

YIDAI YILU: KEYS ON THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

YIDAI YILU: CLAVES SOBRE LA NUEVA RUTA DE LA SEDA

Sara Álvarez Quintáns

Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)

ORCID: 0009-0000-9193-3874

saraalvarezquintans@gmail.com



| Abstract |

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched in 2013 as a project aspiring to promote connectivity among continents through land and sea. A decade after its official announcement, the BRI has modified its design, its scope, its implementation mechanisms, and even the opinions garnered by the international community. The BRI was anything but a humble project and, as such, it gained traction in countries all around the world thanks to numerous bilateral cooperation agreements with China. However, the Belt and Road Initiative has gained critics as well as champions—there even have been other projects that aim to be a counterpart for it. It has been heavily questioned as a tool to exert geopolitical control in the hands of Beijing's government, but its primordial goal stands. Understanding the true nature of such a great initiative as this is a key task in order to be able to analyse its perks, advantages, inconveniences, and likely evolution.

Keywords: People's Republic of China; Geopolitics; Silk roads; International relations; Economic cooperation.

| Resumen |

La iniciativa china de la Nueva Ruta de la Seda (BRI) fue anunciada en 2013 como un proyecto que aspiraba a promover la conectividad entre continentes a través de tierra y mar. Una década después de su inicio oficial, la BRI ha modificado su diseño, su ámbito de aplicación, sus mecanismos de implementación, y hasta las opiniones que suscita en el panorama internacional. La BRI era de todo menos un proyecto modesto y, como tal, fue ganando ímpetu en países de todo el mundo mediante numerosos acuerdos de cooperación bilateral con China.

Sin embargo, la Nueva Ruta de la Seda tiene tanto defensores como detractores, e incluso han surgido proyectos que pretenden actuar como contrapartida de la misma. Ha sido fuertemente cuestionada por considerarse una herramienta de control geopolítico en manos del gobierno de Pekín, pero su objetivo primordial se mantiene. Comprender la naturaleza de una iniciativa de semejante envergadura es una tarea clave de cara a poder analizar sus debilidades, sus ventajas, sus inconvenientes y su posible evolución.

Palabras clave: República Popular China; geopolítica; Rutas de la seda; Relaciones internacionales; Cooperación económica.

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| Introduction |

In simplified Chinese¹, the expression 一带一路 (*yidai yilu*) means, literally, ‘One Belt, One Road’. However, in 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of China officially discarded the acronym ‘OBOR’ in favour of the actual preferred term: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (NDRC, 2015, September 21). Although the Chinese name was not modified at the time, the intent then was to adapt the English translation for official use.

This might appear as a non-transcendental anecdote, but for the author it exemplifies how the BRI is mostly misunderstood in its many, many aspects. From the “project of the century”—so dubbed by president Xi during the first-ever Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017²—to the “most ambitious geopolitical project”—as expressed in the world-famous *Time* magazine (Osman, 2023, October 1)—many an effort has been made in order to try and describe in an accurate manner what, exactly, constitutes the Belt and Road Initiative designed by Beijing’s government ten years ago.

The central aim of this article is, precisely, to set the bases on which the Belt and Road Initiative operates. To do so, the paper is divided in the following sections: a theoretical framework approach, in which the most used theories to explain the BRI will be explained; a section for conceptualisation and trying to answer the question ‘what exactly is the BRI?’; a third section with the historical background on the Belt and Road—from the ancient silk roads to other modern projects; and, lastly, we will discuss the aims of the BRI at both China’s national level and the international arena.

This research has been conducted with the aim to set the conceptual basis for a better understanding regarding the nature of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Following this purpose, I have gathered the data contained in various sets of renowned international institutions and organisations, in order to elaborate a well-rounded and contrasted analysis. Since the BRI is composed of many interconnected aspects and scopes, a multidisciplinary study has been considered as the best option for building a comprehensive landscape.

The nature of the data recollected is qualitative in nature, mainly. This has been proven necessary not only due to the difficulty of gathering quantitative data in relation to a project which is, above all, ambiguous in nature—there is not, even today, an official listing comprising all the projects and investments covered by the BRI umbrella. Consequently, the exact amounts that can be linked to the existence of the Belt and Road are hardly traceable; however, many estimates have been conducted by specialised organs and agencies. For instance, the World Bank reasons that trade costs in Countries

¹ Simplified Chinese is used in reference to one of two sets of characters—along with traditional Chinese—used to write the Chinese language. Simplified Chinese usually implies a reduction in the number of strokes necessary to write a character. This is the official script in countries such as the People’s Republic of China and Singapore.

² Held on May 14th, 2017, Xi’s speech said as follows: “I hope that by engaging in full exchanges of views, we will contribute to pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative, a project of the century, so that it will benefit people across the world” (Xinhua, 2017, May 14th). Since then, two other meetings have taken place on this forum—one, in 2019; the other, in 2023.

participating in the Initiative could experience a reduction of up to 2,8 per cent in their trade costs³ (De Soyres *et al.*, 2018). These analyses are subjected to frequent change and re-evaluation; they are significantly, however, in terms of prediction for policy design and trend monitoring, as far as this research is concerned.

In the decade following the official announcement of the project in 2013, many studies and analyses, both qualitative and quantitative in form, have been conducted to prove or deny the feasibility of the BRI. Some of the most relevant would be Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads: A new History of the world* (2020); Zhou and Esteban's *Beyond balancing: China's approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative* (2018); Comolli's *China's Belt and Road Initiative: A web of (illicit) trade routes* (n.d.); Kliman's *Grading China's Belt and Road*, published by the Center for a New American Security (2019); and Hillman's *The Emperor's new road: China and the project of the century* (2020). Many others can be considered as good, but it is not in the scope of this section to reference them in their totality.

Besides these, several institutions—mainly in America and Europe—have developed different databases with the aim to track the number and location of the projects associated to China's Belt and Road. The World Bank has published several thousands of articles and analyses on the topic of the Belt and Road⁴, with most of them discussing economic cooperation and security. The National Bureau for Asian Research has published a total of 271 documents on the Belt and Road, too. The Council on Foreign Relations has developed a Belt and Road Tracker tool that can be accessed online, and which displays data regarding exports, imports, foreign direct investment, and a debt index. Publications regarding matters of intelligence, such as Janes, have their own periodical newsletters regarding this topic.

Lastly, on the topic of the languages used in the references, it can be argued that most of the documents and articles have been written in the English language, taking into account the fact that the majority of the academic and professional production regarding the Belt and Road is conducted both in English and Chinese.

| Theoretical framework |

It is not a simple task to try and analyse the tremendous complexities of the Belt and Road Initiative through only one lens. Holistic approaches work best when studying China's Project of the Century and its possible outcomes.

The most employed analysis frameworks to deconstruct the BRI are transnationalism and neorealism. However, both are complementary in this case, and can always be used

³ However, this reduction depends on a variety of factors, ranging from the quality of the previous infrastructure, to accessibility to the global market, or to the presence of complementary policies. For example, the country gaining the most benefit from this reduction in trade costs would be Cambodia, with the second next being Tajikistan (De Soyres *et al.*, 2018, 26).

⁴ A total of 6.991 results can be found in the World Bank's database when the keywords "belt+and+road" are used as search criteria in the category of results labelled as "Research".

alongside other theoretical frameworks of International Relations, Political Science, and Economics, depending on the aspects we aim to understand and study.

Garlick (2020), for example, points out the need for an eclectic framework of analysis that comprises neoliberalism, neorealism, and constructivist approaches. Otherwise, it would simply not be possible to cover the whole complexity of factors involved in the Belt and Road Initiative. Other authors, such as Zhou & Esteban (2018) share the same perspective on the matter. The fact that the BRI is a multifaceted and wide-scope project makes it useful to analyse it from different theoretical points of view; however, one can always study the BRI through a single lens of analysis.

Transnationalism typically goes beyond the borders of a state to focus on the flows and interactions on the social level. As International Relations scholars Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane (1971) defined it, transnationalism focuses on the environment in which policies—e.g., the BRI—take place. As they argue, “[t]he environment of interstate politics, however, does not include only these powerful and well-known forces [geography, technology, and domestic politics]. A good deal of intersocietal intercourse, with significant political importance, takes place without governmental control” (1971, 330). Following this argument, it is of the utmost importance to note that the implementation of many BRI projects does not entirely depend on the Chinese government—the lead comes from Beijing, but on the ground, multiple actors with divergent interests and processes of complex implementation can be found. In this regard, transnationalist approaches help the most.

In neorealist terms, the Belt and Road outlines a clear institutional rebalancing intent (Zhou & Esteban, 2018, 3). This effort can be illustrated through the implementation of the numerous institutions that China has created *ad hoc* for the main purpose of supporting the BRI effort. Liberalism and economic interdependence argue that institutions facilitate exerting control, so then the establishment of common norms and interests among different actors is made easier.

On a side note, constructivist approaches are deployed as complementary to neorealist and transnationalist frameworks, making use of factors such as culture, identity, and norms (He, 2008, 491). China masterfully balances these. Xi himself expressed his ambition in the following terms: “We should foster a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation; and we should forge partnerships of dialogue with no confrontation and of friendship rather than alliance” (Xinhua, 2017, May 14). Here, we can observe a clear reformist will pertaining norms and roles on the global arena.

| Conceptualisation |

It is widely known that Xi Jinping (习近平), the seventh President of the People’s Republic of China, announced his paramount project only months after taking charge of China’s presidency. The starting point of what has now become the BRI was made known to the international public through two separate speeches. The first one took place at

the Nazarbayev University (Kazakhstan) on the 7th of September 2013, under the title ‘Promote people-to-people friendship and create a better future’. He was accompanied by the then-president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev.

In what is considered the first-ever speech on the Belt and Road Initiative, president Xi called for an “economic belt along the Silk Road” (State Council Information Office, 2023, May 17), linking China and its Central Asia neighbours through commerce and economic development. Xi’s intervention in Kazakhstan is reminiscent, however, of many other public appearances he has made during his mandate. An example of this would be his speech before the Senate of Mexico, in June 2013, on the relations among China, Mexico and Latin America, and a better future through joint development (People’s Republic of China Embassy in Peru, 2013, June 5).

His second speech on the BRI was addressed to the Indonesian Parliament, on October 3rd, 2013—not a month after the first one. On this occasion, Xi presented the idea of a Maritime Silk Road that would be the product of cooperation among China and other Southeast Asian countries. The aim of this was to “vigorously develop maritime partnership with ASEAN⁵ in a joint effort to build the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century” (Cai, 2015). Prior to this announcement, the Chinese government had founded the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund with, presumably, the exact same strategic goals.

In relation to the Belt and Road’s size, one can argue that the estimates are so uneven that the only solid, reachable conclusion is that the BRI’s range cannot be accurately calculated. This affirmation might seem too categorical to take seriously, since there is no lack of market studies elaborated by international institutions and enterprises trying to prove this one point false. Mainly, the reason behind this argument that I present here takes root in the fact that, until this day, no official procedure for adding new projects exists, the criteria used by Chinese authorities at the executive level has not been cleared, and no definite, detailed list of projects pertaining to the Belt and Road has been published by official Chinese institutions. The purpose for this deliberate lack of information would be no other than to keep such a wide-scope, multilevel project with a certain degree of flexibility, avoiding most of the bureaucratic processes that could be expected when working on a transnational, multilateral initiative.

Hillman (2018, April 3) argued some years ago that the figures for the BRI are not collectively coherent. To illustrate this argument, the author chose various estimates—which ranged from \$3 to \$8 trillion—in order to prove that the material reality of the BRI is incognizable. As such, its implications for fields like security and geopolitics are difficult to calculate and, more often than not unpredictable.

Another reason for the conscious undefinition of the Belt and Road resides in its resiliency as a sort of all-purpose tool of foreign policy. It is most notorious about the

⁵The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a political, government-level organisation comprising ten member states: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

BRI that, since its official announcement at the end of the year 2013, the expansion of its frontiers—both physical and figurative—has not ceased. Quite the contrary, in fact, for the Chinese leadership has been using this initiative as a flag for the renewal of its regional and international presence. The very announcement of the Continental Belt, first, and the Maritime Road, secondly, can be considered illustrative of the several additions to the project that have been recurrently made. Many countries in South America are a part of the BRI, despite not sharing any geographical ties to China whatsoever—at least, not in the traditional sense. Hand in hand with the China National Space Administration (CNSA), the Belt and Road has already reached the outer space: in 2016, it was officially announced that, in the framework for the development of long-term civilian infrastructure in space, the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor was to be launched (Sasaki, 2022, 18). This initiative has been considered by the Chinese government as “a resounding success” (State Council Information Office, 2023), given that this form of development has incentivised even the United Nations to cooperate with the Chinese space program⁶ (CNSA, 2019, April 28).

The continental part of the BRI comprises six great economic corridors designed to channel development across certain regions, which, in turn, include several infrastructure, logistics, and finance projects. In spite of their regional scope, the BRI as a whole should be understood in terms of global implementation (Dollar, 2019), since the sum of its individual components overflows the container of a simple regional initiative. However, it is also true that it cannot be said that a global footprint exists for the Belt and Road—even if its motivations and logics are, up to a certain degree, globally-oriented. The six economic corridors are as follows: the China-Indochina Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, the China-Central Asia Economic Corridor, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, and the New Eurasian Land Bridge.

Since then—more than ten years later—the Belt and Road Initiative has grown wider than its original design. It now encompasses more continents, including Europe, America, and Africa; new geographic spheres, such as the Arctic; and new domains, such as cyberspace, as previously stated.

One of the most controversial ones would be the Polar Silk Road. As the name suggests, this project encompasses the North Pole and its surrounding territories. The Polar Silk Road was born as a spin-off of the Maritime Silk Road and has since gained its own relevance. In recent years, China has pushed to establish itself as a ‘Near-Arctic state’ (Yang & Zhao, 2019, 131). As such, the Chinese government has achieved a certain degree of influence over this region, in addition to other nations like Russia or Canada.

There is also a Digital Silk Road, officially launched in the year 2015. Its scope has been redirected a number of times through the years—from including technology

⁶ Even though the Chinese space program as it can be observed today was based on two ground-breaking white papers—from 2015 and 2016—the 2019 reformulation and its effective implementation allowed China to broaden its economic and security goals (Sasaki, 2022; Chase, 2019).

in the BRI, to managing cybersecurity to an initiative in its own right (Gordon & Nouwens, 2022). Although not as popular as the Belt and Road Initiative, its existence is often overlooked, mainly due to the fact that its parameters are still vaguely defined. However, it could imply a great digital transformation, both for governmental and commercial purposes.

To further conceptualise this point, the Health Silk Road can be also named (Sasaki, 2022). Early conceptualised in 2016 and further developed from the year 2020—during the Covid-19 pandemic—, the Health Silk Road aims to promote health cooperation in the wider, international framework of the BRI. During his speech at the Legislative Chamber of the Supreme Assembly of Uzbekistan, President Xi promoted the funding of a ‘Green Silk Road’ that could provide its participant countries with cooperation in the field of prevention and management of infectious diseases, talent sharing, and epidemics notification (Xinhua, 2016, June 22). Somewhat critical voices argue that the promotion of medical diplomacy by China aims to “redeem its national reputation” and “[reposition] itself as a responsible leader in global health governance” (Bing, 2020, May 26).

There are several institutions—both financial in nature and not—that have been created surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative, in order to support it. One of the most prominent is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), through which most of the funding for BRI projects is channelled. The Silk Road Fund also offers financial support for infrastructure and development projects. Another example of an *ad hoc* institution sponsored by the Chinese government would be the China International Commercial Court (CICC), founded in 2018 with the purpose of resolving litigations related to the BRI (Smith, 2018). The CICC is a subsidiary of the Supreme People’s Court of China.

Making use of all these institutional tools would mean that China has solid ground to both lead the regional economy and to exert heavy influence on global markets, as well as the multiple international actors that interact on that arena (Balázs, 2017, 216). China’s point of view is, above all, pragmatic. In words of Chheang:

China’s approach towards multilateral institutions, although wide ranging, can be understood as a combination of engagement and integration into existing regional and global institutions as well as opposing or revising certain aspects of the institutional frameworks that do not serve its interests. The Chinese way of institutional statecraft can be characterized as being based on functionalism and pragmatism rather than on rules-based institutionalism (2018, 3).

However, and in spite of its ambitious scope, China’s BRI lacks a conscientious delimitation to its particularities. The ‘back to a better past’ argument has been widely exploited for discourse, and not only by China. However, a mythical history of prosperity and cooperation among nations constitutes nothing more than a communication strategy (Frankopan, 2020, 95). What remains yet to be proven is whether the Belt and Road Initiative can create the conditions necessary for peaceful economic development and mutually beneficial trade for all countries involved.

| Historical background |

The notion on which the BRI has been built as it stands nowadays recalls the ancient concept of the silk roads. It is commonly agreed that 19th century geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen firstly used the German term *seidenstrasse* ('silk road') to describe the network of commercial routes between Europe and China spanning the centuries 3rd BCE to 15th CE (Bloom, 2005). The ancient silk roads—plural, because it was not a single road, but multiple routes—were born during the expansion of the Han dynasty towards the West⁷, although the period of peak splendour was reached with the Tang dynasty (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). In this time period, the Han established commercial routes throughout modern day Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan (McBride et al., 2023, February 2).

One major difference between the ancient silk roads and today's Belt and Road is found in the fact that, in the past, the various exchanges that took place throughout these routes were mostly independent from state control (Van Schendel, 2020, 38), so they constituted a purely transnational phenomenon.

The below excerpt belongs to the preamble of an official communique by the Chinese government pertaining to the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, which took place in 2023—the mark of the BRI's 10th anniversary. The note, titled 'The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future' was published by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2023), reading as follows:

Over two millennia ago, inspired by a sincere wish for friendship, our ancestors travelled across grasslands and deserts to create a land Silk Road connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa, leading the world into an era of extensive cultural exchanges. More than 1,000 years ago, our ancestors set sail and braved the waves to open a maritime Silk Road linking the East and the West, beginning a new phase of closer communication among peoples.

Again, this brief extract serves to point out several of the main focuses behind the Belt and Road rationale. Firstly, and most notoriously, it calls out to the revival of a mythical past, which has been already established in this paper as a powerful, sometimes overused discursive tool. Secondly, the concept of 'global community of shared future' serves as a sort of inescapable reach: the will of the BRI to go beyond its own national frontiers to promote a series of interests that will unequivocally serve all of humanity, understood as a global, all-encompassing idea. This, in the best of terms, results extremely subjective as a concept. Dialectically, it can be used to promote ideas such as the one implicitly stated in a YouTube video by New China TV in 2017: "What's wrong with the world? What can we do? China has a solution", meaning that all of humanity shares the same destiny, and equally can be benefitted by a certain set of measures (New China TV, 2017, May 12).

⁷The Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) was the imperial dynasty that succeeded the Qin (221–207 BCE) dynasty and established what nowadays can be considered as "China" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

Many other international actors had tried to revive this historical concept for their own benefit, even before Xi Jinping announced his Belt and Road Initiative in 2013.

The European Union (EU) had tried, as early as 1992, to launch the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor—similarly to the actual BRI, it consisted of various projects. Again, in 2009, the EU reformulated its strategy in Central Asia with the New Silk Road Plan. The goals it set spanned several sectors, such as energy supply, information sharing, and commerce; all of this, in an effort to stabilise the security situation on of the EU's peripheries (Haiquan, 2017, 135).

Russia promoted the 'North-South International Transport Corridor' in 2002 as an alternative to the Suez Canal, bringing together both Russia and India over land via Iran. This project has not had much support from the parties involved, mainly due to other concerns over the particularities of national and regional politics.

The United States has made several efforts to design and implement their own alternative to the silk roads, even though America as a continent was never affected by this historical process. Firstly, in 2011, Hillary Clinton—who, by then, was Secretary of State—had wanted to implement her own New Silk Road Initiative in Afghanistan to connect this country to other Asian economies, in order to make a steadfast recovery after years of armed conflict. The concept of a 'Great Central Asia' that could balance the influence and power of both Russia and China would be a preferred outcome in the long run for this project (Clarke, 2018, 89). However, the developments in Afghanistan impeded the success of this initiative.

The most recent effort from Washington has been made in line with the continuation of the Pivot to Asia strategy designed by the Obama Administration. In June 2021, President Joe Biden announced to the world the 'Build Back Better World' (B3W) initiative. The aim behind this B3W project is to offer an alternative to Beijing's BRI, sponsored by the G7 states. The United States has set the goal to invest up to 40 billion dollars by the year 2035, promoting democratic values and transparency at the same time (EuropaPress, 2021, June 12).

Two other East Asian countries worked to adapt the same concept to their own foreign policies. Japan and South Korea started to develop their own plans related to the silk roads in the year 2013, coincidentally. In Japan, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzou launched the 'Association for Quality Infrastructure' to level Japan's and China's foreign direct investment (FDI) in Southeast Asia (Hillman, 2020, 103—104). On the other hand, Korean President Park Geun-hye proposed the 'Euro Asiatic Initiative' to boost regional connectivity (Wuthnow, 2017, 4).

| Objectives at the national level |

The Belt and Road Initiative, as a project designed by the Xi government, aims to achieve a certain set of goals on the national level. What the BRI intends to do in China can be attributed to an economic logic of stability and growth.

The global financial crisis of 2008 had a dire negative effect on the Chinese economy since it was heavily reliant on exports. The shrinking of the European and North American markets, combined with surplus production in certain strategic national industries—such as steel—provoked an imbalance in the Chinese economy from the year 2012, approximately (Gan & Mao, 2016, 108). This surplus in construction materials (steel, cement, etc.) and specialised workforce in this sector was to be redirected outwards through adequate channels (Clark, 2023, April 6; Frankopan, 2020, 101), such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

The so-called ‘middle income trap’ designates a barrier that keeps—up to some point—middle-income national economies from transitioning to a high-value productivity model (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). This would be one of the problems the Chinese government is trying to solve at the national level. The plan Made in China 2025 is currently aiming to transform China into a competitor in the field of innovative technology, not too far from heavyweights such as Japan or South Korea.

It is expected that the BRI will be able to create an environment beneficial for Chinese investors. One of the ways in which this could be done is the channelling of part of China’s foreign currency reserves into Belt and Road infrastructure projects all around the world (Pencea, 2017, 148).

As it occurs for any other state in the world, national security is one of the main concerns for China. In this sense, the ‘good neighbour’ policy that Beijing had been promoting for the past decades has not borne any significant fruit. On the contrary, even, many countries in Central, East, and Southeast Asia have come to perceive China as an “irresponsible and abusive” state (Gan & Mao, 2016, 111). Aware of this negative perception amongst its neighbours, China aims to promote itself as a key player in regional stability through the establishment of a common identity with the construction of “shared practices and attitudes” (Garlick, 2020, 9). Of course, this effort constitutes a formidable exercise in normative power, as it hopes to be able to define the basis for regional interaction and exchange among main players.

Promoting China as a referent includes the popularisation of its currency—the renminbi (RMB) and its unit, the yuan (CNY). In the year 2016, the renminbi came to be a part of the special drawing rights⁸ (Tao, 2019, 21488). This was made possible through the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, since it opened the door to the concession of credit for its different projects (Pencea, 2017, 148) using the yuan as currency through financial mechanisms such as the AIIB.

The insertion of Chinese enterprises in other countries and continents has been a paramount goal of the national government for a long time. Even before the BRI even came to fruition, the Go Global strategy (走出去战略, *zouchucu zhanlue*) was designed for this particular purpose and officially promoted in the year 2000 (Cornell &

⁸ An international reserve asset created by the International Monetary Fund to supply its members with official reserves. There are currently five currencies included in the special drawing rights reserve: the Euro, the US Dollar, the Pound Sterling, the Japanese Yen, and the Chinese Renminbi.

Swanström, 2020; Frankopan, 2020, 92). In this sense, the Belt and Road Initiative can be understood as the prolongation and continuation of a preexisting strategy—only much more ambitious and affecting areas that go beyond the merely economic. It is under a great umbrella of support such as this initiative that Chinese multinational enterprises can count on the necessary backbone to push through other national markets.

Moreover, the BRI could consolidate itself as an effective roundabout for geo-economic dynamics that are not completely favourable for Beijing. Starting with energetic security—given that China is an energy-inefficient country in the sense that it depends on imports to cover its own consumption (Dollar, 2019).

All of this, the Belt and Road Initiative aims to achieve for China in regard to its national interests inside its own borders. The BRI may not be the primary tool, but it presents itself as the all-purpose channel serving the Chinese government's agenda. In this sense, the BRI not only serves to agglutinate efforts inwards, but also outwards, as we will see in the next section.

| Objectives at the international level |

There has been a systematic refusal from Chinese government officials and academics to infuse the Belt and Road Initiative with any sort of geopolitical ambition (Delage, 2009, 28). However, the similarities observed in most of the countries adhered to the BRI point towards a certain degree of planning and strategizing, instead of isolated commercial activities stemming from private actors, such as multinational enterprises (Frankopan, 2020, 113).

The extended belief amongst a great number of scholars is that the Belt and Road Initiative is an accurate reflection of how China sees the international system and the global distribution of power in the 21st century (Balázs, 2017, 217). This is primarily conceptualised through the idea of *tianxia* (天下, 'under the sky'), which situates China as a political entity in the centre of the world (Zhao, 2021). Tianxianism embodies the expression of this philosophy and its materialization in the modern world through state policies.

In geopolitical terms, the BRI aspires to create a bridge between two acutely separate spheres—Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. The undeniable relevance of the Asian continent makes it impossible to deny that the Belt and Road has geopolitical ramifications (Kliman *et al.*, 2019), even if those are not explicitly stated among its purposes.

The Pivot to Asia strategy, formulated by the United States of America, would be one of the main reasons as to why China has felt the need to exert more assertiveness in its own region, and beyond. Let's not forget that the Pivot to Asia was announced in 2012, barely a year after the official start of the Belt and Road. There is seemingly a chain of international events that added up to the eventual birth of the BRI (Gan & Mao, 2016, 107).

Especially significant for China would be the amount of synergy that the Belt and Road Initiative can promote in the international sphere. Marginalised or rogue states—even those who have been relegated from the centres of global power—could become more sympathetic to China’s plight to gain some extent of power and influence in detriment of traditional players, such as the United States of America. The BRI would be the perfect tool in order to create regional and subregional forums in which Beijing’s government would be perceived in good light (Chheang, 2018, 3). This is particularly true in Africa, where forums like the African Union are more open to China’s presence, in opposition to other players traditionally seen as oppressors (Quadri, 2020). There is no denying that the Belt and Road could be used as a prime tool for strengthening bilateral relations with many different partners in all continents (Dollar, 2019), acting both as a forum for economic cooperation and as a channel for project implementation and development.

The fact that the Chinese government appoints most of its financing to strategic foreign sectors—such as energy production and extraction of natural resources—creates concerns over how Beijing uses FDI should not be overlooked. The thesis here is as follows: if the BRI aims to help developing countries through FDI, but the channelling and management of those same funds are more suited towards China’s interests than those particular countries’, the underlying logic of mutual benefit becomes unsustainable in the long run. This has the potential to create friction between governments and disputes over the projects, arising distrust, elite malcontent and social unrest.

All of this leads to what I like to call the conundrum of China’s reputation: on one hand, China presents a solution to worldwide problematics—lending millions to build critical infrastructure in countries where other countries do not care or risk to invest, and approaching the benefits of the global value chains to some of the least privileged communities in the world—; on the other hand, however, Beijing’s behaviour is seen by some as problematic, controlling, or even irresponsible.

In this sense, it can be said that many of its neighbours historically perceive China as an “irresponsible and abusive” state (Gan & Mao, 2016, 111). This statement goes directly in confrontation with the ‘good neighbour’ policy that Beijing aims to install in its immediate vicinity, such as Southeast Asia. A good example of this conundrum is the South China Sea case, in which the Philippines instituted arbitral proceedings before the Permanent Court of Arbitration back in 2013⁹.

In general, developing countries who would benefit more from this foreign policy tool designed by China have welcomed the Belt and Road into their own territories, regardless of whether they were a part of the aforementioned six original development corridors. African and South American countries have been some of the recipient countries of the BRI, although not without international critique: some voices point towards the lack of

⁹The legal basis for the arbitration was filed under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The court ruled in 2016 that China’s claims in the South China Sea had no historical basis, and that the waters inside the so-called ‘nine-dash line’ were no part of China’s territorial sea or internal waters (*The Republic of Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China*, Award (2016), PCA, 92, par. 214).

transparency of the lending process, most of which—expressed in terms of sovereign debt—does not appear to be registered by either the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank (Dollar, 2019).

China's lending practices relating to the BRI have served its detractors to coin the term 'debt-trap diplomacy'¹⁰. This term has been widely used by the press to promote the image of China as an international loan shark that preys on weaker countries (Brautigam & Rithmire, 2021, February 6; Rowley, 2020, November 25). In reality, the existence of a debt-trap in the BRI context is a matter much discussed by academics and foreign policy experts across the globe¹¹.

A paramount example relating to this reputational issue of responsibility and accountability is the Hambantota port case. Succinctly described, in the initial agreement regarding the construction of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, the Chinese enterprises were to acquire a lease on a part the container facilities for forty years. However, Sri Lanka's debt increased during the development of the project—due to several and varied reasons—, so a new agreement was reached in 2016 where the Chinese enterprises would receive 80 per cent of the container facilities in a lease of 99 years of duration (Clark, 2023, April 6). Hence, the often-attributed shrewdness to BRI-related lending.

While the detection of the maleficent intent can be hard at the best of times, it is true that an improvement on the quality of the loans offered by China could become a reality by rising loan policy standards and the dutiful consideration of the financial state of the countries receiving the loan (Nishizawa, 2023, September 19; Himmer & Rod, 2022). However, in spite of this, the fact remains that China's reputation both as a lender and an influential actor in the global sphere has been tainted.

Another problem that the BRI aspires to solve is the famous 'Malacca dilemma'. The Malacca strait—separating Malaysia and Indonesia—is one of the most notorious bottlenecks of global connectivity. Some of the most relevant maritime trade routes in the world navigate the waters of Malacca, which include oil and gas transportation to China, a country highly dependent on energy imports. Thus, the interest of the Chinese government in guaranteeing unimpeded trade in this region. Developing more efficient connectivity throughout the whole Southeast Asia could help Beijing to overcome the Malacca dilemma, and other similar strategic chokeholds.

| Conclusion |

Much has been said about the Belt and Road Initiative since its first announcement back in 2013. It is true that there is no blueprint of what the BRI actually encompasses, and maybe this particularity is the reason it has grown and changed so much in the last

¹⁰ Attributed to Indian scholar Brahma Chellaney, who created the term 'debt-trap diplomacy' in 2017 (Himmer & Rod, 2022).

¹¹ See, for example, the discussions presented in the following articles and media: Himmer & Rod (2022), Rowley, (2020, November 25), Brautigam & Rithmire (2021, February 6), Joones & Hameiri (2020, August 19), Nishizawa (2023, September 19).

decade. From the Land Belt and the Maritime Road, the BRI is present in most countries in the world nowadays, in some form or other.

However, its implementation has not been as smooth as one might be led to think. Malaysia's ex-Prime Minister, Mahathir bin Mohamad, accused the projects under the Belt and Road Initiative of being politically controlled by the Chinese government funds (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). Italy announced its intention of withdrawing from the BRI in December 2023, after being a part of it since the year 2019 (Tondo, 2023, December 6). Sri Lanka has been a paradigmatic case for Belt and Road critics because of the disastrous agreement that resulted in the lease to China of one of the most important enclaves of the island (*The New York Times*, 2018, June 25). These are only a handful of examples, but there are more.

Lots and lots more of pages could be written about the Belt and Road, and even then, the total scope of such a project would never be fully understood. However, the setbacks it faces are to be reckoned: while there is potential in the BRI—mainly stemming from its resiliency—, the drawbacks it still has to face—such as lack of transparency, reputational issues, project completions, security risks, and geopolitical rivalries, among others—could render the Belt and Road Initiative into something that it is just too big to manage.

The Belt and Road Initiative is, above all, both a strategy and a tool of foreign policy that stems not only from historical concepts and backgrounds, but from many other geopolitical initiatives that several countries and organisations have tried to implement over the last decades. The BRI aspires to be the main driver for foreign policy and development strategies for China in the years to come.

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| Nota biográfica |

Sara Álvarez Quintáns es Doctora en Seguridad Internacional (2023) por el Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado de la UNED. En el desarrollo de su investigación doctoral —titulada *Convergencia de fenómenos ilícitos en la Nueva Ruta de la Seda china*— ha profundizado en el conocimiento de la Nueva Ruta de la Seda y sus implicaciones para la seguridad internacional. Es, también, magíster en Paz, Seguridad y Defensa por el IUGM-UNED (2020) y graduada en Relaciones Internacionales por la Universidad Complutense de Madrid (2018). Sus áreas de interés son la criminalidad organizada transnacional y la seguridad en el entorno Indo-Pacífico.