

Deciphering the Belt and Road Initiative

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JON (YUAN) JIANG, JUN 16 2021

China-BRI-related topics have become some of the most debated academic issues. However, only a few essays and scholarly articles have focused on the BRI narrative in the Chinese media. Both by using critical discourse analysis and comparing reporting of the *China Daily* on the BRI with western media, Xiao, Li and Hu conclude that the newspaper portrays the BRI as economic opportunities to the world, and Zhang and Wu argue that the *China Daily* perceives China as “a peace-loving country, an international co-operator and a great global responsible power”. By comparison, Swaine argues that Chinese media describes the BRI to be a near-altruistic, economic-centered and mutually beneficial network without discussing China’s own domestic and external goals related to the BRI. Also, Chinese media firmly denies any condemnations that BRI will be used to threaten any other member countries.

Furthermore, a considerable amount of literature has been published on the Chinese media’s functions. Chinese and non-Chinese scholars both have realized the importance of the media and reached a consensus that the media of China as an instrument of public diplomacy narratives are still relatively less influential, compared to the Western powers, although China has been dedicated to enhancing it for many years. Cheng, García-Herrero, Xu and Ramo argue that the media play a leading role in shaping the image of China and the BRI, public opinion and decision-making of other countries. Furthermore, they argue that if the image of China and the BRI is commensurate with the perception of local countries or not determines the future of the BRI. Hu Xijin, the Chief Editor of Global Times, Chinese state-owned media, regarded as the center of China’s propaganda machine by Western media, claims that “China’s ability to explain itself to the world is inadequate”.

To explore the rationales of Chinese media’s less credible role in the publicity of the BRI, Xin, Matheson, Rosen and Mi believes that despite the huge investment, the credibility of Chinese media has been difficult, because China lacks global credibility in terms of modern culture and political ideology, and thus the media has been perceived as the tool of government propaganda. Furthermore, Ma argues that China does not grasp the thinking of other countries and only works as “a propaganda machine by repeating the same words everywhere”. In addition, Pan and Zhou argues that Chinese media avoid the possible problems and concrete operational plans of the BRI, and only focus on its good side and theoretical principals of the BRI. Zhou, Zhang and Xu believe that the dissemination of Chinese media is relatively passive and lacks two-way interaction and necessary narrating skills.

The aims of the BRI

Academic opinions have been divided into six camps in terms of the aims or reasons of the BRI. First, Mações, Bhattacharya, Fallon, Leverett, Wu, Leavy, Cau, Sági, Engelberth, Flint, Zhu, L. K. Cheng, Ma, Andornino and Wang argue that the BRI is China’s strategic plan to increase its global influence and seek supports from other countries. There exist nuances in this view. As an eminent scholar in the BRI and politician, Dr Bruno Mações argues that China wants to build a Chinese world order through the BRI. Mações, Bhattacharya, Cau, Fallon, Flint, Zhu, Sági, Engelberth and Leavy argues that China seeks to marginalize America in Asia, strengthen China’s regional hegemony and diminish America’s global position through leveraging its economic power on other countries. By comparison, Ma, Leverett, Wu and Wang affirm that China is geared towards a more multi-polar order by deepening the EU-China economic integration and enhancing its “legitimacy in the international economic and financial order”, rather than replacing American dominance in Asia and the world.

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By comparison with the first one, the second camp identifies the BRI to mainly serve domestic economic and political concerns of China such as creating new markets, promoting stagnating exports, securing energy supplies, maintaining Xinjiang's stability and unity, resolving regional development imbalance, internationalizing Chinese currency, transferring industrial overcapacity to low-wage youth-rich developing countries and excessive foreign exchange reserve. Mações, Li, L. K. Cheng and Wang argue further that the BRI is a cautious response to the America's rebalance to Asia during the Obama administration in order to avoid direct confrontation with the United States, as the BRI focus more on Central Asia, West Asia and beyond.

Third, compared to Trump administration's "America First" foreign and economic policy and withdrawal from some international institutions as de-globalization, the BRI represents and promotes a new category of economic globalization and regional economic integration, exploring novice "international economic governance mechanism" and promoting the economic development of the BRI member countries and a community of shared future for mankind. Also, Mações, Xu, Johnston, Flint, Zhu, Liu, Dunford, Gao, Sági and Engelberth believe that there are numerous demand for infrastructure construction in the BRI participating countries and the BRI helps satisfy their needs.

The fourth camp combines the first three camps, and argues that the BRI not only serves the domestic economic and security concerns of China, but also harbors the ambition of enhancing its global influence and promote the economic development of the BRI member countries. For example, L. K. Cheng argue that the BRI is the combination of foreign aid and profitability "with aid creating conditions for profitable trade and investment", as "developed economies often tie the two explicitly or implicitly in their dealings with developing economies".

Fifth, Mações, Johnston, Cau, Rogelja, L. K. Cheng, Summers, Yeh, Wharton, Yu, Leavy, Sági, Engelberth, Toma and Grădinaru explains the BRI from the perspective of history and contends that the BRI is the new interpretation of the historical Silk Road, and the continuing development of Chinese policy from the existing "Great Western Development Strategy", "Go Out policy" and some sub-national projects to a national level, because some BRI infrastructures are already under way before the BRI has been proposed.

Sixth, as a leading scholar in this question, Professor Jinhan Zeng from Lancaster University represents a unique perspective. Zeng, Jones, Shepard, Mações, Dunford, Liu and He all argue that the West overestimate the BRI, and in fact, in order to please Beijing, Chinese municipal governments' various interpretations of the BRI challenge Beijing's original meaning of the BRI so that the BRI now has become a loose, constantly evolving and indeterminate scheme to accommodate all stakeholders' interests. In practice, after examining three BRI overseas economic and trade cooperation zones, Z. Cheng argues that the BRI mainly relies on grand statement between Beijing and other partner countries, but lacks practical implementation plan, which underpins Zeng's view.

The implementation of the BRI and its impact on the economy

It is possible to apprehend what the BRI has done in recent years. Hu contends that from 2013 to 2019, as the basic institutional framework, the "Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation" has been set up, which is the largest global summit after World War Two except the UN meetings. Key infrastructural projects focusing on infrastructure development, and international capacity cooperation have been established. As the focus of the BRI, infrastructure development has mainly covered the construction of six economic corridor with additional establishment of ports, airports and railway lines. As for the international capacity cooperation, over 80 overseas economic and trade cooperation zones have been under construction. Furthermore, supporting systems, including financial support and people-to-people connectivity, have been built. The financial support mainly comprises international financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and funds such as Silk Road Fund. The people-to-people connectivity essentially involves every aspect of the BRI, but primarily focuses on education and tourism.

However, it seems impossible to explore the complete outcome of the implementation of the BRI. Due to the fact that the BRI is in the direct command of President Xi as mentioned in the introduction, the BRI should succeed without any possibilities of failure in an authoritarian regime like China, even if its success is only nominal. Baogang He underpins this view:

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It is difficult to provide an objective and comprehensive assessment of the outcome of the BRI. A starting problem is the lack of true information; a follow-up problem is the politics involved. Even if projects are economic failures, they can be said to be a 'success' since it is easy to claim that they have achieved their strategic or political task.

Furthermore, through scrutinizing three BRI overseas economic and trade cooperation zones, Cheng believes that there are more problems than successes in the implementation of the BRI, which can be recognized as two main factors: "the lack of government support from either China or the partner countries and the extremely limited corporate awareness of those actors participating in the process". In terms of the insufficiency of government support, Cheng argues that the implementation of the BRI lacks clear guidance, sufficient communication and adequate financial support of the two sides' governments. In detail, the inadequacy of financial support especially in the side of host countries may lead to debt issues that has already emerged in Sri Lanka. Regarding the corporate awareness, some Chinese overseas economic and trade cooperation zones are not aware of local environment before the inception of construction, neglecting natural, infrastructure, cultural and legal background in the member country.

So far, there are only a few papers investigating the impact of BRI on the economy of participating countries with acknowledged flaws in data collection and calculation, and neglect in political factors. Based on the data of World Bank, de Soyres, Mulabdic, and Ruta examine the impact of BRI-related transportation infrastructure projects on the GDP of the BRI member countries and concludes that the BRI is a win-win project for the world, although not every participant will win, especially for small countries. Similarly, drawing on the identical data provider, Sun, Zhang, Xu, Yang and Wang argue that the BRI has effectively facilitated the economic growth of the BRI member states, but the development of per capita GDP growth is not substantial. Thus, it is unrealistic to discuss the whole effect of the BRI, but it is possible to search the factors that influence the BRI.

Three factors that influence the success of the BRI

Scholars have identified three main and divergent factors that influence the success of the BRI. Senior Research Fellow Dr Hong Yu from the National University of Singapore is a principal expert in this question, whose view has covered the first three factors. First, Mações, Du, Ma, Leverett, Wu, Eisenman, Dunford, Liu, Y. Yang, L. K. Cheng and Yu stress that the determinant of the BRI future is the reaction of the US and its allies: if the US contains or accommodates the BRI will decide the accomplishment of the BRI. Furthermore, Mações, Dunford, Liu, Y. Yang, L. K. Cheng and Leavy argues that the strategic anxiety, potential rivalry and political instability of the BRI's partner countries or China's neighboring states is a great challenge to the BRI. For example, the BRI might dwarf the economic existence of Russia in Central Asia that Russia has dominated for decades; the BRI may compete with Japan in Southeast Asia where Japan has great economic influence. To some extent, it is because China does not have the adequate military power to offer protection to its overseas economic interests and China needs cooperation with other countries.

Second, Mações, Lim, Leavy and Vangeli emphasize that the decisive factor of the success of the BRI is if the BRI is beneficial enough to the member countries or just enhance the influence of China without losing economic and political sovereignty. To a profound level, if member states with a stake feel a sense of ownership in the implementation of the BRI or not is imperative to the success of the BRI, given the increasingly strained relations between China and some ASEAN countries due to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Third, from the perspective of domestic factors in China, Mações, Shepard, Yu, Zeng, Ma and He confirm the BRI has faced many challenges that it is not well-defined and not well-designed with various versions of provincial governments in China, and its governance lacks transparent information, clear leadership structure and unified implementation strategy. Furthermore, Zeng, Zou, Jones and Pan affirms that in order to achieve their own economic interests their own economic interests, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are not always under the full control of Beijing, because most of them are province-based and SOE reform has weakened the governance of Beijing over SOEs, to some extent. Additionally, Chinese SOEs and foreign partners sometimes have different understandings of "development". The former prioritizes the improvement of people's lives, while the later also values social responsibility, human rights, democratic reforms, local culture and tradition.

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