

# Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative

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From tea-table discussion to round-table discussion to international seminar to Indo-pacific dialogue, BRI has become a pivotal subject of discussion for researchers and thinkers. So, what is BRI and why is it so important? The young generation, especially students, might be also interested to know what is actually BRI and its purpose. This paper will make an endeavor to analyze BRI.



In ancient time, the Han Dynasty of China (207 CE) using the West route known as the “Silk Road” became the terrestrial network of trade covering a huge area of East-West-South Asia, Southern Europe and East Africa. The term “Silk Route” became favorite of historians but the term “Silk Road” was favored by the mass population. The “Silk Road” was never meant to be single expressway between East and West and the term “Silk” derived from the attractive money-making trade of silk along the thoroughfare from the east to west route. Other than silk, tea, porcelain, paper, gunpowder, spices, etc were also transported, and from West to East came horses, animals, gold, slaves, weapons & armours, etc.

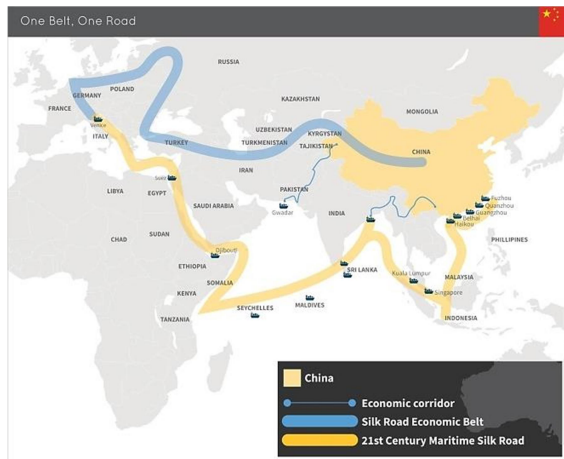
Communication, cooperation and mutual benefit were the spirit of Silk Road throughout the generations as cultural and historic heritage.

The spirit of Silk Road, as viewed by Chinese officials– “peace and

cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and benefit”– was the strategic driver for the motivation of its own people, as well as the people of neighboring countries. This spirit has been passed from generation to generation, promoted the progress of human civilization, and contributed greatly to the prosperity and development of the countries along the Silk Road for thousands of years.

The agglomeration of this spirit, perhaps, motivated Chinese President Xi Jinping to declare is most ambitious foreign and economic policies, of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) in October 2013 while visiting Central Asia and Southeast Asia. Immediately, it gained close attention from all over the world with a mixed reaction. Initially, it was named as One Belt, One Road (OBOR). On land, along the ancient Silk Road, dubbed as SREB, President Xi wanted to connect own country's

underdeveloped hinterland with the Europe through Central Asia. In the second phase, the plan was to connect the fast growing Southeast Asian countries to China's Southern Provinces through building of ports and bridges, known as 21st Century MSR.



### Transformation from OBOR to BRI

According to President Xi's declaration, it was named as "One Belt, One Road," but at later stage in mid-2016, Central Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Peoples' Republic of China stated that "One Belt One Road" in English should no longer be referred to, instead it is to be termed as "The Belt and Road Initiative" with "BRI" as its acronym instead of the catchy "OBOR". Una Aleksandra mentioned that the word "One" had brought too much misinterpretation as the partner countries gave too importance on "One", assuming that there is only one maritime route and a single land belt. But the reality is that China wants to connect Asia, Europe and Africa through five routes so the numeral "One" is to be avoided. In addition, the word "Initiative" has been incorporated into the official

acronym in order to express the openness of the strategy and to avoid criticism over "China-centered institution building". In connotation, the Belt and Road Initiative refers to both land route and sea route.

### What does "Belt and Road" Mean?

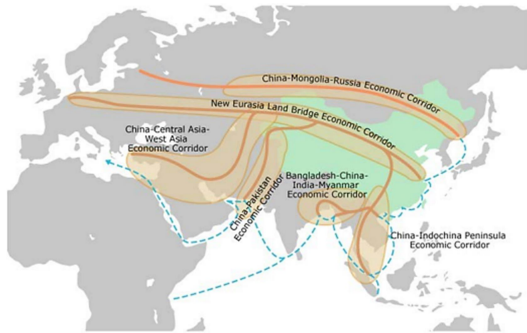
Chinese have found out very innovative way of naming "Belt" and "Road". The "Belt" has been taken from OBOR, referring "Belt" to economic and overland transport links across China to Central Asia and Europe, which earlier meant to be SREB; while the "Road" is a network of maritime routes connecting Europe, Africa and the Asian regions to the Chinese sea ports, which is meant to be 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

### Theoretical Framework of BRI

The BRI intends to connect Asia, Europe and Africa along five different routes, which SREB intends to connect: (1) linking China to Europe through Central Asia and Russia; (2) connecting China with the Middle East through Central Asia; and (3) bringing together China and Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. And the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road focuses on using Chinese coastal ports to: (4) link China with Europe through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean; and (5) connect China with the South Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea.

Focusing on the above five routes, the BRI aims to collaborate with partner countries using existing infrastructure, where necessary, further strengthen cooperation and build six international economic co-

operation corridors. These have been identified as (1) the New Eurasia Land Bridge, (2) China-Mongolia-Russia, (3) China-Central Asia-West Asia, (4) China-Indochina Peninsula, (5) China-Pakistan, and (6) Bangladesh- China- India- Myanmar.



### BRI Principles

BRI refers to Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st century Maritime Silk Road launched by Chinese Government. Its aim is to promote free flow of economic factors through regional economic cooperation with a view to create economic benefit to all, along the BRI, on the basis of Chinese strategic policy. There are five areas to focus, as shown in the diagram below:



### Fund for BRI

BRI plans to cover 70-plus countries across Asia, Europe and East Africa containing more than 60% of world's population, 30% of world's GDP and 35% of world's trade. The BRI is expected to invest as high as \$8 trillion for a vast network of

transportation, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure linking Europe, Africa, and Asia. Out of which 1.8 trillion is expected to be for MSR, for making various infrastructure, roads, energy, transportation, communications, etc. China is going to spend US \$62 billion for the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), BRI's "flagship project". So, from where will such a huge fund come? China expects that money will be invested mainly from two financial apparatus - the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China proposed establishing AIIB in 2013, 57 countries became the founding members, headquarters in Beijing and opened business on 16 January 2016. Bangladesh is one of the founding members of AIIB and also a signatory to BRI. However, despite Chinese assurance and commitment, uncertainty looms by many Asian countries that they might end-up with 'debt trap' like Sri Lankan Hambantota Port.

### Implications of BRI

Since the declaration of the BRI, lots of talks are going around amongst the thinkers western and Eastern – about the successfulness of the initiative. Although Chinese have assured that the initiative will be green, but the environmentalists have raised their eyebrows with suspicion. Westerners have their own way of development and they prefer to avoid China to not interfere in EU's own arena of development network. Some of them have also found the smell of a new Chinese way of colonialism. Thus there are many in favour and many in

skepticism. In the region, India is the strongest critic of BRI on its sovereignty issue of CPEC that passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), and also the growing Chinese military clout in Indian Ocean. Nonetheless, presently BRI encompasses 126 countries and 29 international organizations, which is definitely going to become the biggest showcase on earth. As far as the

documents say, BRI is an initiative, not strategy; it is not Chinese vision rather it is populism; its success or failure will depend on the participation of partner countries. Most importantly, it is China at the end, which needs to show its sincerity and take appropriate steps to counter the criticism. There are valid reasons of wariness.