfrog jump in information technology and social media that amplifies the roles of policy opinions and discourse, with a significant push from the 2015 “Internet Plus” industrial policy.

A critical juncture—in this case between combating the Covid-19 outbreak and convening the Two Sessions—presents a window of opportunity for policy communities to influence Beijing’s policy directions.¹⁶ It also offers an opportunity to observe ideas, coalitions, and preferences in globalizing China. The following channels are sources of Chinese policy opinion:

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materials: (1) government-sponsored sites that publish policies, speeches, events, industry information, and expert opinions on major policy subjects; (2) popular search engines such as Baidu (the Chinese equivalent of Google) and Zhifu (with subject roundtables); (3) preeminent online commercial news sources that publish commentaries in real-time; and (4) think tanks that offer daily and weekly policy briefs and repost content from other sources. In addition to these venues, influential bloggers on social media sites (for example, Weibo and WeChat) can now shape policy debate and decision-making in China with their large followings.

Analyzing materials on China and globalization during this critical period from January to June 2020, this section categorizes policy discourse into three groups focusing on geostrategy, diplomacy, and the economy. The geostrategic group concerns U.S.-China relations and the stability of the global order. The main message is that the great-power rivalry has reached a low point that is potentially damaging to China and the world system. The second group embodies diplomatic ambitions and projects that will expand China’s global leadership now that the country has successfully controlled the Covid-19 pandemic. The third group is numerous and diverse in its interests and target audience. It anticipates massive headwinds facing China and the world economy and urges China to save itself rather than aid other countries in their fight against the virus and economic recession. These three discourses are parallel to the geopolitical, diplomatic, and economic justifications for BRI at its launch in 2013.

Strategic Pessimism Supports BRI

U.S.-China relations have continuously deteriorated since 2009, with conflict concentrated in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Taiwan Strait. As the two countries became engaged in escalating strategic competition, renowned scholar and strategist Wang Jisi wrote in 2011 that “China has to rebalance its strategic focus on the Eurasian continent.” In 2013, he spoke in Beijing and promoted “China goes West” as a strategy to deflect the escalation of the rivalry in the Asia-Pacific. Wang’s strategic reasoning and proposal have facilitated the land component of BRI. The bilateral rivalry further intensified under the Trump administration and expanded to include

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a wide range of issues—trade, technology, intellectual property rights, human rights, and Hong Kong, as well as the aforementioned maritime conflicts. Washington’s new consensus deems China the chief strategic rival to U.S. leadership and the liberal world order and believes that the United States needs to rally near- and long-term competition with China in key areas.19

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the superpower contestation. The Trump administration adopted a largely hostile position toward China, as shown in its early imposition of a travel ban, increased decoupling of U.S. supply chains, characterization of Covid-19 as the “Chinese virus,” and proposition of numerous congressional bills with negative implications for China.20 In response, China also adopted a confrontational approach. After each anti-China move in Washington, Beijing fired back and stressed the United States’ failure to contain the virus and efforts to suppress China.

Against this backdrop, Wang Jisi underscored the dangerous turn in bilateral relations in a widely circulated speech. He observed that, although the pre-pandemic relationship between China and the United States had deteriorated, Chinese policy communities largely viewed the bilateral relationship as central to Beijing’s foreign policy and argued for prudence in managing the superpower competition. He found that “the mainstream view has become ‘tit for tat’ and ‘willing to show force.’” In particular, Wang cautioned that, due to travel restrictions in a post-pandemic world, people in both countries could come to accept hostile interactions and confrontations as the norm. Moreover, the U.S.-China information war, public opinion war, and diplomatic war would intensify to become “an irreversible trend” bilaterally and globally. To break this strategic impasse, Wang argued that China should do more to foster world stability through BRI and globalization platforms, though it should not seek an unrealistic coalition against the United States.21

Peking University professor Jia Qingguo is deeply pessimistic regarding the U.S.-China rivalry. Since a stable working relationship between China and the United States has been critical to institutions such as the G-7,

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20 China’s Global Times documented in June 2020 that at least 388 bills and resolutions related to China were introduced in the U.S. Congress during the pandemic. See “Bizarre Bills against China Stack Up in the U.S. Congress amid Covid-19 Pandemic,” Global Times, June 18, 2020—https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1191994.shtml.

G-20, IMF, and the United Nations, he has expressed concern about the post-pandemic global order. The two countries had managed to cooperate to respond to the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2014 Ebola outbreak, as well as find agreement in the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference, thereby strengthening global institutions and order. Jia has lamented that during the Covid-19 pandemic a lack of leadership from the United States and a worsening U.S.-China rivalry have rendered international institutions slow to react. However, he maintains that, irrespective of changes in the United States and bilateral relations, China must be actively engaged in the global fight against Covid-19.²²

Such pessimistic views on U.S.-China relations are common among strategic specialists in China. In early April, Zheng Yongnian wrote that Covid-19 exposed significant systemic differences between U.S. and Chinese politics, economics, ideology, and the countries’ respective militaries. It was therefore impossible for the United States not to suppress China.²³ Policy elites in both countries who used to believe in mutual dependence and sought to avoid great-power conflict have now become hostile. Furthermore, popular sentiments in both societies are so negative that it will be challenging to improve relations even when the Covid-19 crisis is over. With elite and public opinions hardening against the other country, Zheng is gravely concerned that the U.S.-China cold war may turn into a hot war, which would be a “disaster for the whole world.”²⁴ Zheng argues that the worst China can do is become isolationist; instead, it should keep the door open and be active on the global stage.

Many of the strategists in China’s policy communities are long-term specialists of U.S.-China relations. Their views have large followings in online news, social media, and broadcasts and reach a broad professional audience. The consensus among them is noticeable. On the one hand, they are pessimistic about the future trajectory of U.S.-China relations driven by both hostile high politics and low politics. On the other hand, they firmly believe that globalization and China’s active participation in the world serve the country’s short- and long-term strategic interests. Just as in 2013, when the geostrategic motivation to avoid U.S.-China conflicts in maritime Asia helped


²⁴ Ibid.
drive BRI, the strategists—worried about escalation into a hot war—have welcomed efforts to maintain globalization under BRI and beyond. These efforts include diplomacy and aid in African countries and Central Asia, renewed investment negotiation with European economies, and cooperation with Asian neighbors.

**China’s Diplomatic Ambitions for New Roles in the World**

The second group, whose writing exhibits China’s rising diplomatic ambitions, consists of mainly scholars and researchers with varying degrees of government connections. Many of them, or their institutions, were involved in making and implementing BRI policy in recent years. Their views are generally optimistic about China’s collaboration with other countries, ability to lead in various global forums, and advantages in technology and on public health issues.

Optimists were particularly salient in late March when China curbed the Covid-19 pandemic while Europe and the United States experienced rapid spread of the virus and economic distress. Because of this turn of fate, optimists were eager to advocate for China’s stronger leadership in world health, the global economy, and diplomacy. Gu Xueming, a researcher at MOFCOM, and Ren Lin at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) commented in a policy brief in *China Daily* entitled “Fight Against Virus to Boost Globalization.”

They argued that “although the coronavirus outbreak posed a threat to the world economy in the short term, it cannot change the trend of globalization in the long term.” Furthermore, they argued that “the pandemic could necessitate an adjustment in the international economic landscape, as advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data are to play significant roles in the prevention and treatment of novel coronavirus pneumonia.” In these areas, China has an advantage in domestic innovation and application and can expand their use in BRI projects.

In a separate essay in *China Daily*, “On the Mend,” Ren argued that China’s response to the Covid-19 outbreak has demonstrated that the country can play a meaningful role in improving global health governance. To seize the opportunity, Ren argues that China should, first, formulate its strategy of global health governance, incorporate public health into national security, and build a global governance strategy that suits its international status that involves funding, aid, and technology sharing. Second, it should increase

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influence in global health affairs by “actively engaging in global governance.”
Finally, Beijing should promote reform of the global health governance system
and mechanisms and share China’s successful experience.26

According to CASS researcher Gao Haihong, like the ambition to build
globally on China’s public health experience, China has an opportunity to
play a growing role in the global economy by presenting a viable and perhaps
superior economic rescue package after the pandemic. In a weekly policy brief
in late March, he praised China’s central bank for delivering less aggressive
but well-targeted monetary easing, including a relief fund of $77.6 billion for
vulnerable small and private companies and a stimulus plan of $510 billion for
new infrastructure.27 Jia Pujing, a professor at Renmin University, also praised
China’s economic trajectory and substantial role in the world economy. He
identified the post-pandemic world as heralding a new period of industrial
revolution in which China’s markets present an irreplaceable opportunity.28

Former vice minister of foreign affairs He Yafei, presently the director
of the Global Governance Research Center at Renmin University, offered a
lengthy discussion of the Covid-19 pandemic’s impact on China’s diplomacy.29
He argued that China’s response to the crisis has helped the country gain
more global networks and potential influence, though he also recognized the
damage to U.S.-China relations. Through diplomacy on Covid-19, Chinese
leaders reconnected with foreign heads of state, societal organizations rallied
to support China, and diplomacy was in full force in different directions.
Notably, He argued that when facing “China-bashing” led by the United
States, “China should take the high road”—it should work with international
actors to eradicate the world’s “governance deficit” and support the roles of
the World Health Organization (WHO) and other global institutions.30

Heads of various BRI-named institutions have expressed similar views.
Huang Renwei, vice dean of Fudan University’s School of One Belt and One
Road and Global Governance, published a piece in March underscoring the

30 Ibid.
opportunities presented by Covid-19 to facilitate the country’s participation and leadership in global governance. Huang explained that China could boost its global image by highlighting the “sacrifice” that the Chinese people made in stopping the virus’s spread. To win international compassion, China should be open about its shortcomings in governance and the mistakes it made in the initial handling of the outbreak. By sharing lessons that it learned from these mistakes with other countries, Huang contended, China could mend its international image. Finally, he urged China to respect the WHO’s expertise, guidelines, and role in the future management of the health crisis. “Multilateralism, not unilateralism, is China’s consistent position,” he argued.

In this “ambitions-focused” group, some praised China’s superior political ideology and system. In an article titled “Xi Jinping Is a ‘Good Emperor,’” private entrepreneur Eric Li wrote that the Covid-19 crisis is a testing ground for different political systems, governance structures, and cooperation mechanisms. China’s response to the virus demonstrates its advantageous system. Think tank scholar Zhou Mi praised that China offered superior experiences not only in infrastructure and financing but also in the public health, medicine, vaccination, and long-term crisis response mechanisms that BRI countries can cooperate with and adopt.

In May, optimists seemed to gain more strength in Beijing, driven by the U.S. withdrawal from the WHO and the convening of China’s Two Sessions. In a CASS publication, researchers mapped out future scenarios of U.S. retrenchment and how China should respond in each scenario. They argued that U.S. deglobalization clearly presents opportunities for China to expand in the global arena. They also argued that China should pursue BRI by boosting collaboration with developing countries and working with advanced economies to provide “convenient, resilient, and smart” global supply chains. They pointed out the salience of trade in services, technology, and digital globalization. China needs to step up its technology capabilities,
and the world needs to construct new coordination and risk-management systems. According to this study, these are the opportunities for a new wave of globalization in which China can play a more influential role.\(^{35}\)

In summary, China’s diplomatic ambitions are demonstrated by researchers and scholars who have affiliations with the Chinese government or government-funded think tanks as well as by nationalist entrepreneurs. They have confidence in the future trajectory of multilateral governance and China’s leadership role in it. Some have vested interests in the BRI strategy and have advocated more connections between China and participating countries. In contrast, others have a more nationalist bent, observing the strengths of China’s political system, governance structure, and crisis management. However, overall, the optimists are globalists and advocate for Beijing to take a more active role in world affairs in the future. They are also pragmatic in identifying sectors that offer the potential for China to play a more substantial role in a post-pandemic world.

**Economic Pragmatism Needs BRI**

The third group is the most numerous and comprises mainly economic and diplomatic actors. As a whole, they are not as pessimistic as the strategists who focus on U.S.-China relations nor as ambitious as those who seek China’s expansion in a post-pandemic world. Instead, they view post-pandemic China and the world to be deeply troubled and challenged. For China to actively and effectively rescue itself, it must help others tackle the challenges of the pandemic and economic recovery. Many have worked on and are concerned about the economic fallout from the health crisis. Compared to the 2003 SARS outbreak, as one study argues, the world now is much more connected, and China is much more dependent on the health of consumer markets abroad. With the present crisis, even if China revives production, if North America, Europe, and Asia are still under the threat of the pandemic, there is little hope for China to achieve its economic goals.\(^{36}\)

In other words, pragmatists warned that the Covid-19 crisis has caused severe economic shock and supply chain interruptions and destabilized the global financial system. To mitigate the economic crisis, they argue that China


should coordinate with partner countries to resist all types of protectionism and repair supply chains as quickly as possible. Inside China, they argue that the country needs to expeditiously recover employment and production. After recovery, it can and should offer lessons and resources to help other countries recover.37

Compared to the second group, pragmatists assess that China’s economic recovery will be lengthy, complicated, and dependent on the rate of global recovery. They argue for China’s active engagement in bilateral coordination and multilateral organizations (e.g., the IMF and G-20) to help combat economic recession.38 Hu Biliang, a professor at Beijing Normal University, wrote in April 2020 that it is “highly probable that a global depression is happening this year.”39 To avoid this scenario, Hu argues that China should (1) work within the G-20 to collaborate and provide monetary and financial stimuli, (2) reduce tariffs and barriers to ensure supply chain stability, and (3) use BRI to enhance financial coordination and prevent regional and global financial crises.40

Pragmatists urge China to assist other countries in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, employing a similar rationale—China’s recovery is unachievable without a global recovery.41 Zhang Yuyan, a senior researcher at CASS, wrote that “the pandemic has shown that in interconnected times, a country cannot cut itself off from the rest of the world.” He added, “China will continue to contain the epidemic at home and lend a helping hand to other countries in their fight against the virus, thus safeguarding the shared future of humanity.”42 Similarly, scholar Zheng Guichu echoed that China’s international aid to combat Covid-19 is to “help oneself by helping others.”43

40 Ibid.
Zheng further recognized that anti-China forces have grown during the pandemic and are likely to bolster the trend of “slandering” China in the near term, but that “active and robust aid to developing countries in their fight against Covid-19 can neutralize such a trend.”

The logic of interdependence is clear in MOFCOM researcher Mei Xinyu’s argument for China’s active assistance to European countries to combat the pandemic. He provides two reasons. First, there are substantial numbers of Chinese living overseas, and helping their host societies recover helps expatriates settle, thus preventing an influx of returnees at a critical moment. Second, multinational companies in China benefit. In his view, helping foreign countries fight the coronavirus will enhance relationships with foreign-invested firms in China. These foreign companies are an integral part of the Chinese economy and care about their home countries’ well-being.

In terms of China’s role in the world economy, pragmatists recognize that, on the one hand, China’s speedy response to the crisis will win friends and help it become an “anchor” in the global system. On the other hand, the interruption of trade and supply chains will severely undermine the Chinese economy and its influence around the globe.

In summary, pragmatists underscore the severe economic and diplomatic challenges that China will face after the pandemic. China’s economic recovery cannot succeed without an adequate recovery of the global economy. Beijing will also face enormous diplomatic challenges after Covid-19, particularly in advanced societies, making economic recovery even more difficult. Hence, policy actors argue that China should conduct robust multilateral efforts to fight the global pandemic and help other countries. Global and multilateral actions, in the pragmatists’ view, are needed for China to revive its economy and rebuild diplomatic space abroad.

The discourses studied here are not all focused specifically on BRI. The first group focuses on U.S.-China strategic competition, the second group emphasizes China’s diplomatic leadership, and the third underscores the interdependent global economy. Nonetheless, this discursive layout is consistent with the motivations behind BRI’s launch in 2013 and provides a

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conducive environment to preserve the continuity of the initiative after the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, what is essential is not what China says but what it does. The following activities show that local governments, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and central agencies—the middle elites—are continuing their BRI projects and programs, although with different priorities.

**Actions to Continue BRI**

The policy communities above have argued for BRI continuity to manage the U.S.-China rivalry, expand China’s global roles, and help China revive its economy. But what about the practitioners and implementers of BRI? Do they have motivations and pressures to continue the strategy? This section finds that although some BRI projects experienced inevitable interruption, actions during the pandemic indicate efforts to continue and adapt BRI implementation to suit new realities within and without China.

Following the Covid-19 outbreak, economic actors in China made the following efforts: SOEs that have overseas projects strived to fulfill their obligations to the extent possible, and local governments tried to continue overseas BRI programs and expand new domestic projects. At the central agency level, new policies facilitated investment and trade abroad, including in BRI countries. Beijing’s new stimulus efforts seek to maintain international trade and investment in China and are likely to facilitate and expand linkages under the BRI framework. Likewise, China’s scientific communities have started to renew and expand collaboration with their BRI counterparts. With the Health Silk Road framework, digital infrastructure, and scientific alliances, these new areas of collaboration are likely to grow after the crisis. The AIIB, with its $10 billion Covid-19 emergency fund, has pledged to finance member countries’ health infrastructure development and capacity building.

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Economic Actors Maintain BRI

In China, BRI became the leading strategy because it spoke to Beijing’s global aspirations as well as met the development needs of local governments and SOEs. These vested interests have remained, and during the Covid-19 pandemic BRI projects have tried to stay in operation.

Among local governments, coastal Jiangsu Province had invested in high-profile economic zones in BRI countries. When the virus broke out, the province and its BRI special zones were quick to respond. To stabilize business in these zones, the provincial Organization Department sent cadres to help combat the virus on site. In the China-UAE Industrial Capacity Cooperation Demonstration Zone, for example, the management office rapidly installed an online services system and expeditiously started virus prevention and control.\(^5\) Also orchestrated by the provincial Organization Department, doctors from Jiangsu went to help fight the health crisis in the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone in Cambodia, setting up protocols and checkpoints for detection and prevention as well as distributing information to the zone’s 26,000 workers. In May 2020, Jiangsu announced its plan to upgrade the Cambodian zone and connect it more integrally with both BRI operations in Southeast Asia and existing zones in the province. Other coastal provinces also passed new plans and projects to expand BRI implementation.\(^5\)

In inland China, local governments began to revive and expand projects in the name of BRI as soon as they contained the pandemic in March. For example, Shaanxi published its provincial 2020 Belt and Road Action Plan, proposing to upgrade the province’s pivotal position in regional commerce and logistics.\(^5\) The plan highlights Shaanxi’s motion to become “the Belt and Road Aviation Experimental Site” and promote e-commerce with BRI markets. The province also strived to expedite automation and digital railways to integrate major domestic and regional railway arteries and ports in China as well as construct more linkages with Central and Southeast Asia to expand market

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\(^5\) “Jiangsu zhongdian jingwai yuanqu ‘Yidai Yilu’ yanxing yuanqu yiqing fanxian” [Jiangsu’s Overseas Economic Zones Jointly Built a Virus Control and Preventive Line in the “BRI” Region], Xinhua, February 6, 2020.


access. Inland cities such as Chongqing, Chengdu, and Urumqi likewise have proposed localized BRI action plans for after the pandemic.\(^5\)

SOEs have been the main BRI actors and have developed extensive supply networks with subsidiaries in China and abroad. When Covid-19 broke out, their priority was to “ensure the operation of global supply chains and stabilize international trade and capacity cooperation.”\(^5\) For example, China Merchants’ Group recovered, to the extent possible, production in overseas projects in January and tried to maintain its 2019 volume. China Railways Heavy Manufacturing continued its production schedule and ensured shipments of heavy machinery to fulfill its parent company’s tunnel projects in Turkey and Russia. China Chemical’s subsidiaries are essential exporters of chemical products used in agriculture, medicine, textiles, and fertilizers in many countries, and throughout the outbreak they kept their production schedule. To ensure supplies to China Energy Engineering Corporation’s project in Poland, Huaye Iron and Steel had 150 laborers work overtime throughout the crisis.\(^5\)

Similar patterns occurred in China Electronics Corporation and its subsidiaries in Shenzhen; China Railway Materials’ operations in Hungary and Serbia; China Nonferrous Metal’s projects in Congo; China Huadian Corporation’s hydropower projects in Cambodia, Bali, and Vietnam; China Electricity’s wind power project in Kazakhstan; and China Communications Construction’s port project in Angola. In particular, China Construction Materials ensured that its principal subsidiaries would continue production, sign new contracts, and pledge to complete 110 overseas projects. Logistics were also critical to ensure global supply chains. To maintain on-time export shipments and conduct coronavirus control at domestic ports, China COSCO Shipping reoriented its online and offline operations to make it more efficient and enhanced its shipping networks worldwide, particularly in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. China-Europe Railways increased its shipments and trips to ensure stable trade and production of foreign companies in central China.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Ibid.

Companies with less pressure to fulfill supplies to other SOEs have had a more relaxed production schedule during the pandemic. For example, China Metallurgical Group extended the length of vacations in its Thailand subsidiary, and its regulator in Beijing employed remote tools to monitor quality control and maintain productive capacity. Headquarters also sent a manager from an unaffected country to the Thailand site to recover 50% production capacity. Furthermore, Chinese SOEs do not have control over the fallout from the pandemic in China and abroad. Many of their BRI projects were paused due to lockdowns in both China and abroad. China Railways, for example, paused its $6 billion speed railway project in Indonesia and ordered the Chinese workers home for the Chinese New Year through February.

In summary, actions by Chinese economic actors adopted to ensure BRI’s continued implementation demonstrate that, as an economic globalization program, BRI policy has had a lasting impact. In the past six years, SOEs and local governments have expanded their roles in BRI in China and abroad. Moreover, as these actors are connected within China and held mutually responsible, BRI projects become more sustainable and likely to survive the shock and aftershocks of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic has precipitated changes in China’s development priorities, with health, technology, and the digital economy now being emphasized. At the same time, it has also caused shifting demands in recipient countries, with new calls for health and science projects.

Government Policy Stabilizes BRI

In January and February, Beijing’s main task was to ensure the fulfillment of its overseas orders and supply chains as much as possible while fighting the virus. MOFCOM started the process early and passed down documents to facilitate industry and encourage e-commerce. In late January, MOFCOM created a special team to implement BRI during Covid-19. By late February, the team had completed coordination with all provincial governments, Chinese companies, and foreign aid personnel. In total, MOFCOM passed twenty policies to “stabilize foreign trade and foreign investment as well as to maintain consumption” by focusing on (1) bringing licenses, crediting, and other paperwork online, (2) reducing tariffs and creating networks of sales
in medical supplies, and (3) directing local governments and companies to revive production as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{57}

Other government agencies led efforts in providing incentives and subsidies to help companies, particularly SOEs. For example, the People’s Bank of China, Ministry of Finance, and other financial institutions passed measures to increase loans and insurance to companies, as well as temporarily paused loan repayment. The Ministry of Finance, in particular, offered 50% loan subsidies for companies experiencing significant disruption due to Covid-19, allowed donations to be tax-deductible, and permitted industries suffering the most to defer tax payments for five to eight years.\textsuperscript{58} The NDRC, in turn, passed electricity fee reductions to companies and launched a “green channel” for corporate bonds to expedite the application and extend the duration. The Taxation and Customs administrations then applied special tariff rates for medical equipment imports and exports. In late 2020, cross-agency efforts to save and stabilize globalization in China continued and intensified.\textsuperscript{59}

Furthermore, Beijing’s efforts to stimulate the domestic economy by expanding cross-border e-commerce and promoting new infrastructure projects in China have helped sustain and reorient future BRI implementation. Beijing has aggressively promoted e-commerce experiment zones across China to search for new export channels. Such zones carry many incentives, such as reduced or deferred tariffs, favorable tax rates on exports, and better infrastructure and services. The first five e-commerce experiment sites started in 2015, and by 2019 the number had grown to 59. The growth of e-commerce trade was astonishing in these four years, with an average annual growth rate of 49.5%. After the outbreak, in April 2020, Beijing approved 46 new e-commerce zones and supported cross-border offline e-commerce industrial parks. Its aim is to create new industrial clusters that involve traditional businesses, online connectivity, and trading companies going global and establishing international storage sites. In July, Beijing designated ten cities as new experimental zones for cross-border business-to-business e-commerce, offering companies more incentives and administrative support.\textsuperscript{60}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} “Tuanjie yixin zhuahao yiqing fankong, tuijin Yidai Yilu jianshe” [United in Virus Prevention and Control, Promote the Construction of the Belt and Road], ComNews, February 27, 2020 — http://www.comnews.cn/article/ibdnews/202002/20200200038212.shtml.
\item \textsuperscript{58} “10 buzhang dati: Xiabannian zheme gan” [10 Central Ministers Reported Their Work Plans for the Year], Zhongguo Yidai Yilu wang, August 16, 2020 — https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/187315460.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
The New Infrastructure Plan—different from traditional infrastructure such as power plants, railways, and ports—was being considered before Covid-19. Facing economic recession, China rolled out the plan expeditiously in early 2020 to mobilize local governments and financial institutions to come up with new localized infrastructure proposals and projects employing information technology, digital networks, big data, and artificial intelligence. For example, in Zhejiang the provincial government enhanced support for a cloud-based economy and facilitated small and medium-sized companies’ internet-enabled businesses. In Chengdu, a supercomputer and data-processing center was completed in April that will provide full digital economy and information technology coverage for western China. Planning for these new infrastructure projects is still in the early implementation stage, yet given the connectivity between internal and external BRI projects, new localized infrastructure projects are soon likely to boost digital and technology-enabled applications abroad as well.61

In May, agencies in Beijing publicized that China’s exports and imports with BRI-participating countries increased by 3.2% in the first quarter of 2020. While this was not a high rate, it was more than 9.6% higher than average trade in China during the same period. Investment in BRI increased by 11.7%, against an overall decline in investment in other destinations.62 Beijing affirmed its goal of constructing high-quality BRI infrastructure in the future, focusing on three aspects: (1) a network of free-trade zones along BRI routes, (2) establishing a Health Silk Road and a Digital Silk Road, and (3) soft and social cooperation between China and BRI countries.63 This message was clear in Xi Jinping’s speech, the State Council’s Government Work Report, and multiple communications by central agencies and Chinese media at the Two Sessions held in late May 2020. Ministers of the NDRC, MOFCOM, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (representing domestic industry, international commerce, and diplomacy) all pledged that China will strive to promote the Health Silk Road and Digital Silk Road frameworks with BRI countries.64

61 “Shiqiang chengshi de Yidai Yilu.”
Collaborations among scientists have been the softest illustration of BRI in the last few years, and Covid-19 has enhanced many of the ongoing soft institutions and collaborations in science and education. On March 11, 2020, the BRI Science and Innovation Consortium, based at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, held an emergency online conference. Attendees from universities in Russia, Thailand, Pakistan, Serbia, and other institutions in China discussed and exchanged ideas regarding how to help fight the pandemic. The Shanghai government science and technology (S&T) director spoke at the meeting and urged the consortium to pioneer joint measures in preventative health and pave the foundation for establishing an international collaborative mechanism. Universities in China shared their emergency measures and research findings. Representatives of the Shanghai-sponsored field hospital in Wuhan also participated and related their experiences. The consortium’s chairperson disseminated Shanghai’s procedures and mechanisms to ensure research and teaching while supporting other agencies’ efforts to contain the virus.

The Shanghai-based consortium is but one of many soft institutions in BRI spearheaded by Chinese universities and scientists in recent years. BRI has led universities in China to improvise programs and build coalitions inside the country and with counterparts in BRI-participating countries. In 2016, leveraging BRI, Shanghai Jiao Tong University launched an executive program on university S&T innovation system development and received endorsement from the Ministry of Science and Technology. The first cohort recruited members from fourteen university leaderships in eight BRI countries, including Egypt, Pakistan, the Philippines, Kazakhstan, Sudan, Thailand, India, and Indonesia. The Ministry of Education S&T director, Shanghai government S&T director, representatives from Shanghai’s foreign affairs office, and consulates of BRI countries attended the inaugural program and showed support. The executive program lasted for only two weeks, but it established networks that included S&T communities in China and partner BRI countries.


66 “Kejibu gaoxiao keji chuangxin tixi jianshe yu guanji peixunban ji Yidai Yilu keji chuangxin lianmen zhengshi qidong” [MST Opens the BRI Training Program on S&T Innovation and the Inauguration of the Belt and Road S&T Innovation Consortium], Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Executive Training Center, October 21, 2016 ~ http://edp.sjtu.edu.cn/news/express/27750.html.
Following the executive program, the BRI Science and Innovation Consortium officially came into being in October 2016. The first signed members consisted of prominent research institutions based in Shanghai, China’s technology transfer center headquartered in Shanghai, a new energy technology company, universities, S&T centers, and companies from Singapore, Thailand, Egypt, Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, and Serbia, among others. It focused on coordinating mechanisms among universities, research institutions, and high-tech companies. Based on this consortium, Shanghai is expected to play a leading role in S&T cooperation between China and BRI partners. In September 2017 the consortium held its inaugural summit in Shanghai and published the “Shanghai Declaration on Belt and Road S&T Innovation.” By its third annual forum in 2019, more than 150 representatives from twenty countries attended. At the forum, the Shanghai government’s S&T director remarked that “the consortium is an important experiment for Shanghai to become the accelerator of the S&T component in the BRI strategy,” urging members to participate actively and pioneer science and innovation in BRI countries.

Scientists in Beijing have also been active in establishing networks in the name of BRI. The Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) has spun off several fast-growing scientific programs. In 2014, CAS upgraded its collaboration with Uzbekistan’s Ulugh Beg Astronomical Institute, and in 2017–18 it established the Alliance of International Science Organizations (ANSO) with other BRI partners. In 2018, more than twenty nations and 37 academic institutions signed on with ANSO. In 2019, an additional 15 institutions joined. Drawing on its network of research operations in Africa, South America, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world, CAS pushed for the formation of the Digital Silk Road. In public health, it early on began collaborative research with other BRI participants. In 2016, CAS scientists started to research and cooperate on infectious diseases, arguing that public health was not only part of the initiative but a guarantee of the healthy development of BRI. They started to build an international network on infectious disease and planned to complete and share it among the members by 2020.

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paused the formal process, but now Chinese medical specialists are expediting the collaboration.\footnote{Chen Yongjun, “Quanqiu yiqing fankong xuyao Yidai Yilu guoji hezuo xinmoshi” [The Global Pandemic Control Needs the Belt and Road New Cooperation], Xinhua, March 25, 2020 \url{http://n.eastday.com/pnews/1585115829015994}; and Wu Xiaobin, “Zhongguo chuangxinyao ying huiji Yidai Yilu yanxian guojia” [China-Invented Medicine Should Benefit BRI Countries], Zhongguo Yidai Yilu wang, November 29, 2020 \url{https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/320874773}.}

To keep pace with scientific initiatives in Shanghai and Beijing, China’s Medical Science University organized the Belt and Road International Medical Education Alliance (BRIMEA) in May 2018 and invited participants from 49 medical education institutions from fifteen BRI countries. At BRIMEA’s inaugural conference, the members signed a cooperation framework agreement and publicized the Shenyang Declaration, in which they pledged to conduct joint research and education based on long-term mutual interest. They also pledged to conduct joint projects in public health and health professional training over the next three years.\footnote{“Yidai Yilu guoji yixue jiaoyu lianmen zai Shenyang chengli” [One Belt and One Road International Medical Education Alliance Established in Shenyang], People's Daily, May 28, 2018.} In 2019, BRIMEA held its second forum and published a series of documents for joint education and research in medical areas.

Shortly after the Covid-19 outbreak, BRIMEA disseminated among its member institutions the Initiative on Jointly Combating Coronavirus. It asked member institutions to share information and research output to help each other fight the pandemic; expedite research on test kits, immunization, and drugs; and come up with joint research programs for innovation in medical equipment and supplies. In response, all member institutions telegraphed to BRIMEA headquarters and stated that the “virus has no borders and international society has to fight it together.”\footnote{“Yidai Yilu guoji yixue jiaoyu lianmen haiwai chengyuan wei Zhongguo kangji yiqing jiayou” [Foreign Members of the Belt and Road Medical Education Consortium Sent Support of China’s Combat Against the Coronavirus], China Medical University, February 26, 2020 \url{http://www.cmu.edu.cn/info/1019/5932.htm}.} In March, BRIMEA started to rally member institutions to propose projects and programs that would facilitate student exchanges, faculty visits, joint education, and research programs. In May, it passed a new initiative on joint remote education in medical science for BRI countries, seeking to integrate and share educational resources and pedagogical experiences, increase the international visibility of the consortium, and achieve internationalization of medical training and research.

To summarize, BRI is more than China’s strategic policy. Since the launch of the initiative, Chinese actors have taken the program into their own hands.
and formed networks and associations in economic, social, and scientific areas. Hence, in the last six years, BRI has become China’s globalization platform, incorporating numerous interests and groups below the state level. Should Covid-19 make certain sectors less desirable from a recipient’s point of view, other sectors will likely step up. Similarly, should Chinese workers be less welcome in recipient societies, the number of scientists and technologists helping education, research, and innovation in BRI countries is likely to grow.

However, when the Covid-19 crisis is over and global production recovers, interest and investment in hard infrastructure and industry along BRI routes are likely also to rebound. Infrastructure, hard or soft, is needed for sustainable development and industrialization around the world. In June and July, for example, China restarted construction of railways, highways, and hydropower plants in Pakistan, while at the same time both states emphasized the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor’s digital infrastructure projects.73

**CONCLUSION**

China’s project of the century—the Belt and Road Initiative—was driven by domestic priorities to deflect the U.S.-China rivalry, search for alternative diplomatic space, and find new opportunities for industry. During its implementation, national agencies, think tanks, local governments, companies, and universities have conducted relevant programs that support and include their own interests and expertise. Before the pandemic, developments in 2019 suggested that BRI remained China’s overarching globalization platform, with softer and more sustainable linkages having emerged both domestically and in BRI countries. The Covid-19 crisis presented challenges to BRI in 2020. On the one hand, it nearly brought the Chinese economy to a halt and reduced Beijing’s capacity to invest abroad. On the other hand, it greatly intensified the U.S.-China rivalry as well as anti-China opinion in both BRI and non-BRI countries. Are these challenges enough to break BRI and force China to turn inward? What are the domestic drivers of BRI in a post-pandemic China? How may BRI implementation adapt?

Analysis of Chinese discourse in this article shows that policy elites in Beijing continue to support BRI following the Covid-19 outbreak. First, to

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strategists, China’s relations with the United States and its Western allies have gone so poorly that a new Cold War is inevitable. In this geopolitical context, BRI is instrumental in deflecting the escalation of great-power rivalry in a post-pandemic world. Second, China’s ambitious thinkers view Beijing’s capability and advantages as enhanced by its effective handling of the pandemic. They advocate for China to play a leadership role in the world, particularly in health, technology, and crisis management. Finally, most Chinese policy elites are sanguine in the face of the difficulties in China’s economic recovery and recognize that the nation’s future trajectory depends on global well-being. Diplomats and economists in this group urge China to engage and help the world fight the pandemic and recession. BRI represents an essential venue for China’s global engagement.

Just as important, analysis of Chinese actions demonstrates that BRI, as the country’s overarching globalization strategy, is continuing via technocratic, commercial, and societal groups—the middle elites—after the Covid-19 outbreak. Specifically, SOEs with supply chain commitments in BRI projects have tried to ensure satisfactory completion of obligations and maintain business stability as much as possible. Local governments, facing the pandemic’s economic shocks, have strived to maintain overseas business and expand new projects locally in the name of BRI. While the global pandemic has interrupted many economic activities in China and abroad, BRI’s scientific and soft institutions, focused on such issues as health, technology, education, and the environment, have expanded and are likely to grow faster in a post-pandemic world.74

This article has surveyed Covid-19’s critical cycle in China—from the outbreak to containment, economic reopening, and the return of political life, shedding light on domestic and global politics. First, China’s globalization agenda, in which BRI is an important platform, is more resilient than external observers perceive. The Chinese policy actors—strategists, diplomats, and economic technocrats—have embraced and benefited from deepening globalization. Thus, while hawkish rhetoric in Beijing and Washington persists, the main policy options available to Beijing remain (1) strategically rebalancing to de-escalate conflicts, (2) expanding different areas of diplomacy and globalization, and (3) recognizing the mutual dependence between China and the world. Furthermore, actions by companies, local

governments, and scientists and technologists provide the foundation for sustainable globalization through BRI. Like the central policymakers in Beijing, subnational actors have come up with projects, programs, and linkages in BRI’s name. The pandemic has not stunted these efforts.

Second, in terms of global politics, Covid-19 has intensified the conflictual high politics of great-power rivalry and the contentious low politics of widespread protests and anxieties in social media. Both trends point to the coming clash and devastating decoupling of China and the United States, as testified by political rhetoric and public opinion polls. In China, middle-level policy actors have shown a consistent conviction in stable development and robust engagement in globalization before and after Covid-19. The practitioners—local governments, SOEs, and scientists—had interests and aspirations in globalization before BRI, and they expanded their external activities after the implementation of the initiative. During the Covid-19 pandemic, their actions helped stabilize China’s global engagement in BRI and beyond.

Middle politics—involving policy professionals, companies, and various subnational actors—also exists in other countries. Because of this, Covid-19 is likely to have a more limited impact on the long-term trend of globalization than hawkish high and low politics indicate. However, the pandemic will have a significant effect on globalization’s priorities, making some sectors and areas more desirable or feasible than others. BRI will need to adapt to the changed global environment and China’s domestic circumstances in a post-pandemic world.75
