

Dragon Rising: The Belt and Road Initiative and China's Global Emergence

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quality of the silk produced in the west was vastly inferior to that produced in China so the majority of silk used by Byzantines was still procured from the Chinese.

There was a series of conquests along the Silk Road that temporarily disrupted trade as Tibetans conquered the western regions in the Chinese borderlands. The Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) reopened the Silk Road during the reign of Empress Wu (r. 655-683) after Tang forces reconquered the territory, and the route was accessible to the Chinese Empire once again. The Islamic world in the Middle East was also significantly involved in the trade routes established by the Chinese. During the Abbasid Caliphate (566-653 CE), the city of Baghdad became one of the most important destinations along the Silk Road. The Tang dynasty produced a [golden age](#) of peace (Pax Sinica) that saw an upsurge in trade along the Silk Road as traders from Persia were able to benefit greatly from the East-West trade.³

There are significant differences between the ancient Silk Road and its contemporary counterpart in the Belt and Road Initiative. Whereas the routes during the Han dynasty were established through chance encounters with other empires as China sought to expand its territory, the modern-day Belt and Road program is a highly-centralized endeavor that has been meticulously planned by the Chinese government in a bid to augment its global influence and potentially challenge the position of the United States across its spheres of influence from East Asia and beyond. The initial results from this massive investment in infrastructure could serve to induce participation from countries that are currently hesitant and harbor doubts regarding Chinese intentions. If the first wave of projects proves to be a success, it may lead to increased participation in the program from other states, which would result in greater global economic integration as well as a China that could potentially become the new center of the global economy.

II. Overview of BRI Goals

According to the [official](#) Chinese Belt and Road webpage, the BRI is a “development strategy and framework, proposed by Chinese president Xi Jinping that focuses on connectivity and cooperation among countries primarily between China and the rest of Eurasia, which consists of two main components, the land-based “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the oceangoing “Maritime Silk Road”.⁴ The Belt and Road Initiative aims to increase the overall level of connectivity between China and Eurasia, potentially establishing additional links to the Middle East and Europe via the region. As the Chinese attempt to augment their global influence and become the leading power of the 21st century, they are actively seeking partners for economic cooperation across the globe. To that end, Beijing has signed deals with a bevy of countries to build roads, railways, and invest in critical infrastructure across Eurasia and Southeast Asia. Beijing has claimed that the projects are intended to promote greater connectivity and bring prosperity to the people of the world.⁵ The Chinese government has invested hundreds of millions of dollars into infrastructure projects across the Eurasian continent and beyond. The success of this first wave of projects will be critical to the long-term viability of Beijing’s massive economic investment. There have been a mix of successes and failures during the first batch of infrastructure projects.

One of the projects that Beijing has found limited success to is a [railway project](#) in Kazakhstan.⁶ The railroad was estimated to cost approximately \$1.9 billion and expected to be in service by 2020. However, a series of recent financial issues have slowed the progress. The Kazakh bank that was receiving Chinese loans collapsed, and the Central Bank of China has since halted additional loans to the bank. Kazakh officials have claimed that the rest of the funds for the railway would have to be obtained domestically. In addition, Kazakhstan has promised to repay the Chinese

loans. The [Problem Loan Fund](#) has thus far provided 3.3 billion tenge (approximately \$8.6 million) to Astana LRT (a light-rail company) in order to repay Chinese contractors that worked on the project.⁷ The issues that the BRI projects faced in Kazakhstan could potentially be a harbinger of future scenarios in other countries.

III. Potential Economic and Political Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative

The case of Kazakhstan could potentially serve as a microcosm of the issues that could ultimately jeopardize the long-term economic success of the BRI. Despite the potential economic stimulation the projects could bring to certain countries, there are also concerns of how the Chinese funds will be distributed and repaid. Many of the countries involved in the project are considered to be developing societies with relatively weak economies that are in dire need of infrastructural investment. These states are constantly plagued with significant bureaucratic corruption that serves to hamstring economic development efforts. There are also political concerns that have arisen with the projects. According to a number of analysts, Chinese economic investments in countries with authoritarian government systems has served to [further curb](#) civil liberties and human rights.⁸ For instance, in many Southeast Asian countries such as the Maldives and Bangladesh, the government actively engages in suppressing political dissent. From 2014 to 2018, the Maldivian government began to ramp up its attacks on the press, activist groups, and opposition leaders. These attacks incidentally coincided with the island nation's growing political closeness with Beijing. This political suppression campaign ultimately enabled the Maldivian government to sell the land rights of many islands to the Chinese without a bidding process. Similarly in Bangladesh, the government has taken steps to [restrict civil liberties](#) and human rights since 2014.⁹ While Beijing is certainly providing critical economic resources for the development of regions such as Central and Southeast Asia, the potential political ramifications are also considered to be a key source of concern for the future of the region.

Yet another issue that BRI participant countries could face is the prospect of potentially becoming mired in a “debt trap” as a result of the massive loans that Beijing is currently doling out. Currently, many of the countries involved are still-developing states with relatively limited financial capabilities. This brings into question whether current participants will be able to bear the financial burden in the long term once the projects are completed and Beijing begins to ask for repayment of the loans. Should a country choose to default on their financial obligations at that time, the Chinese could seize control of the infrastructure in exchange for forgiving economic obligations. This scenario would in turn allow for Beijing to significantly increase its international political capital, an important first step in a potential reshaping of the international order. The debt trap argument has been cited by a number of policy experts as well as Heads of Government who have voiced their concerns with regard to the intentions of the Belt and Road Initiative, with some analysts terming it “debt-trap diplomacy” that is used by Beijing to advance Chinese interests. The Prime Minister of Malaysia has called Beijing's massive loans a “new wave of predatory lending”, [asserting](#) that the Chinese are doing something that amounts to a form of colonialism.¹⁰

However, [not everyone](#) buys the debt trap argument.¹¹ According to Bonnie Glaser, a senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, it does not make sense for China to make loans that it does not believe would be repaid. This would be counterproductive, as Chinese banks would most likely not wish to lose money on an investment. Rather, Beijing's willingness to lend may signal [China's belief in](#) the right of countries to make decisions for themselves.¹² Thus, the Chinese could be of the view that it is not necessarily Beijing's responsibility to decide what countries can or cannot make such a significant financial commitment.

Among the PRC's various slogans for promoting the Belt and Road Initiative is one phrase that advocates for the creation of a "[community of shared destiny](#)" in the world.¹³ The BRI in this case can be viewed as one of the mechanisms for the PRC to achieve the "Chinese Dream" of a prosperous and powerful China. By establishing what Beijing claims are mutually beneficial relationships with its Eurasian and Southeast Asian neighbors, China appears to be pursuing a combination of soft power diplomacy with a focus on infrastructural development to form the basis for the Belt and Road Initiative. This approach is fairly consistent with China's "peaceful rise" approach, which Beijing has repeatedly highlighted as China's economic and military clout grew over the past several decades. While Beijing's rhetoric has been amicable, there are still concerns with regard to the PRC's potential ulterior motives and intentions. Here, we must examine Beijing's overarching political objectives as conveyed through what China dubs the "Chinese Dream" of a powerful and prosperous country.

The concept of the [Chinese Dream](#) first emerged in 2013 soon after Xi Jinping became the leader of the People's Republic. The term is loosely defined and open to interpretation.¹⁴ Xi asserted that there are numerous "dreams" that are encompassed by the Chinese Dream, and that the term would have a variety of different meanings for different people. For instance, [one university student](#) at the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing opined that "for students, the China Dream is perhaps studying hard" but also added "but I think the core of the dream is the same: We Chinese must do something for the country."¹⁵ Despite the government's efforts to promote the concept as a social movement that will lead to a more prosperous and powerful China, some observers have viewed the China Dream as simply government propaganda that is intended to generate support for the Communist Party. Indeed, as the economy slowed following nearly two decades of double digit GDP growth, China has been facing considerable economic problems on the domestic front. The Chinese Dream has thus been seen by some segments of the population as something to distract the people from the growing collection of domestic problems that Beijing is facing. Perhaps more importantly, the Chinese Dream is linked to the goal of *fixing* (复兴), or national rejuvenation.

For some international observers, the Chinese goal of national rejuvenation is directly linked to the creation of a Sino-centric world order that will ultimately supplant the current US-dominated global system in East Asia and beyond. The Belt and Road Initiative can be seen as a critical tool in achieving this long-term goal. The plethora of infrastructural investments that Beijing is currently making could be conducive to China's growing influence through soft power. Indeed, the potential debt trap that many participants of the BRI will face in the future could provide Beijing with opportunities to influence the domestic political scene in those countries and contribute to the creation of a bevy of political entities with friendly ties to the PRC. Thus, the BRI could serve to provide China with the necessary conditions to drastically alter the international political scene and present a significant challenge to the current US-led world order. Indeed, China's "[peaceful rise](#)" does not necessarily mean that Beijing will not take steps to erode US influence and augment to its own status in the global arena.¹⁶

To achieve this goal, an increasingly energy-hungry China would naturally seek critical resources such as petroleum and natural gas to fuel its global ambitions as well as sustain its domestic economy. Thus, the vast oil fields of the Middle East can be seen as crucial to the realization of Chinese national rejuvenation, and the Belt and Road Initiative provides an excellent means of obtaining the natural resources that Beijing desperately needs to advance its national objectives. By linking China with Eurasia, the Middle East, and Europe, Beijing has taken steps to ensure that its plan to augment China's global influence will not run out of fuel.

IV. Military Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative

Oil is the lifeblood of any military force, and every global power must possess considerable military capabilities to both protect its interests and project power and influence across the world. Beijing will most certainly take steps to protect the plethora of infrastructural investments that it has made, particularly along the Maritime Silk Road. In that regard, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has significantly expanded its capabilities in recent years. In 2012, the PLAN announced the commissioning of the fleet's first aircraft carrier, [the Liaoning](#), which was recently declared to be combat ready.¹⁷ The ship was a Soviet vessel from the 1990s that was refitted after purchasing the hull from Ukraine in 1998. In 2017, the PLAN began development of its first domestically-produced aircraft carrier, the [Type 001A](#).¹⁸ The development and launch of China's first aircraft carrier signals a considerable advancement in the ability of the Chinese military to project its power beyond China's shores and the Asia-Pacific.

As Chinese infrastructure projects increase in number along the Belt and Road routes, Beijing could attempt to use security concerns for its projects as a pretext to deploy military assets to guard vital points of interest. Although the Chinese Foreign Ministry has asserted that the Belt and Road Initiative is intended to promote international cooperation and development, the Chinese Ministry of Defense [publicly acknowledged](#) that the Belt and Road Initiative has both commercial and military objectives.¹⁹ In a July meeting with defense chiefs from the Caribbean and the South Pacific, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe asserted that these developments along the Belt and Road routes are intended to better facilitate international cooperation in areas such as anti-terrorism, disaster relief, and peacekeeping.²⁰ China has already begun development of the [Sino-Pakistani corridor](#) in a joint project with Pakistan.²¹ This would give the PLAN access to the Arabian Sea and possibly a military presence in the Middle East. If the People's Liberation Army were to establish a presence in the region, it would allow Beijing to simultaneously challenge US influence in both the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific, as the PLAN already has a significant presence in the South China Sea. Furthermore, China also potentially has desires to establish a presence in the Indo-Pacific (another region that the Belt and Road would pass through). This has raised concern in countries like India, whose national security could be directly impacted should Beijing establish bases along the so-called ["String of Pearls"](#), a geopolitical phrase that refers to the presence and possible intentions of Chinese military and commercial facilities in the Indian Ocean region.²² To date, China has established a commercial presence in countries such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. In response to growing Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, India has moved to provide a [substantial amount](#) of economic assistance to countries like Myanmar while also strengthening its partnerships with other countries in East and Central Asia.²³ As Chinese naval power grows, Beijing will have increasing capability to assert its will and more directly challenge the United States military for influence across the globe. The PLAN is crucial to China's ability to project its military presence along its planned Maritime Silk Road. In addition to possible bases in the Indo-Pacific, China has also established facilities in Africa, with the PLAN having built a [naval docking base](#) in Djibouti in 2017.²⁴ The Belt and Road projects provide an excellent pretext for China to deploy military assets in strategically important areas. If Beijing opts to eventually challenge the US military in the Middle East, it could lead to additional friction in an already volatile region of the world.

V. Concluding Thoughts

Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative can be seen as possibly the most ambitious geopolitical and geoeconomic project of the 21st century thus far. The astronomical sums of money that China is doling out in the BRI along with the participant countries' questionable ability to pay back the loans

raises a level of concern regarding Chinese motives behind these projects. There are certainly tangible mutually beneficial reasons for these developments. The plethora of railroad infrastructure being developed can serve to significantly reduce transportation costs and increase overall trade volume among China, Central Asia, and Europe as well as parts of Southeast Asia. The projects also provide a [means](#) for Beijing to put its excess industrial capacity and foreign exchange reserves to use.²⁵ Indeed, the investments that China is currently making can certainly be seen as mutually beneficial, with a bevy of developing countries receiving much needed infrastructure that could spur domestic economic growth and accelerate national development. Through these projects, Beijing also has an opportunity to develop goodwill and augment its international political capital. However, there also has been a notable amount of criticism from both western and Asian governments with regard to the overarching motives and ultimate feasibility of the Belt and Road project. While the debt trap argument advanced by some experts can be seen as dubious (China certainly would not want to lose credibility with potential economic partners), the potential geopolitical and security implications are perhaps more concerning and difficult to dismiss.

As Chinese global economic and political clout has grown since the beginning of the reform and opening up period in 1978, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has not been seen as a potent force until rather recently. According to a [retired US Navy officer](#), the PLAN has significantly improved its ability to conduct joint operations with the Chinese Air Force and Strategic Rocket Forces.²⁶ The Chinese Navy is also investing heavily in advanced weapons potentially aimed at containing or challenging foreign naval powers in the Pacific region. Furthermore, the relatively low costs and skilled engineers in Chinese shipyards means that Beijing can [produce](#) up to two nuclear attack submarines and one ballistic missile submarine annually.²⁷ The rapid development of Chinese naval capabilities could eventually allow Beijing to project its power across areas of interest along the Belt and Road routes.

Of course, critical to all of these plans is access to raw materials and natural resources that will serve as the backbone needed to fuel a project of this scale. In this regard, Chinese plans to connect the country with the mines and oil fields of Central Asia and the Middle East will provide Beijing with the energy needed for both domestic consumption as well as potential power projection across the Asia-Pacific, Middle East and the African continent. Despite the criticism thus far, many countries have been fairly receptive of Belt and Road investments. Indeed, the Chinese policy of economic aid with [no political conditionality](#) is very appealing to many countries in the areas of current and potential Belt and Road projects.²⁸

Perhaps more importantly, the way that the United States and its allies choose to respond to Beijing's actions, particularly in the Middle East will determine the long-term viability and success of the Belt and Road Initiative as well as Beijing's bid to become the premier global power in the 21st century. A Chinese military presence in the Middle East would add yet another potential flash point to the myriad of existing points of contention between the PRC and the United States. On the other hand, these concerns regarding the military intentions of the People's Liberation Army could ultimately prove to be misguided, and the Belt and Road is in fact what Beijing has always said it would be: a project that seeks to establish mutually beneficial economic partnerships with countries around the world. However, if previous Chinese regional activity can be used to serve as a point of reference (in this case the South China Sea), future Chinese militarization along the Belt and Road could certainly be a possibility. Beijing has used territorial sovereignty as a pretext to engage in land reclamation and establish military strongpoints in the South China Sea, and it could similarly cite security concerns along the Belt and Road to build military bases in areas of interest.

Xi Jinping has seemingly tied the rise and rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the 21st century to the long-term success of the Belt and Road Initiative. If successful, China will bolster its domestic economic prospects and establish a bevy of useful partnerships with countries around the world. Furthermore, Beijing's ability to project both its soft and hard power will also be significantly enhanced. This will perhaps give the Chinese a window of opportunity to replace the United States as the world's premier economic and military power, a position the US has occupied since the end of the Cold War. How Washington and its global partners choose to respond to a rising China will have a tremendous impact on both Great Power relations as well as the future developmental trajectory of arguably the most crucial international relationship of the 21st century.

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