

How Do BRI Narratives and Actions Impact Cooperation Relations and Partnerships Worldwide?

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Abstract: - China's large-scale initiative BRI announced in 2013 first in Kazakhstan, then in Indonesia, detailed in March 2015 and included in the Chinese constitution in October 2017, has become the most intensely discussed and disputed development project worldwide. In the context of actual power shifts, it has been accompanied by both new narratives and actions of countries worldwide but especially in Asia-Pacific and even by the replacement of this denomination with the concept of "Indo-Pacific", strongly supported by the participants at the Quadrilateral Dialogue (United States-Japan-India-Australia). In only several years, BRI has forged for China solid partnerships with some countries but at the same time it increased the antagonism with others. Taking into account the present context, this paper is focused on finding out how the BRI is influencing the relations between the main actors, situated at the core of global changes.

Key-Words: - Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific vision, power shifts, alternative Silk Roads

1. Introduction: BRI, generator of a harsh competition among the actual and aspirant world powers

There are many answers offered by third parties at the question: *What is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?* Among the most usual answers in the literature there are: *China's global strategy or Grand Strategy, China's vision for global connectivity, interregional initiative or an instrument of the Chinese foreign policy.*

BRI is an economic initiative but with "geopolitical repercussions" (Fowdy, 2019). It is "Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy initiative" (Wuthnow, 2017) and "it is symbolic of China's more assertive foreign policy and departure from the strategy of *hide and bide* that long characterized Beijing's global engagement" (Feng *et al.*, 2019). Most of the recent Chinese initiatives have been included in the large BRI framework. Initially, this New Silk Road included two main segments: the land route (Silk Road Economic Belt, with six ramifications connecting China with Southeast, South and West Asia, the Middle East and Europe) with **six economic corridors** and the sea route (the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, linking Asia-Africa-Europe) (Map 1).

Map 1: Components of the BRI



Sources: South China Morning Post (2018), Merics (2018) and Grare (2018).

The first step in understanding BRI is a thorough study of Chinese official documents on the New Silk Road, its objectives, ways of implementation, priorities and cooperation mechanisms (Box 1). The second is an in-depth research on third countries' declarations and actions regarding BRI. The third is the literature review, together with the analysis of projects associated with the BRI (which can fall into several categories: successful for participants, successful for one side, renegotiated, postponed or cancelled). Otherwise we risk taking sides before having completely understood this complex project.

**Box 1: Chinese visions and actions on jointly building the BRI,
in search of complementarities with other connectivity initiatives**

NDRC (2015) describes BRI as “a **systematic project**, which should be jointly built through **consultation to meet the interests of all**, and efforts should be made to integrate the development strategies of the countries along the Belt and Road”. The principles associated with this development project represent the “**Silk Road Spirit**”, namely “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit”, which are win-win features. BRI has **five key goals**: “policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds”. A distinct sub-objective is to “form an infrastructure network connecting all sub-regions in Asia, and between Asia, Europe and Africa step by step”. Therefore the main focus is the Asian region, then the network of links with Europe and Africa, but also South America and other regions (BRF, 2017). This is not only a South-South cooperation platform but also a North-South one. Infrastructure development is seen as prerequisite to increasing trade, investment, job opportunities, people-to-people and cultural exchanges. It is encouraged “involvement of governments, international and regional organizations, the private sector, civil society and citizens”.

The BRI **principles** refer to: “consultation on equal footing”, “mutual benefit”, “harmony and inclusiveness”, “market-based operation” and “balance and sustainability” – being in line with those of the international organizations –.

In the list of **cooperation mechanisms** are included: “the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN Plus China (10+1), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), China-Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Dialogue, Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Economic Cooperation, and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)”, which are necessary “to strengthen communication with relevant countries”. Subsequently other countries, regions and institutions will be invited to participate in the BRI. At present, more than 70 countries have signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and statements with China related to cooperation under the BRI. The joint projects may be financed via Chinese banks (China Development Bank, the Export-Import Bank of China etc.), as well as the Silk Road Fund, China-Eurasia Economic Cooperation Fund and more recently by multilateral development banks (MDBs): The Asian Development Bank (ADB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the New Development Bank and the World Bank Group.¹

Source: Box elaborated by the author based on NDRC (2015) and BRF (2017).

The BRI map has been extending continuously so that nowadays it surpasses boundaries of Asia, Europe and Africa and reaches the Americas, the Arctic, cyberspace and even the outer space (Hillman, 2018a).

BRI has generated positive reactions (related to its objectives of *policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds*) but it faces also “enormous challenges of geopolitical suspicion, economic uncertainty and security risks” (Cui, 2016).

¹ Please consult the MoU dated May 2017, *on collaboration on matters of common interest under the BRI*, available at: <https://www.ndb.int/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/MOU-on-BRI-signed.pdf>.

As the attitudes of the key global actors (including here the triad US-Japan-EU) towards China have changed after the BRI was launched in 2013, this paper focuses on two inter-related aspects. First, it analyzes the new narratives and actions, associated with the actual power shifts. It stresses that many of the Chinese partners have become much more critical and harsh against BRI. Besides, some of them launched their own initiatives, such as the *US Indo-Pacific Economic Vision* or the *EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia*. Second, it synthesizes the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) linked to BRI, from the perspective of the new narratives and actions.

2. New narratives and actions going together with the BRI, a symbol of actual power shifts

Xi Jinping Thought has been accompanied by new narratives for the world (such as “shared destiny for mankind” and “win-win cooperation”) and for the Chinese society (the “Chinese dream”, the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”) but also by large-scale initiatives (Belt and Road or the New Silk Road, the launch of a new multilateral development bank, namely the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, inter-regional and Asian projects). Together with the new narratives and actions, the Chinese process of opening up and reform has continued after 2012 at a much faster pace than before.

Both Chinese narratives and actions are equivalent with more competitive advantages for China, which enables it on one hand to attract more and more supporters of its development model and on other hand to become a “fully developed nation” and a “world leader in science and technology” in the next three decades. However the EU and the US, together with other developed countries but also emerging and developing ones, have chosen to counterbalance China and have resorted to: **anti-Chinese narratives** and **concrete actions** in order to obtain more reciprocity and fairness in bilateral relations. In the literature, middle-power states’ strategy on how to deal with China is described as “hedging”, which includes “both containment and engagement” (López i Vidal and Pelegrín, 2018). Their prevailing position towards BRI is that of hedging against China but without losing sight of economic interests.

As regards competitors’ concrete actions, these include both bilateral and multilateral perspectives, such as: (1) the trade war initiated by the US against China; (2) steps to identify any project which could become a “threat” to national security, specific frameworks for screening FDI (US, EU, Japan) or even the cancellation/renegotiation of large-scale investment projects considered to be against the national interest (e.g. in Malaysia); (3) multilateral frameworks to hedge against China, such as the Quadrilateral Dialogue (United States-Japan-India-Australia); (4) alternatives to the BRI (*alternative Silk Roads*), for instance: the Japan-India “Asia-Africa Growth Corridor” (2017) (Prakash, 2018), the US Indo-Pacific Economic Vision (Pompeo, 2018), the US-Australia-Japan Trilateral Partnership on Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific (US Embassy and Consulates in Australia, 2018) and the EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia (2018) (EC-HR, 2018).

There is a plenty of anti-Chinese narratives examples in the recent US strategies (*US Defence Strategy of December 2017* – The White House, 2017a – and the *US Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia* – The White House, 2017b –), but also in official documents issued by other governmental and non-governmental organizations. In general, concrete actions are associated with anti-Chinese narratives.

In the *American Indo-Pacific Economic Vision* of 2018, US puts forth democratic values: “high standards, transparency, and adherence to the rule of law”, a “free” and “open” Indo-Pacific (FOIP) (Pompeo, 2018), resonating with the Japanese FOIP of 2016. It is underscored that “the United States does not invest for political influence, but rather practices partnership economics... We believe in strategic partnerships, not strategic dependency... We thus have never and will never seek domination in the Indo-Pacific, and we will oppose any country that does”. If one correlates this statement with the *US Defence Strategy of December 2017*, China appears as a “threat”. US intends to invest USD 113 million in new initiatives “to support foundational areas of the future: digital economy, energy, and infrastructure” in the Indo-Pacific and “the US government’s development finance capacity would more than double to \$60 billion dollars”, incomparably lower than the BRI projects. The US compensates this discrepancy by a strong narrative against China (as seen in the *US Defence Strategy*). Even the “terminological” enlargement of Asia-Pacific in order to include India

represents a concession offered to a much needed partner in the Indo-Pacific region (Oehler-Şincai, 2019). India, which in vain has been trying for more than 25 years to accede to APEC, represents for the US a like-minded partner and a large market (e.g. for the defence industry). Similar to other countries in the region, it considers that **hedging against China** is necessary, even if the bilateral trade and investment ties are strong.

Anti-Chinese narratives include general and specific assertions. In the category of **general assertions** is included the Chinese model itself, which is presented in antagonism with the neo-liberal models, a-priori associated with generally accepted political and economical values (*democracy, human dignity, human rights, freedom, equality and the rule of law, fairness, reciprocity*). There is also a host of **specific cases**, which put in antithesis good initiatives with the BRI, associated with: a “debt trap” (Hurley, Morris and Portelance, 2018) and consequently with the risk of “loss of sovereignty” (Yamada, Palma, 2018), the lack of transparency, non-compliance with international standards and norms and the crowding out phenomenon (Passi, 2018; Baruah, 2018; Grare, 2018; Saarela, 2018). The goals associated with the US-Australia-Japan Trilateral Partnership on Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific is a good illustration in this regard: “We share the belief that good investments stem from transparency, open competition, sustainability, adhering to robust global standards, employing the local workforce, and avoiding unsustainable debt burdens” (US Embassy and Consulates in Australia, 2018).

China’s relations with most of the countries in Asia-Pacific are similar to the Sino-Malaysian ties, which are compared with a “delicate balance” (Fowdy, 2019). China is the most important trade partner for most of the countries in the region. In the ASEAN group, only for Laos and Brunei it is the second largest partner (European Commission, 2019a). However these countries know how to hedge against China, especially together with large actors such as the US, Japan and India, which restrain from cooperating with China under the BRI. Their common front against China enables them to acquire a stronger bargaining power, as demonstrated by the recent renegotiation of the BRI projects by Malaysia, including the East Coast High Speed Railway.

The four decades of Chinese opening up and reform have shown that the pace of change is slower as compared to the others’ expectations. This is not due to bad will, but to specific conditions in China’s economy, culture and society, and political leaders must first take into account the expectations and needs of the population. US President Donald Trump reiterated in his speeches at prestigious summits that “America first” means the pursuit by the US of national interests, and every nation of the world must first take into account its own interests. Of course, it is not easy to overcome the situation when national interests collide, in which case both sides must resort to compromise in order to reach a new balance. The EU is currently requiring from China very much, as underlined by the document of March 2019, *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*. But China, considered a “systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” (European Commission, 2019b), cannot give up its model based on strong political control and meritocracy. It can make larger concessions in some areas, as indicated by its new investment law for instance, smaller in others, or even cannot make any concessions in sectors of national security. BRI is the best way for China to pursue its opening up and reform and at the same time to stimulate economic growth worldwide.

3. A concise SWOT analysis of the BRI

The most relevant group of projects under the BRI are those related to infrastructure development and adjacent services, essential for trade, investment, energy supply, better living standards and people-to-people exchanges. There are already many success stories linked to the BRI (Belt and Road News, 2019; South China Morning Post, 2018), such as:

- The projects in the Gwadar harbour, including the connection between the Pakistani Gwadar harbour and the Chinese Kashgar through an oil pipeline estimated to come into operation in 2021, which would complement the oil supplies via Dubai-Shanghai-Urumqi route (CPEC, 2018);
- The extension of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline;
- The Khorgos dry port, facilitating the railway transportation between East and West;
- The 142 km Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway, under construction;

- The completion of the 186.5 km Abuja–Kaduna Railway in Nigeria, as the first segment of the Lagos–Kano standard gauge project;
- Development of the Colombo Port City in Sri Lanka;
- The 30 km Temburong Bridge in Brunei, the country’s longest sea-crossing bridge, scheduled to open to traffic by the end of 2019;
- The railway system linking Asia to Europe (Box 2), reducing the travel time from around 40 days by sea to 18-20 days;
- The railway to Iran, via Khorgos-Almaty-Tode Bi-Tashkent-Samarkand-Bukara-Bayramaly-Mashhad-Shahrud-Teheran (10,400 km in 14 days);
- China-Belarus industrial park;
- Punta Sierra Wind Farm in Chile;
- Yamal LNG Project in Russia;
- Completion of the Padma bridge in Bangladesh, a first project among many others which are planned in the near future, with a total value estimated at around USD 31 billion, half of the amounts necessary for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Box 2: Railway services between China and Europe

According to Hillman (2018b), the development of **railway services** between China and Europe developed at an impressive pace, even if trade by rail represents only around 2% of the China-Europe trade by value. “Just 10 years ago, regular direct freight services from China to Europe did not exist... Today, they connect roughly 35 Chinese cities with 34 European cities”. This evolution is due to Chinese state subsidies but also to market-driven factors, in terms of costs and speed and also to the relocation of Chinese manufacturing facilities from the Eastern provinces to the Central and Western regions.

Source: Box elaborated by the author based on Hillman (2018b).

Such projects generated not only benefits for the host countries, but also advantages for China, such as: securing access to strategic resources, expanding to new markets, promoting the internationalization of the national currency, RMB, sea routes alternatives to the Malacca strait, opportunities of moving excess capacities abroad or larger marginal revenues for Chinese companies. Therefore they have been associated with a stronger Chinese geopolitical influence, generating fear of a too strong China. The following table synthesizes the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) linked to BRI.

Table 1: A SWOT analysis of the BRI based on the literature review

| Strengths, opportunities | Weaknesses, threats |
|---|---|
| The multi-trillion BRI corresponds to a strong demand for investment in infrastructure and connectivity development (only developing Asia’s needs being estimated at USD 26 trillion from 2016 to 2030, according to ADB, 2017). | Local pushback, renegotiation/cancellation of particular projects (because: an initial low level of local industry and workforce participation at BRI projects; fear of overdependence on China; third party influence; ethnic, social, and political divides linked to concerns about the fair distribution of benefits among different regions as it is the case in Balochistan/Pakistan) (Passi, 2018, Grare, 2018). |
| Infrastructure development has the potential to generate spillover effects in countries participating in the BRI (attraction of FDI in various sectors, participation at complex regional logistics networks, stimulation of local industries and labour market). | Large Chinese state owned companies are the main beneficiaries of the projects, which means distortion of fair competition (Saarela, 2018). |
| Cooperation with MDBs, taking into account their “knowledge, extensive experience, substantial | “BRI is not based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of |

| Strengths, opportunities | Weaknesses, threats |
|--|---|
| resources, and convening power” and also with multinational corporations from other countries in order to implement BRI projects. | law, openness, transparency and equality” (Baruah, 2018). |
| Infrastructure projects in less developed regions have a larger marginal benefit than in developed ones (Feng <i>et al.</i> , 2019). | It is focused on lending money, generating a “debt trap” especially for countries with a weak bargaining power, associated with an increasing Chinese geopolitical influence (Hurley, Morris and Portelance, 2018, Wuthnow, 2017). |
| It stimulates the increase of people-to-people exchanges, it spurs trade and investment and it “could serve as an accelerator, an effective enabler to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals” (CCIEE-UNDP, 2017). | Lack of sustainability and transparency with multiple potential effects: preventing other businesses to take part in projects, poor governance, corruption, increasing China’s influence (Feng <i>et al.</i> , 2019). |
| It helps China advance the reform and opening up not only through the development of the Chinese regions lagging behind but also by: expanding to new markets, diminishing the national production capacities in excess, promoting the internationalization of the national currency, RMB and generating a “circle of friends” in regions of Central Asia, Middle East, North Africa (Adarov, 2018). | Ignoring domestic problems in favour of overseas development and business opportunities (Feng <i>et al.</i> , 2019), the risk of increasing bad debts (Wuthnow, 2017) and also security risks, as BRI implies also projects in regions associated with conflicts and instability (Wuthnow, 2017). |
| China has taken measures in order to temper side effects/partners’ fears (increased international cooperation, partnerships with MDBs etc.). | Strategic locations in harbours generate suspicion from other global players, which aggravate tensions (Baruah, 2018). |
| The BRI map is continuously expanding according to partner countries’ development objectives. | The overall impact of the BRI is overestimated, as most of China’s infrastructure projects began as bilateral projects before the BRI was launched (Baruah, 2018). |

Source: Table elaborated by the author based on ADB (2017), CCIEE-UNDP (2017), Passi (2018), Baruah (2018), Grare (2018), Adarov (2018), Hurley, Morris and Portelance (2018), Saarela (2018) and Feng *et al.* (2019).

4. Conclusions

Most of the countries worldwide are ready to intensify cooperation with China under the BRI. This large scale initiative corresponds to a strong demand for investment in infrastructure and connectivity development. There are already many success stories under the BRI. However, the US, Japan and India do not participate in the BRI. The EU launched in 2015 a Connectivity Platform in order to link the BRI with European projects, however EU has recently distanced partially from China.

Critics of the BRI have resorted to concrete actions, which include both bilateral and multilateral perspectives, such as: (1) the trade war initiated by the US against China; (2) steps to identify any project which could become a “threat” to national security; (3) multilateral frameworks to hedge against China; (4) launch of alternative Silk Roads. The last mentioned category has become a new phenomenon which is worth paying attention to. It would represent a good engine of the world economy if it relied on complementarities with BRI, instead of fierce competition. The Japan-India Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (2017), the US Indo-Pacific Economic Vision (2018), the US-Australia-Japan Trilateral Partnership on Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific (2018) and even the EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia (2018) fall into this category.

Other states pursue a strategy of hedging against China, in order to increase their bargaining power, which resonates with their national interests. It is a good perspective as long as it leads to a higher level of participation at BRI projects on the part of private sector, local industry and workforce. China itself has already taken measures in order to temper side effects and partners' fears.

It is true that BRI brings various benefits not only for China's partners but for China itself, reflecting its win-win character, underlined by Chinese officials from the inception of the project. BRI is the best way for China to pursue its opening up and reform and at the same time to stimulate economic growth worldwide.

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