

China's Belt and Road Initiative is Neither a Strategy, Nor a Vision. It is a Process.

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*Grzegorz Stec*¹

Given the global attention received by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its impact on international affairs, it is remarkable how ambiguous the initiative remains. This is hardly astonishing, as Chinese foreign policies tend to strategically focus on general trajectories and leave more elasticity in comparison to Western ones. A reason for the government's reluctance to attach a specific definition to the BRI is that it continues to evolve.

One interpretation would be that BRI is China's new geopolitical and economic strategy; a plan adopted in the face of an American pivot to Asia that also ensures the continuation of China's trade surplus and new markets to satisfy domestic production overcapacity. BRI would then be aimed at sustaining China's growth in a global backdrop that is increasingly anxious of the country's growing influence.

Another interpretation would see BRI as a vision for a new wave of globalisation, one that can be defined without the historical baggage that the term possesses – a new development strategy for the world. A Chinese vision for a better global economy and society.

Neither is correct. Indeed, the initiative has constantly been in flux since first being introduced – something that can even be seen in its name. Due to the nature of Chinese foreign policy, we should see BRI as a process rather than a defined strategy or a clear vision. BRI progresses through an evolutionary process.

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¹ Grzegorz Stec is an Associate Researcher at the European Institute for Asian Studies. Mr Stec is also the founder of <https://beltandroad.blog/> a blog devoted to all aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Given the global attention received by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its impact on international affairs, it is remarkable how ambiguous the initiative remains. This is hardly astonishing, as Chinese foreign policies tend to strategically focus on general trajectories and leave more elasticity² in comparison to Western ones, which often feature blueprints with clearly defined objectives.

BRI's case is no different. The only strategic document devoted solely to BRI is the "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road"³ published in March 2015. The document is unsurprisingly both brief and vague. It lacks a clear description of what the BRI actually is; leaving the reader with a choice of interpretations:

*„**The Belt and Road Initiative is a way** for win-win cooperation that promotes common development and prosperity **and a road** towards peace and friendship by enhancing mutual understanding and trust, and strengthening all-round exchanges.“*

*"**The Belt and Road Initiative is 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."*

*„Though proposed by China, **the Belt and Road Initiative is a common aspiration** of all countries along their routes.“*

*„**The Initiative is an ambitious economic vision** of the opening-up of and cooperation among the countries along the Belt and Road.“*

Within the political discourse in China, many slogans have been applied to communicate the meaning of BRI. There are a number of recycled mantras from Hu Jintao's era: "Peaceful Rise", "Peaceful Development", "win-win approach", "increased connectivity", and "mutual respect and mutual understanding" being some of the main examples. However, if it was just reused rhetoric from previous Presidents, the BRI would simply mean 'more of the usual', as China would attempt to upkeep its strong position within international trade through improving infrastructure that Chinese companies would construct. But BRI is something else, it is more than the newest version of the 'win-win' rhetoric.

² Ekman, A. (2012). China's Two-Track Foreign Policy-From Ambiguous To Clear-Cut Positions. *Asie, Visions*, 58. Retrieved from <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/enotes/asie-visions/chinas-two-track-foreign-policy-ambiguous-clear-cut-positions>

³ *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, Issued in March 2015 by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, with State Council authorization. Retrieved from http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html

Chinese foreign policy is shifting, BRI is the clearest manifestation

But China has changed. Xi Jinping's China has clearly taken a more active role in international relations⁴ and moved away from Deng Xiaoping's notion of "keeping a low profile" (韬光养晦 *taoguang yanghui*) towards Xi Jinping's paradigm of "striving for achievements" (奋发有为 *fenfa youwei*).

It is within the context of this shift⁵ that China proposed the BRI and has employed more globally-oriented slogans to describe its flagship foreign policy initiative. One example is the aim of achieving a "shared destiny for all mankind" (人类命运共同体 *renlei mingyun gongtongti*). The fact that China is now confident enough to propose a project addressing "all mankind" highlights the extent of the foreign policy shift. In the words of a recent publication⁶ in People's Daily on Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress, China now finds itself in "a key period for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and is "more confident, and more competent, than any time in history" to grasp the "historic opportunity".

Despite these grandiose ambitions and involvement from a number of Chinese stakeholders, reliable data on BRI is hard to come by, as there is no clear criteria on how to distinguish a BRI project from regular economic or diplomatic relations. Chinese academics have taken to writing extensively on the BRI, but despite over 23,800 works published on the BRI in China in 2017 alone, on the CNKI database, along with a plethora of conferences organized on the BRI, the crucial question of what the BRI actually is remains awkwardly unaddressed.

BRI is in flux, just like its name

One reason for the government's reluctance to attach a specific definition to the BRI is that it continues to evolve. Indeed, the initiative has constantly been in flux since first being introduced – something that can even be seen in its name.

The concept was first introduced in September 2013 in a speech given by President Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. The name given to the initiative at the time was "Economic Belt along the Silk Road" (丝绸之路经济带 *sichou zhi lu jingji dai*). Xi introduced the policy by linking it to the historical Silk Road and emphasising the development potential for Central Asia. The "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (21世纪海上丝绸之路 *21 shiji haishang sichou zhi lu*), targeting Southeast Asia, Oceania, and North

⁴ Wacker, G. (2015) The Irreversible Rise. A New Foreign Policy for a Stronger China. In A. Amighini, A. Berkofsky (Eds.), *ISPI Report Xi's Policy Gambles: The Bumpy Road Ahead* (pp.64-77). Retrieved from <http://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/CHINA.POLICY.2015/CHINA.POLICY.Cap.4.EBOOK.pdf>

⁵ Mardell, J. (2017, October 25) The 'Community of Common Destiny' in Xi Jinping's New Era. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-community-of-common-destiny-in-xi-jinpings-new-era/>

⁶ Xin, Z. (2018, January 15) CPC newspaper says China should "grasp historic opportunity. *Xinhua*. Retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/15/c_136897189.htm

Africa was unveiled soon after in October 2013 in President Xi’s speech to the Indonesian Parliament in Jakarta. The two initiatives combined acquired the name, “One Belt, One Road” (一带一路 *yidai yilu*) by the end of 2013.

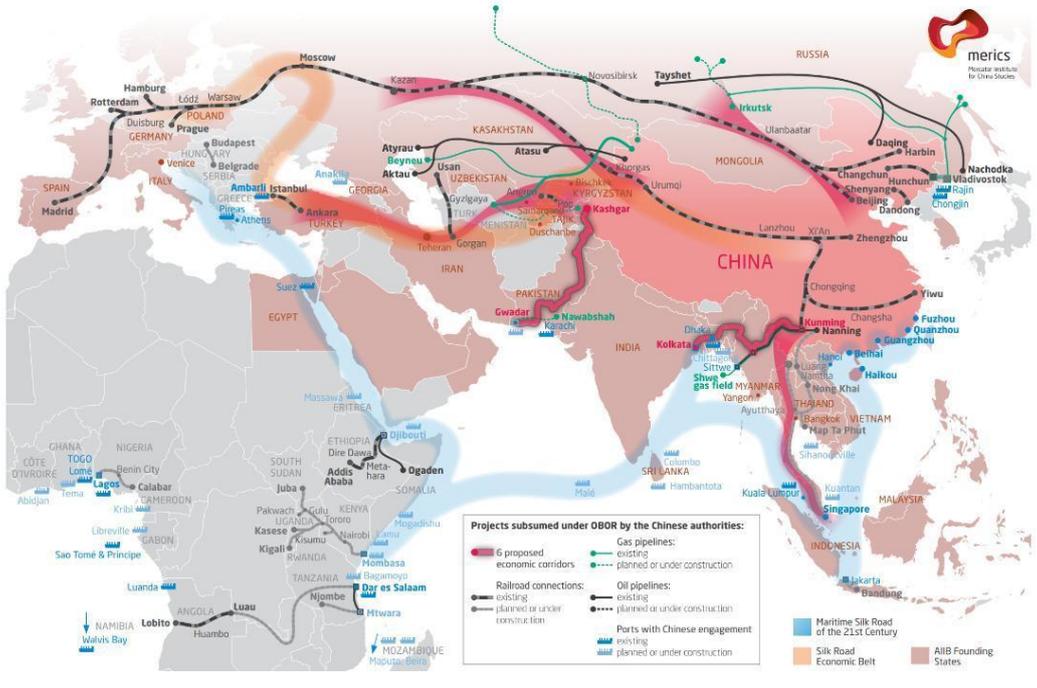


Figure 1: Map of the Transportation Links along the Belt and Road Initiative (MERICS)

In September 2015, the government issued guidelines for official translation⁷ of “一带一路” (*yidai yilu*) as “Belt and Road” rather than “One Belt, One Road”. But more interestingly, the document specifically forbid to translate the phrase 倡议 (*changyi*) as “strategy”, “program”, “project” or “agenda”. Instead the official title is “initiative”, which we see in the name today.

These iterations highlight a process whereby the initiative has become more inclusive with time; previously the two components were sub-regional – now the term is a global one that leaves much elasticity for China to interpret according to its views. The recent call on Latin American countries⁸ to take part in the Initiative is a clear proof that Beijing thinks beyond old Silk Road and is planning to shape new ones.

⁷ 白, 孙靖 (2015, 九月 25) “一带一路”倡议英文译法有了规范. *中国经济导报-中国发展网*. Retrieved from <http://news.chinadevelopment.com.cn/zj/2015/09/963154.shtml> (Bai, S.J. (2015, September 25) The “One Belt One Road Initiative” standardized translation into English guidelines. *China Economic Herald & China Development Net*. Retrieved from <http://news.chinadevelopment.com.cn/zj/2015/09/963154.shtml>)

⁸ Cambero, F., Sherwood, D. (2018, January 22) China invites Latin America to take part in One Belt, One Road. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-chile-china/china-invites-latin-america-to-take-part-in-one-belt-one-road-idUSKBN1FB2CN>

What can we interpret about BRI from the recent changes?

Therefore, attempts to pin down the exact meaning of BRI in the way foreign policies are understood in the West may be futile. The name of the Initiative is likely to be sealed, as it was enshrined in the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party⁹ during the 19th National People Congress, but its exact meaning is likely to continue to fluctuate depending on the needs of China.

Is the BRI a Chinese strategy aimed at pushing its national interests or as a Chinese vision for a better global economy and society? These two oft-cited interpretations strike at the heart of the China threat versus China opportunity debate, which seeks to interpret the impact of China's growing position on the future of the international order. It is a debate between hopes that China can play a constructive role in the international order and fears it may be playing a long game based on zero-sum logic. The standpoint of specific actors to China's re-emergence within global order depends, as often, on their goals within international politics and interpretations of BRI are also a function of this standpoint.

Interpretation 1: BRI as a Strategy

One interpretation would be that BRI is China's new geopolitical and economic strategy; a plan adopted in the face of an American pivot to Asia that also ensures the continuation of China's trade surplus and new markets to satisfy domestic production overcapacity. BRI would then be aimed at sustaining China's growth in a global backdrop that is increasingly anxious of the country's growing influence.

Leaving the "keeping a low profile" (韬光养晦 *taoguang yanghui*) strategy behind and aiming to play a more consequential role in international affairs, China needed to rebrand its growth in the eyes of other countries into an opportunity rather than a threat. This in turn allows China to continue to grow and to accumulate power within the international system. BRI could be seen as the vehicle through which that transition occurs. It is an adaptive strategy that permits China to use its economic charm and sophisticated rhetorical tools to present its national interests as desirable to other international actors through 'win-win logic'. So BRI buys China more time to develop economically and slowly shifts the global balance of power towards China.

Interpretation 2: BRI as a Vision

Another interpretation would see BRI as a vision for a new wave of globalisation, one that can be defined without the historical baggage that the term possesses – a new development strategy for the world. Ironically, it is the rise of populism and protectionism

⁹ Prasad R., Römer M., Stec G. (2017, October 26) Belt and Road in CCP Constitution – Future sealed? *Belt and Road Blog*. Retrieved from <https://beltandroad.blog/2017/10/26/belt-and-road-in-ccp-constitution-future-sealed/>

in the West and President Donald Trump's rhetoric in particular, that helped China¹⁰ to promote itself as the main engine of globalisation and gave BRI more substance. The now famous speech of President Xi Jinping in Davos¹¹ in 2017 clearly contrasted with President Trump's rhetoric, and encapsulates this new narrative for China's role in global affairs.

Consequently, BRI could be viewed as a Chinese vision of "making our planet great again" borrowing President Macron's slogan¹². And BRI's goal of achieving a community of "shared destiny for all mankind" would mean shaping a new vision for globalisation with Chinese characteristics, which is likely to be distinct from the one led by the US after World War Two.

Belt and Road as a Process

Despite these two interpretations dominating the headlines, neither is correct. Due to the nature of Chinese foreign policy, we should see BRI as a process rather than a defined strategy or a clear vision. BRI progresses through an evolutionary process, we have already seen its metamorphosis from an initiative solely focused on infrastructure to one which now also incorporates industry, tech, cultural and environmental components. At the same time, the BRI has been increasing its geographical scope by shifting its focus from the historic Silk Road region to the entire globe. Chinese policy makers have also been setting BRI increasingly ambitious goals; from economic development to constructing a community of "shared destiny for all mankind". As a result, the only constant BRI has exhibited is its propensity to change. Yes, there are persuasive arguments that BRI could be a strategy or a vision, or even something else entirely. However, these interpretations can also be disputed, in part due to the lack of transparency and data on the initiative. What we can say definitively, is that in its first five years, BRI has been a process. Where that process will lead is difficult to say, indeed it could tend towards a strategy, a vision or even remain as a perpetual process.

¹⁰ Goodman, P. (2017, January 17) In Era of Trump, China's President Champions Economic Globalization. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/17/business/dealbook/world-economic-forum-davos-china-xi-globalization.html>

¹¹ Barkin, N.& Piper, E. (2017, January 17) China's Xi Positions Himself As Champion Of Globalization At Davos. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/china-xi-globalization-davos_us_587e705be4b0c147f0bb6fc4

¹² Yu, L., (2018, January 11) Commentary: China, France will "make our planet great again". *Xinhua*. Retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/11/c_136886160.htm

European Institute for Asian Studies – EIAS a.s.b.l.
26 Rue de la Loi, 10th Floor, 1040 Brussels/Belgium
Tel.: +32 2 230 81 22 E-mail: eias@eias.org Website: www.eias.org

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 European Institute for Asian Studies

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