

LITERATURE REVIEW

“The Chinese people have stood up” (Mao Zedong, 1949)

Attempting to summarise the field and situate this paper within it is no small task given the ‘crowded’ analytical space. Between 2014 and 2017 alone, nearly 49,000 academic articles relating to the BRI were published (Weidong, et al., 2018). The aim of this literature review then is to provide a ‘tour d’ horizon’ of the major perspectives pertaining to the BRI. In doing so, the literature review tackles the following questions: What does the Belt and Road Initiative entail? Why has China formulated this initiative now? Will the BRI complement or contest the existing economic order? The first half of the review ‘maps out’ the BRI, aiming to highlight the scope of the Belt and Road framework. The second half of the literature review then organises and examines the major political and scholarly perspectives pertaining towards the BRI.

Mapping the Belt and Road Initiative

The first recorded mention of what is now known as the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ appeared in a speech by President Xi during his visit to Kazakhstan in 2013. The speech entitled ‘Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future’, focused on China’s policy of “good neighbourly and friendly cooperation towards countries in Central Asia” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 2013a). It was here President Xi proposed ‘joining hands’ to establish a ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’. Details on the initiative were sparse at first and the content difficult to interpret (Zhang, 2018, p.329). However throughout 2013-2015, President Xi and other Chinese elites began to ‘flesh out’ the initiative, through a series of speeches and policy papers. In November 2013, the BRI was written into the PRC’s Central Committees’ comprehensive reform blueprint as a key policy priority before 2020 (Huang, 2016, p.314). Then in March 2015, the most comprehensive outline of the Initiative was issued with the release of ‘Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’, issued by the National Development and Reform Commission and Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Commerce in 2015 (hereafter, V&A, NDRC et al. 2015) According to the V&A white paper the Belt and Road initiative aims to

... Promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries. (Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road)

However the BRI is more than simply infrastructure development, as evidenced by the five key priorities for cooperation set out in the V&A white paper:

1.1 Policy Coordination

Policy coordination refers to promoting “multi-level inter-governmental macro-policy dialogues”. In essence the aim is to promote inter-governmental cooperation in order to support such large-scale projects (V&A, NDRC et al.,

2015). Although ‘policy coordination’ seeks to ‘expand’ and ‘enhance’ shared interest among countries, Beijing is hoping to encourage countries along the Belt and Road to fully coordinate their current and future economic development strategies in line with the BRI (Dunford & Lui, 2019).

1.2 Facilities Connectivity

Facilities connectivity aims at strengthening plans for basic infrastructure among Belt and Road countries. The aim is to seek convergence of infrastructure construction plans and technical standards within each country in order to create an expansive network linking all sub-regions in Asia and between Asia, Europe and Africa (V&A, 2015). However, facilities connectivity does not simply refer to transport infrastructure, but also energy and communications connectivity. Specifically, this means promoting cooperation in building cross-border power supply networks as well as cross-border optical cables and other communications trunk line networks.

High-speed railroads	Eurasian High-speed Rail (Starting from London, through Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, Kiev, to Moscow where it will separate into two branches, one into Kazakhstan, and the other into Russia's Far East, and then into the North Eastern Region in China) Central Asian High-speed Rail (Starting from Urumqi, through Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey and arriving in Germany) Pan-Asian High-speed Rail (Starting in Kunming toward Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia and arriving in Singapore, another line through Thailand)
Oil/gas pipelines	Central Asian natural gas pipeline line (passing through China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, etc) China–Eastern Russia Line natural gas pipeline
Telecom and electricity links	China–Myanmar, China–Tajikistan, China–Pakistan cross-border communication lines China–Russia power and communication lines

Table 1: Cross-border projects of the Belt & Road Initiative (Huang, 2016, p.319)

1.3 Unimpeded Trade

A major task in building the BRI is investment and trade cooperation. To aid this, the initiative is focusing heavily on removing trade and investment barriers, developing free trade zones, cross-border e-commerce and customs cooperation.

1.4 Financial Integration

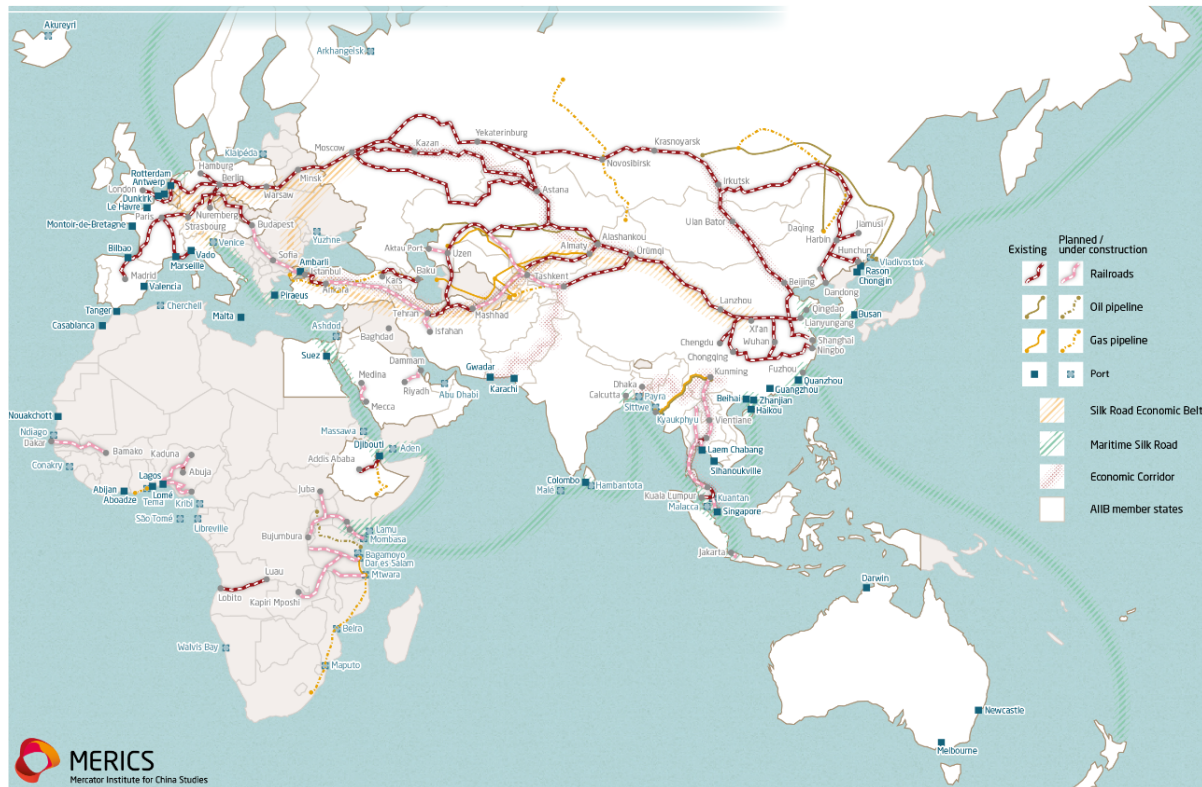
This is a key pillar of the Belt and Road Initiative and is openly stated as such within the V&A white paper. The Major projects are the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF). Other cross-border initiatives to increase financial integration include building a currency stability system, expand currency swaps and settlements and to develop an Asian bond market.

1.5 People-to-People Bond

People-to-people bond is intended to provide the public support needed to implement the initiative (Dunford & Lui, 2019, p.153). This is to be achieved through cultural and academic exchanges, joint scientific and technological research as well as cooperation to expand the scale of tourism.

A Geographic Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative

Figure 1: Map of the transport and energy projects along the Belt and Road Initiative.



Source: (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2018)

The BRI is comprised of two major components: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI). The Silk Road Economic Belt consists of three routes. All three starting from China - the first runs through Central Asia and Russia to Europe. The second also goes through Central Asia but pivots down into the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. The third route runs through South and South-East Asia ending at the Indian Ocean. Then the Maritime Silk Road, beginning at China's coastal ports goes through the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. In addition to the two belts (the SREB and MSRI) there are four economic corridors, which in keeping with the five key priorities of cooperation, will be closely linked into the overarching BRI framework. (Ionela Pop, 2016, p.2-3; Reeves, 2018). They include the: China-Mongolia-Russia; China-Pakistan; China-Indochina and China-Myanmar-India-Bangladesh economic corridors.

Motivations Undergirding the Belt and Road Initiative

Having attempted to outline the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative, the next section reviews the political and scholarly perspectives pertaining to it. The academic literature can broadly be divided into three camps with regard to the characterisation of the BRI. The first is that "China's efforts to enhance multilateral regional cooperation through the BRI are strongly motivated by a multifaceted grand strategy" (Zhou and Esteban, 2018, p.487). The strategic aspect of the BRI has been "to break perceived U.S. 'encirclement' in the Asia-Pacific and constrain the rise of India" (Clarke, 2018, p.72). If fully realised, the BRI "can be characterised as nothing less than rewriting the current geopolitical landscape" (Fallon, 2015, p.140). The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) acts as a

'spearhead' for the BRI, putting "China at the centre of geoeconomics and geopolitics in the region and beyond" (Yu, 2017, p.353).

The second interpretation, is that the BRI as a grand strategy is a 'misapprehension' predominantly by Western countries viewing it through a 'geopolitical' lens (Cai, 2017). The BRI is viewed among Chinese and most developing nations as "China's international cooperation strategy to enhance global connectivity, communication and cooperation so as to foster a more balanced and equitable world system" (Zhexin, 2018, p.327). Economic globalization has arrived at a crossroads due to the crisis of neo-liberalism - "the BRI opens up a possible new globalisation path, amongst which inclusive globalization warrants exploration" (Lui, Dunford, Gao, 2018, p.1119). This interpretation emphasises the economic underpinnings of the BRI, which is "seen as a direct outgrowth of China's economic travails after the global financial crisis... In this view, geopolitical gains that may come from the success of the BRI are welcome but of secondary importance" (Clarke, 2018, p.72). So although this perspective acknowledges potentialities for political leverage, "the key drivers behind [BRI] are largely motivated by China's pressing economic concerns" (Cai, 2017, p.1).

The final perspective relating to the BRI is that it is the "outgrowth of Beijing's increasing desire to augment its growing economic and strategic influence with a 'soft power' narrative that presents China as an alternative leader to the global hegemony of the United States" (Clarke, 2018, p.72). A lot has been said on China's soft power in the last two decades which becomes the subject of focus after the methodology. However, comparatively little has been made of the connection between China's desire for 'ideational' power and the BRI acting as a perfect 'vehicle' for such ambitions. That said, recently more are beginning to make the link between historical CCP attitudes towards 'soft power' and the BRI – specifically about its potential to bolster China's 'material' and 'ideational' power in tandem (see, Shambaugh, 2015; Yagci, 2018).

This paper attempts to tie a lot of the existing literature on the BRI together, the summation of which is that there is strong evidence that the Belt and Road Initiative should be classified as a multifaceted 'grand strategy' - that is, a long term strategy by a state designed to further its interests (Gray, 2007, p. 283; Nina, 2018). It should be considered 'multifaceted' in the sense that it serves three objectives of "shaping a sympathetic and harmonious international environment that is a catalyst for China's rise; creating a Chinese international image that reflects Chinese charm and kindness; building Chinese soft power with norms and values" (Wang, 2008, p.270). The BRI clearly seems motivated by CCP desire to resolve "long term domestic, economic, and geopolitical challenges" (Clarke, 2018, p. 72). Domestically, the BRI is guided by "China's ongoing state-building agenda in its traditional frontier regions" (Clarke, 2018, p.72). Economically, the BRI outsources domestic overproduction and uses Chinese State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) to build 'trans-Eurasian connectivity' through huge infrastructure projects. These "new outlets for Chinese capital and exports" ensure continued economic growth for China, and is a key determinant of CCP legitimacy (Clarke, 2018, p.72). Politically and strategically, the BRI allows for a form of economic diplomacy that President Xi uses to promote narratives such as the "Chinese Dream" and "Community of Common Destiny". Morgenthau's concept of cultural imperialism is utilised to show that such narratives serve a dual purpose: one is to

augment China's image as a rational, legitimate hegemonic cause; the second is that while doing so, these benevolent, 'anti-hegemonic' narratives act as an '*ambiguous ideology*' that disguise the true imperialistic nature of the BRI. This paper attempts to demonstrate this through linking theory to 'praxis' - by applying Morgenthau's concept of economic and cultural imperialism as outlined in *Politics Among Nations* (Morgenthau, 2005) to the BRI. Upon doing this we can see that the Belt and Road Initiative shares many commonalities with a theoretically imperialist foreign policy. The second argument, based on China's increased relative power in the region, is that there is a subsequent need for strategic-reorientation by the United States within the Asia-Pacific.

What has proved remarkable is the speed in which China has achieved her new political weighting. So quick in fact, that even as the first decade of the 21st century came to a close, academics who were bearish on China's rise, have markedly changed their tune, seeing it almost now as an inevitability. A striking example of this can be seen in Beeson's article on *Hegemonic Transition in East Asia* in 2009 where he concludes that "the idea that a form of hegemonic transition might occur in East Asia is unlikely for a number of reasons" (Beeson, 2009, p.110). Fast forward a little over ten years, Beeson in his 2018 article *Geoeconomics with Chinese Characteristics*, finishes by remarking that "the BRI may be the most tangible manifestation yet of China's seemingly unstoppable rise to regional primacy" (Beeson, 2018, p.252). From unlikely to achieve regional hegemony, to likely unstoppable, is a stunning turn of events, one in which illustrates just how quickly 'central pillars' of the international system may shift (Browne, 2016). What is clear from this is that the international system of the twenty-first century has re-entered into an era of multipolar struggle. The days of Washington's unipolar dominance and unrivalled hegemony are over. While Obama partially acknowledged the changing power dynamics within his National Security Strategy (NSS, 2015), the Trump Administration placed the renewal of great power competition at the heart of its National Security Strategy (NSS, 2017). This emphasis formally reorientated US security strategy to an explicit focus on great power competition (O'rouke, 2021). How the US should orient its 'Indo-Pacific' strategy in response to China's BRI, is addressed in the final section of the paper.