RESEARCH ARTICLE

European Journal of Law and Political Science
www.ej-politics.org

The Belt and Road Initiatives (BRIs): Understanding China's Intentions Behind It

Sumaiya Rabeya

ABSTRACT

BRI is regarded as the most aspiring foreign and economic policy initiative of President Xi's legacy. At the same time, Beijing has the overarching objective to achieve its geopolitical goals by economically binding China's neighbouring countries through this initiative. Some Scholars are cynical regarding the success of BRI as planned by President Xi's administration, urging caution for both China and the countries involved. President Xi's exceptional overt emphasis on protecting China's national interests that transpired into their newly formed foreign policy approaches has demonstrated that China's commitment to peaceful development is not without conditions. China's commitment to a peaceful rise will also be further conditioned by the many externalities, namely international and regional interest, domestic priorities, security dilemmas, power conflict, and conflicting core national interests from participating members, which in turn can be reciprocated with antagonistic strategies by others. Consequently, President Xi's administration will have to tackle formidable challenges in the implementation era of BRI.

Keywords: BRI, China, international politics, policy diplomacy.

Published Online: November 08, 2023

ISSN: 2796-1176

DOI: 10.24018/ejpolitics.2023.2.6.100

S. Rabeya
International Islamic University, Malaysia.
(e-mail: sumaiyarabeya@gmail.com)

Corresponding Author

I. Introduction

A well-known Chinese proverb states, "If you want to be rich, you must build roads." President Xi Jinping's administration is turning the ancestors' advice into reality, rendering The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) one of the greatest transnational undertakings of modern times. Since its launching in 2013, the BRI initiative has gathered noteworthy momentum in both the regional and global arena. The 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) is a multinational project that reflects the foreign policy and economic strategy of China. It takes inspiration from the ancient Silk Road and is based on two policies: the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the '21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,' introduced by President Xi Jinping (Liu, 2016). China, as an emerging superpower, views BRI as a valuable tool to enhance the internal influence of its leadership and secure a prominent role in the region (Lim, 2015). The multifaceted nature of the project is likely to have significant political implications both within and beyond the region (Lim, 2015). The BRI aims to create a corridor that connects China with the rest of the world, and it has gained increasing interest from scholars and policymakers in Asia, Europe, and Africa. The initiative seeks to revive the land and sea-based Silk Road while also fostering greater political, economic, cultural, and educational cooperation between Europe and Asia, according to Sing (2016).

Unlike other multinational agreements, China is presenting BRI as an open developmental instrument, seeking market-driven association with 65 countries through an informal, supportive, flexible structure and a softer approach to rules. There is no doubt that some members of the international community view it as a gleaming opportunity for economic cooperation and shifting their focus away from Western-based initiatives. While existing hegemons are actively rallying against this initiative, terming it a grand conspiracy for China's world dominance plow. However, the fact remains that the underlying intentions of the Chinese to launch the BRI framework are still fluid. Understanding these fragments as opportunities to get a better grasp of this project is the objective of this paper. This research is devoted to a discussion on the intentions of the Chinese to launch the BRI initiative and the possible externalities it will render.

II. The Belt and Road Initiative Policy (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) draws inspiration from the historical Silk Road that had a significant influence on global trade in ancient times. Proposed by President Xi Jinping, the BRI aims to establish a network of trade routes and promote cultural exchanges, connecting important civilizations across Asia,

Europe, and Africa. It is believed that embracing and learning from other cultures are essential processes for transformation and improvement (Sing, 2016). The BRI was officially introduced to the world through the Vision and Action Plan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Weidong Liu (2016), a senior consultant on the BRI, highlights the Silk Road as a shared history among major countries, emphasizing its role not only in trade but also in facilitating the exchange and interconnection of religions, cultures, technology, sciences, and civilizations. From this perspective, the BRI can be seen as an effort to preserve China's illustrious past. Comprising six economic corridors and spanning across Asia, Europe, and Africa, the modern-day Silk Road encompasses approximately 65 countries. It is a remarkable political and foreign policy initiative in its own right.

Scholars based in China, such as Justin Yifu Lin, emphasize the cooperative nature of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and assure that China's intentions are benevolent. They paint a positive picture of the BRI, arguing that it not only benefits China in its quest to become a high-income country but also supports the industrialization and modernization of other developing nations (Lin, 2015). Beijing has declared the BRI as an ambitious multilateral collaboration, emphasizing that no single country will have dominant control (Dingli, 2015). As a result, proponents of the BRI, including legislators and scholars, consistently strive to present it as a generous initiative. Beijing also asserts that the spirit of the Silk Road is crucial in the 21st century to address the sluggish global economic recovery and the increasing complexities in international and regional affairs (NDRC, 2021). Peter Ferdinand (2016) argues that despite China's rise as a major global economic player, it is still grappling with establishing itself as a significant political force on the international stage. Despite China's efforts in areas such as contributing to UN peacekeeping and participating in international organizations, Shaun Breslin (2016) suggested that China lacks a clear and unified approach to international relations and the global order. As a result, Breslin suggests that China's foreign policy objectives should be evaluated based on its actions rather than any expressed doctrine. In this context, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presents an opportunity for Beijing to solidify its image as a proactive participant in global politics.

III. International Influence: In Support of Xi Jinping's New Foreign Policy

In an epoch of more assertive Chinese foreign policy, President Xi Jinping strategically launched the Belt and Road Initiative. Certainly, the launch of BRI is often interpreted as a geopolitical masterplan for China (Johnson, 2016) rather than a decently economic one. A grand conference on ‘peripheral diplomacy’ was arranged in October 2013 by the Chinese government ahead of their 18th Party Congress, apparently the first foreign policy meeting of such level since 2006 and the first ever policy meeting targeting its neighbouring countries since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (Swaine, 2014). Douglas Paal (2013) noticed this conference as pivotal, where the Chinese leadership adopted a new phase of more advanced and proactive diplomacy while burying Deng Xiaoping, their former leader, whose celebrated dictum was “Hide your strength and bide your time.”

Obama’s ‘Pivot to Asia’ project had brutally off-shouldered China and further prompted Beijing to develop a counter policy. Tang Min (2015), a counsellor of the Chinese Government’s State Council, stated that BRI could function as a much-needed ‘third pole’ for China and many other promising economies that had been locked out of the Tans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement led by the US. Likewise, Justin Yifu Lin, a former chief policy advisor at the World Bank, claimed that the launch of BRI by President Xi was to counterbalance US policies, specifically in Asia. Luckily, TPP was rejected by the new Trump administration in the US shortly after taking over the Oval Office, giving space for BRI to grow more effective. Under the vision of President Xi, China wasted no time in promoting itself as the free trade champion of the 21st century. This stance has been well-enshrined in the Action Plan (2015), proposing that BRI will promote economic prosperity, peace, and development in the world. Countries well-established as regional allies to the US, such as Malaysia and the Philippines, are already seen gravitating towards BRI despite their troubled relationship with China over the disputed territorial control of the South China Sea (Blanchard, 2016).

Observers have noted that President Xi Jinping considers the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) a significant part of his political legacy. This sentiment is evident in his strong determination to ensure the success of the initiative among its participants. Reports suggest that President Xi has urged senior officials and businessmen within his party to expedite the BRI process. He emphasized the importance of completing model projects, demonstrating early signs of success, and allowing participating countries to experience the positive benefits of the initiative. This indicates President Xi's desire to showcase the effectiveness of the BRI and generate tangible outcomes. (Xinhua News Agency, 2016). Recently, Beijing has grown more vocal in expressing its intention to devise a greater role in international affairs. Foreign observers have recognized President Xi Jinping's tenure as significantly more proactive compared to his predecessors, with some describing it as "one of the most active periods for Chinese foreign policy" (Singh, 2014). This

acknowledgment highlights the notable shift in China's approach to international affairs under President Xi's leadership. His administration has taken a more assertive stance and has been actively engaged in shaping and advancing Chinese foreign policy objectives. This proactive approach has been observed and acknowledged by foreign analysts and experts studying China's role on the global stage. It was reported that noticeable changes were made by President Xi Jinping towards the orientation and guiding principles for China's foreign policy, aiming to achieve far-reaching, long-term implications for its foreign relations. Many have expected the new leadership in Beijing to continue the same passive form of foreign policy, but President Xi proved them wrong. Beijing still observes its long-standing policy approach, described as a 'peaceful development' aiming at maintaining an unwavering atmosphere outside of China's borders, as it is critical to its economic development. However, what differentiates this term from the past decades is the manner in which it seeks to do so. Zhang (2015) described the new foreign policy approach by President Xi as an approach that "features a more purposeful and assertive pursuit of China's national interests whilst vigorously seeking to maintain a peaceful external environment." Within a week after taking power in March 2013, President Xi Jinping made his first overseas tour to attend the BRICS summit in South Africa, followed by his visit to Russia and Tanzania. Until October 2013, President Xi spent a total of 33 days overseas, visiting Europe, Latin America, the United States, Africa, and Asia to attend international forums. He also welcomed dozens of visiting state leaders at home.

The new leadership has deployed an array of new initiatives to reshuffle China's foreign policy implementation system while coating it as a "holistic approach" to managing diplomatic affairs, with centralized planning for an effective policy implementation process based on greater coordination among all other players involved in China's foreign relations (Jiechi, 2013). A notable aspect of the Action Plan (2015) discusses "Policy Coordination" as one of the five major goals for BRI, aiming to "build a multilevel intergovernmental macro policy exchange and reach new cooperation consensus." It may seem very benevolent; however, exchanging policies is anything but benign, and from expert eyes, this is exactly how an initiative may acquire economic and political control. BRI is the exact initiative that meets the criteria of President Xi's wish to push stronger foreign policy objectives that boldly emphasise China's national interest while sugar-quoting it as a friendly, helpful, and holistic approach towards its participants to maintain their notion of peaceful rise.

IV. Regional Influence: China's Relation with Neighbouring States

For China, ensuring a secure peripheral environment is a critical component of their diplomacy. Luckily, most states directly aligned with China's border can be regarded as weak states due to their considerable scales of instability and insecurity. To ensure stability at its borders, engagement with these states is a crucial foreign policy for China. Jeffrey Reeves (2016) noticed that one of the main modules of China's foreign policy approach to weak states is based on economic exchange. Although it is not a new concept, over time, China has advanced its economic-based exchange to promote such state development as its primary doctrine of foreign engagement. Since the '80s, such economy-centric engagement has been undertaken by the government of China towards its neighbouring weak states, such as the 'Periphery Policy' and the 'Good Neighbour Policy' (Shaolei & Shuai, 2013), still continuing as vital policies in shaping China's quest for securing its borders. Under President Xi, these approaches were further promoted as new approaches to peripheral security. Such policies were highlighted, for example, by arranging the 'Symposiums for Working Periphery Diplomacy' in Beijing under titles like 'Friendly, Secure, and Prosperous Neighbourhood' (Ribao, 2013). According to analysts like Reeves (2016), the introduction of the 'One Belt, One Road' is reinforcing China's old peripheral security agenda, with little difference from its past policies. Even though Chinese-based media and their mouthpieces are hailing the BRI initiative as "breakthroughs in foreign policy thinking on periphery relations," both policies are largely supported by similar economic exchange and development commitments, which sadly "are the most effective conduits for security relations with the weak states on China's borders" (Reeves, 2016). The extent to which China is willing to get involved in its regional diplomacy is still ambiguous. Yet, Beijing's intentions of gaining a geopolitical economic advantage in its periphery are very glaring. For academics like Lim Tai Wei (2015), the leaders in Beijing themselves may be as unsure as most of the observers since they are using BRI to test the waters to pragmatically implement regional policies with options to modify the plans as they go along.

Compared to the past decade, President Xi's attempt to upsurge China as a key regional player via the BRI initiative could source a more disadvantageous strategic position in the region. It is partially due to China's domestic and foreign policy objectives being inherently contradictory. China's regional strategic ambitions are being challenged by increasing tensions between it and some of its neighbours over territorial disputes. Beijing's over-assurance on its economic ability, using it as the key peripheral diplomatic instrument, may lack credible strategic power to hold a strong position in the regional security sequence. Consequently, President Xi's government will have to tackle formidable challenges in the coming decade.

V. Promoting Infrastructure as a Form of Diplomacy

It is obvious that some of the key policies behind BRI are largely motivated by China's domestic and transnational economic concerns. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to enhance Beijing's economic leadership by focusing on infrastructure development in key areas and establishing a unified coordination mechanism for transportation throughout the regions involved in the initiative. This objective is highlighted in the BRI Action Plan (2015), which emphasizes the construction of infrastructure in strategic locations and the establishment of efficient transportation systems across the BRI regions. According to many policy analysts, this initiative can be viewed through the lens of geopolitics, as Beijing puts effort to achieve political leverage over the regions the initiative plans to cover. It is clear that President Xi perceives the substantial economic resources reserved by China over the years as fundamentally instrumental in his efforts to maintain regional stability and proclaim China's control in the country's neighbourhood (Swaine, 2014). One such project is BRI's high-speed railway project. China takes great pride in its spectacular development of the high-speed rail sector, which covers more than 50% of the world's total construction of high-speed railways (Lu, 2015). Today, China has mobilized hundreds of scientists and engineers to incorporate imported foreign technology to create their own standards, successfully marketed to countries like Thailand, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Undoubtedly, Beijing views its high-speed railway technology as one of "the crown jewels" of the BRI initiative.

The MIIT released a policy document stating that the high-speed rail sector planned under BRI is predicted to play a leading role in boosting exports of high-end Chinese industrial goods at an estimated value of around $263 billion by 2018 (Kennedy, 2015). In addition, once the countries accept the BRI Action Plan, the Chinese high-speed railway technology becomes their national standard, thus becoming the de facto standard for a vast geographic area. They stated in their Action Plan (2015) that countries along the Belt and Road should improve the connectivity of their infrastructure construction plans and technical standard systems. By focusing on high-speed rail construction, Beijing also shows its optimism about gaining regional acceptance for Chinese standards. The result will be that Chinese manufacturers and suppliers will benefit from a "strong, first-mover advantage" (Lu, 2015). Additionally, the infrastructure thrust includes building roads, bridges, and other forms of construction needed, as well as land and water transportation channels, to accelerate the free movement of goods and supplies along the borders. Beijing is also proposing that the participating countries formulate standards in transportation laws to increase connectivity by gradually enforcing policy controls on cross-border trade. Such an initiative, according to researchers, will help China to reduce its trade costs in the long run and motivate competitiveness inland. The Economic Belt land corridors are designed to cover the major countries across Eurasia, Central and West Asia, through China-Mongolia-Russia, the Indochina Peninsula, and along Pakistan-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar, enabling the integration of inland and coastal China with a vast region of multifaceted cross-border links. Scholars like Yiping Huang (2016) mentioned that the BRI initiative is seen by many as evidence of China's ambition to eventually substitute the "American-led international economic architecture" by disseminating the so-called "China model." This means China is using BRI as an instrument to assert its international leadership by manifesting vast programs of economic integration through massive infrastructures.

VI. Meeting Domestic Needs

President Xi's administration has also been confronted by a myriad of inner challenges, such as the development gap between coastal and central/western regions, poverty, industrial overcapacity, and employment challenges for its people. The BRI initiative could be the answer to these domestic issues. Beijing devised BRI to meet some of its own most pressing economic challenges. One analysis reasons that many interpreters and policymakers are obscuring its geo-economic agendas by directing the geopolitical dimensions of BRI, particularly in China's domestic industrial policy (Cai, 2017). It can be said that although the Action Plan (2015) tactfully ignores to mention this matter, the BRI initiative will have a substantial domestic concentration, and China seems to have already folded its shelves for the task. From the various state planning agencies to small-town universities, the Chinese government at every level is preparing to be involved in BRI. Major state-owned and commercial bodies in China have announced lavish funding devices to satisfy President Xi's vision, and almost every province has stirred its own BRI plans to cater to the nation's ambitious scheme.

President Xi's party has faced a significant challenge in addressing the vast economic gap between the western regions located inland and the thriving eastern states. Take Shanghai, for example; the mega-metropolis is five times more prosperous than the inland province of Gansu. Since 1999, Beijing has perused some drastic measures like the "Western development strategy," which included 'large-scale fiscal injections and state-directed investments to bridge the hideous development gaps among its western provinces. Despite its efforts, China's total GDP of the shares from the western provinces increased

insignificantly within 10 years, from 17.1% in 2000 to 18.7% in 2010 (Goodman, 2015). In 2014, Beijing made a firm commitment to tackle the problem of imbalanced development within China by introducing three regional development plans that were officially integrated into the country's national economic development strategy.

As reported in an official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, BRI was one of these three masterplans (Yifei, 2016). One of the key objectives of BRI is to encourage regional developments in China by integrating themselves with neighbouring economies. By rolling with BRI, Beijing will endorse projects coupled with financing mechanisms to countries with poor infrastructure, such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, or the Philippines, in turn allowing China to offer its products and services into these countries' domestic markets in the longer term. Furthermore, BRI was designed to connect some of China's underdeveloped hinterland to Europe through Central Asia through the Silk Road Economic Belt, and through the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, China's southern provinces will be connecting to the fast-growing Southeast Asian region through ports and railways. Consequently, apart from the underperforming provinces, the remaining provinces in China will be encouraged to actively engage in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), perceiving it as a valuable chance to secure funding and political backing for their local development initiatives.

It is highly likely that the domestic modules of BRI projects will be given priority before any overseas ones simply because Beijing can administer and implement its plans much more efficiently within its own dominion. However, the concern regarding this initiative is that if Beijing fails to bond its domestic developments with the overseas components as they declared, apart from the regional discontents, BRI will be left seen as any other domestic program, greatly diminishing its economic and strategic value and not worthy of acknowledgment.

VII. Using Export as a Mechanism to Attain Control

China's ability to produce in bulk saved its economy during the global economic crises but also left it to deal with its massive excess capacity in the manufacturing industry. For President Xi's administration, dealing with the excess capacity has become one of the urgent economic concerns, describing it as "the sword of Damocles hanging over the head" (Keqiang, 2015). As reported by The Financial Times in 2015, President Xi's vision of the new Silk Road initiative initially originated as a modest export-focused initiative within China's commerce ministry. Observers believe that the announcement of BRI by its policymakers is to address the excess capacity problem and is an effort by Beijing to export its products into neighbouring markets. The policymakers in Xi's administration have placed high hopes on BRI, believing that the emerging markets under it will facilitate acceptance of higher-end manufactured goods from China than from developed countries like North America and Europe for both cost-effectiveness and ethical inclinations in order to reduce the western dependency dogma that China is serving. Additionally, the action was devised to make the export and manufacturing stream created by BRI an expansion of the China-centric production chain. This will further pressure its domestic manufacturers to move up the value chain to meet demands.

In the past few decades, China has gained recognition as the "world's factory" due to its extensive and cost-effective manufacturing capabilities. However, that seems to be changing in recent times not only due to other emerging low-cost industries like India but also owing to increased awareness of companies regarding meeting ethical standards that have often been violated by Chinese factories. Surprisingly, Beijing responded to these looming threats with a new strategy known as "Made in China 2025" to upgrade its manufacturing industry. Beijing plans to reschedule its resources by shifting its focus from low-cost, quantity-driven products towards innovation and quality (Kennedy, 2015). More than Beijing's urge to dump its excess products into overseas markets, BRI is about moving its surplus production capacity out of China. One of the most influential financiers of BRI projects and Chairman of the China Development Bank, Hu Huaibang (2016), confirmed that an essential part of BRI's objectives is to facilitate China's ongoing economic structural reform through the progression of its industries through evolvement, away from the cheap mass manufacturing model it is widely known for. According to Cai (2017), considering BRI as a crucial stepping stone in upgrading their domestic industry, China is currently more interested in "migrating surplus factories than dumping excess products."

BRI's entourage to facilitate free trade has much deeper implications than just economic gains. One often overlooked aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's ambition to export its technological and engineering standards through this initiative. Beijing also aims to address its persistent issue of excess capacity by leveraging the BRI platform. A careful analysis of the BRI Action Plan reveals that China intends to establish a regional production chain with itself at the centre, leading in advanced manufacturing, innovation, and setting standards for the participating countries. This strategic approach is driven by the belief that controlling standards would provide China with an upper hand in negotiations, increased

bargaining power, and improved profitability (Ruquan, 2015). As seen from the Action Plan (2015), its focus on exporting technologies must be understood in terms of its long-term ambition to lead in research and development by transforming into an innovation-based economy. As mentioned earlier, China has a much bolder goal – to create acceptance of Chinese standards in the global manufacturing industry rather than simply creating a market for its excess products. A popular saying in China's policy circles and academia goes, "Third-tier companies make products, second-tier companies make technology, and first-tier companies make standards" (Breznitz & Murphree, 2013).

Making it full circle, the promise of investment by Chinese financiers to the partaking members of BRI means they can have strings attached, such as urging loan recipients to assent to more goods and standards set by China for their respective markets. BRI's venture to finance the Jakarta–Bandung High-Speed Railway project in Indonesia is a worthy example. The high-speed rail line will be 142 kilometres long, connecting the capital to West Java, and will be adopting the "Chinese standards, Chinese technology, and Chinese equipment" slogan. The Indonesian officials declared that from the initial survey, a Chinese company will be involved in every aspect of its construction, "including management of the railway once the project is completed" (Zheng, 2015). Interestingly, predictors decipher this as a loss-making project for China since they have taken the expenses of the project fully on themselves. Yet, Beijing is celebrating this deal as a breakthrough in influencing foreign lands into accepting Chinese standards and technology, as well as securing their long-term presence in their domestic economies. Similarly, via BRI, China will be consolidating control using its exports of various kinds to ensure a strong clutch of the regional economy.

Understandably, for these very reasons, the international community finds it hard to recognize the essence and impression of BRI since China has been ambiguous in explaining its intentions with this initiative. Coupled with China's image as a somewhat alienated entity from the rest of the world, it is adding to the confusion. As a result, BRI was looked upon with scrutiny; some referred to it as 'China's Marshall Plan' or even "sinking its dragon claws into other countries" (Lehmann, 2016). Hence, BRI, since its implantation, has been looked upon with doubts and has faced a considerable number of criticisms.

VIII. A Critical View of the BRI Initiative

The discourse surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has evolved dynamically to incorporate the promise of non-hegemony, ensuring China's peaceful rise without encroaching on the interests of others. The BRI is perceived not only as a strategy to achieve economic, political, and foreign policy objectives for Beijing but also as a pathway for China's emergence as a global economic powerhouse. Stephanie Goche, an Australian research analyst, has extensively studied China's rise over the past three decades and observed its transformation from a relatively impoverished agricultural nation to a contender for economic superpower status. However, she posits that China is now entering a phase of decline, partly due to the excessive utilization of resources, which limits its reliance on domestic infrastructure development. In this context, Goche views the BRI initiative as a strategic international development strategy aimed at fostering global partnerships for infrastructure construction (Goche, 2016). On the other hand, experts have expressed concerns about the financial risks associated with the grand scale of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The project involves numerous countries and necessitates significant long-term investments in infrastructure development with uncertain returns. Furthermore, this highly ambitious plan is projected to span several decades, approximately 35 years to be precise. Chen Gong, the chief researcher of Anbound Research Centre, predicts that such diversification could lead to wasteful dispersion of China's limited resources over an excessively large field (Wang, 2015). Additionally, Xu Gao (2014) has pointed out that the BRI initiative entails massive infrastructure investments, accounting for almost a quarter of China's total investment. Considering that the returns on infrastructure investment are often low, uncertain, and require a long period of time, there is a risk that China may accumulate significant debt and potentially face a financial crisis.

Furthermore, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has the potential to exacerbate political tensions. Many of the countries involved in the initiative are classified as developing or underdeveloped, and they often have existing political disputes. Meddling in these already volatile areas carries significant risks. Beijing may find itself caught between rival governments and opposition factions, both attempting to exploit BRI contracts for their own partisan agendas (Bondaz *et al.*, 2015). Even if China maintains a policy of non-interference and focuses on its own interests, these factors will inevitably impact Chinese businesses operating within these regions. While the BRI is touted as a lucrative opportunity, many developing economies are looking to the initiative for funding to support their domestic infrastructure projects. This raises concerns among experts who question the credibility of the current financial institutions involved in BRI projects. Even if combined, these institutions may not be able to meet the substantial financial needs and demands of the initiative.

The new proactive Chinese foreign policy, exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has garnered attention from Western scholars. The BRI is seen as a policy that reflects Beijing's growing

confidence in its position as a major player in the international system. Zheng (2015) views the BRI as a determined foreign policy strategy aimed at establishing China as a global force. He terms this approach "partnership diplomacy," which entails China's efforts to cultivate friendly relations abroad and serve as an alternative to traditional alliances in international politics (p. 122). Ferdinand (2016) highlights the BRI as the most prominent and significant initiative, but he raises doubts about the enthusiasm of China's neighbouring countries to participate. This scepticism arises from the fact that an earlier proposal for the new Silk Road project did not generate much interest. Even with the positive portrayal, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has faced significant criticism and scepticism. There are concerns about China's hidden agenda to gain influence, confine and dominate its regional competitors, and manipulate the states participating in the initiative (Xin, 2017). Zhang (2016) views the BRI as a means for China to accumulate wealth and capital, labelling it as a government-led globalization strategy and characterizing it as China's neo-mercantilist approach. This perspective is deemed insensitive, particularly considering the cultural, environmental, and ethnic differences among the host countries. Overall, the BRI initiative is seen as anything but benign, with China primarily focused on assessing the profitability of the countries involved while disregarding their concerns.

IX. BRI Creating Tension on Political Status Quo

The debate among policy analysts revolves around understanding China's political and strategic objectives behind the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Indications of China's national interests can be found in various local documents, including the official journal of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. These documents suggest that the BRI is seen to alleviate pressure from overproduction and reduce reliance on purchasing significant amounts of debt from the United States (Ohashi, 2018). Chinese officials express confidence in the BRI's potential to counter the U.S. Department of Defense's Asia-Pacific Rebalance Strategy, which was initiated by President Barack Obama in 2011 and poses a perceived challenge for regional leaders like China (Ohashi, 2018). Despite acknowledging the political implications of the BRI, Beijing maintains its stance of striving for a symbiotic relationship with participating countries and emphasizes its focus on promoting regional growth through infrastructure development and trade to foster connectivity among regional nations (Xin, 2017). In support of China's position, Sheng Dingli, a prominent scholar from Fudan University, defends the BRI as an ambitious platform that utilizes multilateral collaboration to harness a vast number of resources without allowing any single country to dominate the process.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has faced criticism, with some critics comparing it to a "Chinese version of the Marshall Plan" (IISS, 2015, p. IV) and characterizing it as a product of Chinese neo-mercantilist thinking (Zhang, 2016, para 3). Another perspective suggests that the BRI is driven by Chinese mercantilism and serves as a means for China to exploit new markets and address the excess output from its state-owned enterprises during a period of economic slowdown (IISS, 2015, p. V). Furthermore, the BRI has presented a dilemma for many countries, particularly China's neighboring nations, who remain skeptical about its true intentions. India, a regional competitor to China, has portrayed the BRI as a grand strategy aimed at dominating Asia, Africa, and Europe, utilizing rhetoric such as integration, connectivity, and trade ties as a cover (Pitlo & Karambelkar, 2015). Hu Zhiyong (2015) argues that the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will inevitably attract the attention of major powers like the US and Russia towards China and the affected regions, potentially leading to resentment among these powers. This could result in a “tug-of-war” between existing global powers, particularly the US, and the emerging power of China. Wei (2017) suggests that many states participating in the BRI will face the dilemma of choosing sides between Beijing's initiative and Washington and its institutions. Some countries may seek to balance China's economic strength against Washington's strong geopolitical influence.

China has indeed become the world's second-largest military spender, following the United States, with reports indicating a significant increase in military spending by 500% in real terms (Bender, 2015). This heightened military expenditure includes China's efforts to expand its territorial influence in the contested South China Sea. Sing (2016) highlights that even if only a fraction of the objectives outlined by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are accomplished, the initiative has the potential to disrupt the current dynamics of regional and global politics.

X. BRI Initiative: Chinese Security Dilemma

China's recent foreign policy actions, especially in territorial disputes, demonstrate a shift towards a more assertive and uncompromising stance, contradicting the image of compassion and compromise associated with the BRI initiative. In recent times, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China has been observed to shift its focus from solely improving its military capabilities to developing the capacity to achieve decisive

victories. This shift is seen as a manifestation of a more assertive and triumphalist foreign policy approach, as described by Shi Yinhong (2015), who likens China to a "re-awakening lion." According to Shi, President Xi Jinping takes pride in China's hard-line stance towards its rivals and advocates for a strategic and operational attitude that pushes opponents to their limits. This more assertive approach is particularly evident in China's handling of territorial disputes, such as those in the South China Sea. China has adopted a tougher stance on these disputes and has reinforced its position through increased military presence in the region. China has constructed high-capacity installations, including runways and ports capable of accommodating naval ships, in the disputed areas. These actions are perceived as acts of intimidation and signify a departure from the compassionate and compromising image projected by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI initiative serves as a strategic tool for China to strengthen its influence and relationships in the South China Sea region, particularly with ASEAN countries. The economic integration promoted by the BRI offers a means to address non-economic conflicts and foster closer ties through increased trade and investment. These efforts are understandable, considering that the countries surrounding the South China Sea, particularly the ASEAN countries, are significant destinations for Chinese companies and major contributors to the BRI initiative. The two-way investment between China and ASEAN, for example, had exceeded US$160 billion by the end of May 2016 (Wong, 2017). This demonstrates the economic interdependence between China and the ASEAN countries, and the BRI provides a platform for further enhancing economic cooperation and deepening ties.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be seen as a strategic move by Beijing to reinforce its influence and dominance in the South China Sea and the surrounding regions. Following the maritime disputes that strained China's relations with ASEAN countries, China is actively seeking ways to rebuild its ties with the region, and the BRI presents an attractive avenue for achieving this objective. Chinese officials, such as Ling Yoxin, Deputy Director of the Institute of Maritime Silk Road National Institute, have emphasized the importance of using economic integration to mitigate non-economic conflicts (Goche, 2016). Scholars like Feng and Kai (2013) from Griffith Business School suggest that if external pressure on China becomes too great and its interests are challenged, President Xi Jinping may adopt an assertive foreign policy to achieve strategic goals. This implies that if Beijing's authority over islands in the South China Sea, for example, is not recognized, China may be inclined to adopt a more aggressive stance towards its neighbors. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) traverses some disputed territories, and China's growing economic and military power adds complexity to its actions in the region. Balancing economic cooperation with political tensions becomes more challenging in such situations.

XI. Conclusion

Despite the escalating hopes of inducing high exports and creating economic control over the BRI countries, it is questionable whether the related countries have the ability to conceive China’s gigantic production line both economically and politically. Countries like Bangladesh, which, on the one hand, hold a strong position in the BRI economic corridor routes, is also a fierce competitor in productions such as garments. In such cases, BRI’s efforts to push their production standards may be seen as a national threat to their already global standard industries. Besides, moving a vast and mostly labor-intensive production capacity from China means that a substantial number of Chinese laborers would find themselves out of jobs. Hence, Beijing’s hopes in dealing with excess production capacity may create another issue of excess manpower lying idle and cause leakage out of its own economy. In addition, critics are wary of China’s inability to look into its issue of soft infrastructures as much as their advertisement for hard infrastructures. Although China has a gigantic workable population, only a fraction of them are world-class. In the long run, this could give rise to fundamental questions regarding the quality and security of the key strategic assets of BRI in the partaking foreign lands.

Behind the facade of cooperation and mutual benefits, the elephant in the room is hardly mentioned, namely the lack of political trust, as well as instability and security threats among China and some BRI countries. These are considerable obstacles in the progression of the BRI initiative. There is a general anxiety that this initiative can be a decade-long undertaking, causing many to tread cautiously. Beijing’s appetite for funding complex projects and its ability to handle the intricate environment beyond China’s border will further project momentous challenges for BRI. The canvas for this initiative ranges over the most vibrant regions around the world but, at the same time, the most combustible. Given that China has conspicuous disputes with many of its neighbours, Asia’s balance of power remains fragile as China aims to achieve a peaceful rise, a matter with no historical precedent.

REFERENCES

Bender, J. (2015, September 17). *These are the Chinese military advancements that could shift the balance of power in Asia.* Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/chinese-military-advancements-shifting-power-2014-10.

Blanchard, B. (2016, October 20). *Duterte aligns Philippines with China, says US has lost.* Reuters. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-philippinesidUSKCN12K0AS.

Bondaz, A., Cohen, D., Godement, F., Kratz, A., & Pantucci, R. (2015). *"One Belt, One Road": China's Great Leap Outward* (Report). *London: European Council on Foreign Affairs.*

Breslin, S. (2016, May 3). China and the Global Order: Signalling Threat or Friendship? *International Affairs, 89*(3), 615–634.

Breznitz, D., & Murphree, M. (2013*). The Rise of China in Technology Standards: New Norms in Old Institutions.* Washington, DC: US–China Economic and Security Review Commission.

Cai, P. (2017). *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative.* Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy.

Dingli, S. (2015, March 16). China's "One Belt, One Road" Strategy Is Not Another Marshall Plan. *China–US Focus.* Retrieved from https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/china-advances-its-one-belt-one-road-strategy.

Feng, H., & Kai, H. (2013, June 7). Xi Jinping's Code Beliefs and China's Foreign Policy. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 6*(3), 209-231.

Ferdinand, P. (2016). Westward Ho – The China Dream and One Belt, One Road: Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping. *International Affairs, 92*(2), 940-957.

Gao, X. (2014, November 20). Looking At the 'One Belt, One Road' strategy from a return on investment point of view. *Financial Times (Chinese version).*

Goche, S. (2016). *China's One Belt One Road policy: Can history repeat itself?* (China) [Report]. Future Directions International. https://apo.org.au/node/65624.

Goodman, D. S. G. (2015). *Handbook of the Politics of China.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Huaibang, H. (2016). Using development finance to service the one belt and one road strategy. Retrieved from http://www.cdb.com.cn.

Huang, Y. (2016). Understanding China's Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, Framework and Assessment. *China Economic Review, 40*, 314–321.

IISS. (2015). China's ambitious Silk Road vision. *Strategic Comments, 21*(6), IV-V. International Institute for Strategic Studies. https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic-comments/2015/silk-road/.

Jiechi, Y. (2013, September 10). *Implementing the Chinese dream*. The National Interest. https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/implementing-the-chinese-dream-9026.

Johnson, C. K. (2016). *President Xi Jinping's 'Belt and road' initiative: a practical assessment of the Chinese Communist Party's roadmap for China's global resurgence.* Washington DC: CSIS Report. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160328_Johnson_PresidentXiJinping_Web.pdf.

Kennedy, S. (2015). *Made in China 2025*. Washington DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Keqiang, L. (2015). *Knocking on the door of ASEAN countries and industrial capacity cooperation is the key.* Retrieved from the Chinese Government Information Portal.

Lehmann, J. P. (2016). One Belt – One Road: China's Re-Engineering of the Global Business Environment. *International Institute for Management Development*, 57.

Lim, A. C. H. (2015). China's "Belt and Road" And Southeast Asia: Challenges and Prospects.. *Jati-Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 20*, 3-15.

Lin, J. Y. (2015). "One Belt and One Road" and Free Trade Zones—China's New Opening-up Initiatives. *Frontiers of Economics in China, 10*(4), 585-590.

Liu, W. (2016). *An Introduction to China's Belt and Road Initiative.* Presented in Oxford International Infrastructure Consortium Global Infrastructure Conference 2016.

Lu, S. (2015, November 26). Li Keqiang's 'High-Speed. Rail Diplomacy' Scorecard. *Xinhua News Agency.* http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/wtstxns.htm.

Min, T. (2015). *One Belt and One Road Shows China's Great Power Attitude, National Think Tanks and Their Insights on China's New Silk Road*. Beijing: CITIC Press.

NDRC. (2021). *BRI enhances innovation, sustainability, bolsters global recovery*. The National Development and Reform Commission. People's Republic of China. https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/news/mediarusources/202111/t20211119_1304460.html

Ohashi, H. (2018). *The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the context of China's opening-up policy, Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 7:2, 85-103, DOI: 10.1080/24761028.2018.1564615

Paal, D. (2013). *Contradictions in China's foreign policy.* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/12/13/contradictions-in-china-s-foreign-policy-pub-53913.

Pitlo, L. B., & Karambelkar, A. (2015). India's Perception and Response to China's "One Belt, One Road" Initiative: Views from Indian Mainstream Media. *Asian Politics & Policy, 7*, 667–671.

Reeves, J. (2016). *Chinese Foreign Relations with Weak Peripheral States Asymmetrical Economic Power and Insecurity*. New York: Asian Security Studies.

Ribao, R. (2013). Xi Jinping gives an important speech at the Symposium for Working Periphery Diplomacy. Retrieved from http://politics.people.com.cn.

Ruquan, L. (2015). One Belt and One Road, China on the Oil Road. Retrieved from https://www.caixinglobal.com.

Shaolei, F., & Shuai, F. (2013). Reconsidering China's Periphery Security: Characteristics, Function, and Trends. *Global Security Research*, 49–50.

Sing, B. Y. (2016, July 9). Other side of One-Belt One-Road plan. *The Start Online*. https://www.thestar.com.my/.

Singh, S. (2014, March 19). *Xi's proactive foreign policy fruitful*. China Daily USA. http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2014-03/19/content_17360607.htm.

Swaine, M. D. (2014). Chinese Views and Commentary on Peripheral Diplomacy. *China Leadership Monitor,* 44. Retrieved from http://www.hoover.org .

Wang, C. (2015). *One Belt, One Road' is facing increasing challenges.* KL, Malaysia: Anbound Research Centre.

Wei, L. T. (2017). *China's Belt and road initiativeInitiative*. London, UK: Imperial College Press.

Wong, P. (2017, January 9). *How China's belt and road is transforming Asean.* South China Morning Post. R https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2059916/how-chinas-belt-and-road-transforming-asean.

Xin, L. W. (2017, January 29). China's Belt and road initiative: Literature Review (Chapter 8). UK: Imperial College Press.

Xinhua News Agency. (2016, August 17). Xi Jinping's speech at the one belt and one road work conference. http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-08/17/content_5100177.

Yifei, C. (2016, September 20). *三大战略肩负共同使命* [Three strategies shoulder the common destiny]. The People's Daily (Overseas Edition). http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2016-09/20/content_1713601.htm.

Yinhong, S. (2015). *China's complicated foreign policy* (Commentary). Berlin and London: European Council on Foreign Relations. http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_chinas_complicated_foreign_policy311562.

Zhang, J. (2015). China's new foreign policy under Xi Jinping: towards 'Peaceful Rise 2.0'? *Global Change, Peace & Security, 27*(1), 5-19.

Zhang, J. (2016, September 2). *What's driving China's One Belt, One Road initiative?* East Asia Forum. https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/09/02/whats-driving-chinas-one-belt-one-road-initiative/.

Zheng, C. (2015). High-speed rail export scores historical breakthrough, China and Indonesia will jointly build high speed rail between Jakarta and Bandung. *Xinhua News Agency*. Retrieved from http://www.news.cn/english/.

Zhiyong, H. (2015). *How to understand the political risks of 'One Belt One Road*. Aisixiang.