

The New Silk Road: A Global Development Tool or A Modern Trojan Horse?

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March 20th 2023

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as "One Belt, One Road," is a global infrastructure project proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, designed to link China to the rest of the world through physical infrastructure such as railways, highways, and ports, etc. The 'Belt' refers to an overland silk road economic belt, and the 'road' refers to the maritime silk road (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023). This global infrastructure development model was inspired by the 'Old Silk Road,' the network of trade routes connecting China to Europe through Central and South Asia, established during the Han Dynasty of China (130 B. C. E) until the Ottoman Empire closed off trade in the West (Onion, Sullivan, & Mullen, 2023). While China claims it is an effort to boost economic activity by strengthening trade connections in developing countries, some see it as an effort to expand an already powerful economy. In the decade since the project's launch, it has expanded to the African and South American continents and the Oceanic region, considerably expanding China's economic and political influence. While critics share concerns over the China-led development and military expansion, the United States has failed to propose an initiative of an equal match, and the project has also incited opposition in some participant countries experiencing debt crises (McBride, Berman & Chatzky, 2023, para. 1). As China carries out this project in different nations, concerns about how it might affect human security have been raised. This paper will discuss the deeper drivers behind the BRI, its latest developments, and its possible impact on human security. This paper will argue that combining geopolitical and economic motives drives the BRI. While the potential benefits to participant nations are great, the threats to human security posed by the BRI's economic, social, and political impacts are greater.

Overview of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

In 2013, China's President Xi Jinping proposed a global development project called the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), also known as the 'New Silk Road.' The BRI comprises two main components: the 'Belt' refers to an overland silk road economic belt, and the 'road' refers to the maritime silk road. This project aims to link Asia to Europe and Africa through physical infrastructure such as highways, railways, pipelines, and ports. The silk road economic belt is the land-based trade route connecting China to Central Asia, the Middle East, Russia, and Europe. The maritime silk road is the sea-based trade route connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and Africa (Jie & Wallace, 2021, paras. 9-10).

The BRI is described as the largest infrastructure project in history and is estimated to cost over \$1 Trillion USD. Reportedly, Chinese companies have secured more than \$340 billion USD in construction contracts along the Belt and Road (Kuo & Kommenda, 2018, paras. 5-6). The BRI can also be considered a global investment project which could significantly benefit the countries involved through increased trade, investment, and economic growth. Increased investment and trade is known to generate new market opportunities and create employment opportunities. While the BRI is expected to promote regional activity and enhance China's strategic presence, it could also pose several risks to human security.

Deeper drivers behind the Belt and Road Initiative

A combination of geopolitical, economic, and domestic motivations could drive the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's geopolitical motivations behind the BRI could be its global rise to power. President Xi Jinping and the CCP see the BRI as an opportunity to expand China's global influence, promote its interests and challenge the United States' global dominance. The BRI allows China to develop new trade linkages, boost the Chinese export market, and export China's excess productive capacity (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023, para. 12). The BRI

could also help China with challenges to its regional influence posed by India and Japan by rerouting economical activity, encouraging the development of soft-infrastructure such as improved financial integration, and strengthening people-to-people connections through a cultural exchange which shifts power between states (China Power Team, 2020, paras. 3-4). Additionally, by boosting links to its western regions, which have historically been neglected, China aims to secure long-term energy supplies from its neighbors in Central Asia and the Middle East without the possibility of interference from the United States (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023, para 13).

Considering China's economic motivations, Chinese leaders are determined to avoid the possible 'middle-income trap' which plagues close to 90 percent of middle-income countries. This trap is when countries experience an increase in wages and quality of life at the expense of the quality of production of goods and services (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023, para 14). For this reason, the BRI is seen as an export-oriented growth strategy to address China's overcapacity in domestic industries such as steel, aluminium, and cement. China could export its excess capacity through the BRI and create access to new markets, generating more demand for its industrial products and services, mainly construction and engineering (China Power Team, 2020, paras. 14-16).

In terms of domestic motivations, the BRI is seen as an opportunity to promote regional development and stability, particularly in China's lower-income western provinces. The government aims to use the BRI to support businesses in these regions, as the creation of overland economic connectivity with Europe and Central Asia will promote growth and reduce income inequality (China Power Team, 2020, paras. 14-16).

Latest Developments of the BRI

Since its launch in 2013, the Belt and Road (BRI) has continued to expand its membership, with over 140 countries signing agreements with China to participate. Some of the more recent notable agreements are the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, and the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was unveiled in 2015 during President Xi's visit to Islamabad. The CPEC is a \$46 billion BRI initiative to build new transportation and infrastructure across the country. The Chinese government hoped this project would boost Pakistan's economy, ease tensions within the country, and stabilize Xinjiang, giving China an advantage over India, one of its biggest regional competitors, and by extension, the United States (Sacks, 2021, paras. 1-2). The focus of the project was intended to be the Port of Gwadar, located on the Arabian sea at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, developing the port to build supporting infrastructure and establish a free trade zone (Sacks, 2021, para 3). Other projects in Pakistan under the BRI include a \$7 billion upgrade made to the railway connecting Peshawar to Karachi, two hydroelectric power plants in Kashmir, a metro system in Lahore, Huawei fiber-optic cables running from China to Pakistan and the establishment of multiple special economic zones (SEZs) (Sacks, 2021, para 4).

The Jakarta-Bandung Railway is another major project initiated under the BRI as an agreement between China and Indonesia. The 142.3 km line connects Jakarta to Bandung, the fourth-largest city. The railway is expected to cut travel time between the two cities to around 40 minutes from over three hours and makes Indonesia the first country in Southeast Asia with a high-speed railway (Min, Simin, Chuyan, & Cao, 2022). Additionally, the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka is a project launched under the BRI. The Sri Lankan government proposed the project

under former President Mahinda Rajapakse in cooperation with a Chinese State-Owned Enterprise (Jones & Hameiri, 2020)

China has continued to expand its partnerships along the BRI route. In 2021, China signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Mauritius, which is seen as a significant step in the BRI's expansion into Africa (Xuequan, 2019). Additionally, China has been working to emphasize sustainability and green development through the BRI in recent years. In 2020, China issued green Belt and Road development guidelines, including measures to promote renewable energy, energy efficiency, and low-carbon transport (Xinhua, 2019). As the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted global trade and investment, BRI projects were no exception. To adapt, China explored different ways of investing through digital infrastructure and health cooperation. For instance, in 2021, China launched the Digital Silk Road Initiative to build 5G networks and data centers along the BRI route (Silk Road Briefing, 2020). Furthermore, the BRI has faced increased scrutiny, especially from the United States and European countries, as concerns have been raised about the initiative's debt sustainability, environmental impact, and geopolitical implications. In 2021, the G7 countries announced the launch of a new infrastructure initiative called the Build Back Better World (B3W) Initiative, which aimed to rival the BRI and promote high-standard, sustainable infrastructure (Parker, Cameron-Chileshe, Hook, & White, 2021).

Implications of the BRI on Human Security

In 1994, the United Nations Development Program defined 'human security' as "first, safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease and repression, and second, protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life" (Human Development Report, 1994). China's political and economic system was initially founded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 as a socialist state with a centrally planned economy. It has since transitioned into

a mixed economy described as 'socialist with Chinese characteristics' by the government (UNDP, 2023). While the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could potentially strengthen China's security, it also carries several potential risks to global human security, including economic, social, environmental, social, and political impacts.

In terms of China's security, the BRI creates alternative routes in the South and East China seas in case of possible military clashes prompted by China's territorial disputes with its neighbors, India and Japan. Additionally, in case of a US-China confrontation, China would not be isolated as the BRI creates an economic and financial platform independent of the West. China has also built up military facilities on artificial islands in the South China sea to safeguard the passage of Chinese vessels along the maritime silk road. Furthermore, the Xinjiang region in China has long been a concern for the government as the majority of the population consists of ethnic Uyghurs. China aims to use the BRI as a tool to improve economic stability and development in neighbouring countries and, by extension, improve its national security (Sahakyan, 2019). The BRI also helps China enhance cybersecurity through its latest development, the Digital Silk Road (DSR). The DSR promotes international cybersecurity cooperation through the development of telecommunication infrastructure such as 5G networks throughout the region (Silk Road Briefing, 2020, para. 7).

On the other hand, the BRI also has significant potential benefits for participants, including increased trade, investment, and economic growth. However, the risks associated with the BRI, including debt-trap diplomacy, are significant. 'Debt-trap diplomacy' is the term used to describe China using the BRI as a manipulative strategy to fund major infrastructure projects in developing nations with unsustainable loans, using it as leverage over those governments (Jie & Wallace, 2021, para. 23). Participant nations may find it difficult to repay loans received from

China which could result in financial instability in the country. This is already seen in some countries, such as Sri Lanka, where China invested a total value of \$12.1 billion USD between 2006 and July 2019 in infrastructure projects. The Sri Lankan government was unable to repay the Chinese loans that funded the Hambantota Port, forcing the government to hand over control of the port to China on a 99-year lease in 2017. As the port is strategically positioned in the Indian Ocean, it provides China with significant infrastructure and an advantage over competitors. It is important to note, however, that the Sri Lankan government proposed building the port as part of its legacy projects, and corruption played a major role in its failure (Jie & Wallace, 2021, paras 23-25).

Moreover, the BRI has received criticism as being environmentally unsustainable. As the BRI involves the construction of physical infrastructure such as ports, railways, highways, and dams, it leads to deforestation and land cultivation, resulting in a loss of biodiversity and air and water pollution. In 2017, the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) released a report noting that as many as 1739 important bird areas and key biodiversity areas are at risk of harm along the BRI corridors. For example, a dam scheduled to be constructed under the BRI on the island of Sumatra seriously threatens the highly diverse ecosystem of the Batang Tori jungle. These projects also threaten the livelihoods of people who rely heavily on local environmental resources. In Cambodia, the proposed construction of a dam along the Mekong River could cut off fish species from their upriver breeding grounds, negatively impacting not only the river fisheries but fishermen in Thailand and Laos (Environmental and Energy Study Institute, 2018). This creates the risk of hunger within these communities and is a clear disruption in the pattern of daily life for these civilians, a clear threat to human security.

Furthermore, the BRI could have a significant social impact. Since BRI projects involve labour migration and work contracts, this could lead to exploitation, poor working conditions, and human rights abuses by contractors. In the 2022 Annual Report on Human trafficking, the U.S. State Department highlighted the use of forced labour in China's BRI. According to the report, some BRI projects in African, European, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries have seen forced overtime, physical violence, restricted freedom of movement, and retaliation for reported abuses (Nikkei Asia, 2022). Additionally, construction of large-scale infrastructure projects could result in the displacement of local communities which is a direct violation of the concept of human security. For instance the approval of the construction of the Lower Sesan Dam by the Cambodian government resulted in the displacement of nearly 5000 people, including Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities who, for generations, had lived along the Sesan and Srepok rivers, and two tributaries of the Mekong River. As yields drastically decreased, this devastated tens of thousands of civilians who depended on the river fisheries for income and food (Amat, 2021).

Likewise, the BRI also carries a significant political impact within participating countries and on the global level. As China seeks to expand its influence, particularly in the Southeast and Central Asian regions, the BRI could potentially shift the balance of power towards China as increased trade could result in dependency on Chinese exports. Since the BRI involves the construction of physical infrastructure, it provides China with access to natural resources in partaking nations. It potentially influences domestic politics, which could be seen as an infringement on the sovereignty of these countries, increasing tensions and political conflict. For instance, Russia's President Vladimir Putin has pledged to link his Eurasian vision with the BRI,

further deteriorating Russia's relationship with the West (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023, para 31). This contributes to increased political tensions between China and the United States.

Conclusion

A massive infrastructure project that aims to link Asia, Europe and Africa through a network of land and sea routes could bring significant economic benefits to both China and the Asian region. However, the risks to human security, such as debt-trap diplomacy, environmental pollution, labour rights violations, displacement, and possible military clashes due to political tensions within regions, are evident. Although China has considered these concerns and proposed BRI policies promoting quality and sustainability, it is important for participant nations to ensure these policies are soundly implemented to prevent the BRI from becoming a modern-day Trojan Horse.

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