



The Washington Quarterly >

Volume 40, 2017 - [Issue 1](#)

16,698 Views

142 CrossRef citations to date

1 Altmetric

Chinese Economic Diplomacy

China's "Belt and Road Initiative": Underwhelming or Game-Changer?

Nadège Rolland

Pages 127-142 | Published online: 26 Apr 2017

🗨️ Cite this article

🔗 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302743>



Sample our
Politics & International
Relations Journals

>> **Sign in here** to start your access
to the latest two volumes for 14 days



📄 Full Article

📊 Figures & data

🗨️ Citations

📊 Metrics

🖨️ Reprints & Permissions

Read this article

🔗 Share

China's "Belt and Road Initiative": Underwhelming or Game-Changer?

Since its unveiling at the end of 2013, China's "One Belt One Road" initiative, or BRI for Belt and Road Initiative, as it is now officially known¹—an awkward label that does not do justice to the poetry of its Chinese name, *yidai yilu*—has clearly emerged as one of President Xi Jinping's top priorities. The sheer size and ambition of the project, to which the regime has already committed substantial financial, diplomatic, and intellectual resources, gives it the potential to become one of the defining economic and political constructs of the first half of the 21st century. Designed to stimulate economic development by dramatically enhancing regional interconnectivity, the BRI aims to integrate the world's largest landmass—from Vladivostok to Lisbon, from Moscow to Singapore—through a dense network of both "hard" and "soft" infrastructure all linked to China (from transportation, telecommunications, and energy infrastructure to financial integration and political coordination). If the project succeeds as Beijing hopes, it will transform Eurasia's geopolitical landscape and cement China's position as the preponderant regional power.

Despite its evident importance, the BRI has thus far received comparatively little attention from the United States.² This is due in part to the fact that tensions in the South China Sea and on the Korean Peninsula continue to occupy the attention of Asia watchers in America. But it also reflects a lack of understanding of the strategic motivations that underpin the Belt and Road Initiative and a serious underestimation of its potential implications for the entire Eurasian continent.

Nadège Rolland is Senior Fellow for Political and Security Affairs at the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR). Her monograph, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the 'Belt and Road Initiative'*, is forthcoming in spring of 2017. She can be reached at nrolland@nbr.org or on Twitter @RollandNadege.

Copyright © 2017 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 40:1 pp. 127–142
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302743>

Notes

1. The official standardized English translation of 一带一路 'yidai yilu' became "Belt and Road Initiative" in 2015, after the publication of a joint statement by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, specifically demanding that "initiative" should be in the singular instead of the plural form, and that the words "strategy", "project", "program" or "agenda"

should not be used. See Xie Tao, "Is China's 'Belt and Road' a Strategy?" *The Diplomat*, December 16, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/is-chinas-belt-and-road-a-strategy/>.

2. With the notable exception of the following: Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Views and Commentary on the 'One Belt One Road' Initiative," *China Leadership Monitor*, 47 (Summer 2015), Hoover Institution, <http://www.hoover.org/research/chinese-views-and-commentary-one-belt-one-road>; Christopher K. Johnson, "President Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road' Initiative," Report, CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies, March 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/president-xi-jinping%E2%80%99s-belt-and-road-initiative>; Simeon Djankov, eds., "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Motives, Scope and Challenges," *PIIE Briefings 16-2* (March 2016), Peterson Institute for International Economics, <https://piie.com/publications/piie-briefings/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-motives-scope-and-challenges>.

European think-tanks have been watching the BRI closely: Jikkie Verlare, "A New Opportunity in EU-China Security Ties: The One Belt One Road Initiative," *Clingendael* (December 2015); Nadine Godehardt, "Chinas Vision einer globalen Seidenstraße" [China's Vision of a Global Silk Road] in Volker Perthes, eds., *Ausblick 2016: Begriffe und Realitäten internationaler Politik* [2016 Outlook: Concepts and Realities of International Politics], SWP, Berlin (2016) 33-36; Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar, "'One Belt, One Road': Mapping China's New Diplomatic Strategy," *The Polish Institute of International Affairs Bulletin*, 67 (July 2, 2015); Alice Ekman, "China in Asia: What is Behind the New Silk Roads?" *Note de l'Institut Français des Relations Internationales* (July 2015).

3. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries," September 7, 2013, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml.

4. "Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament," *ASEAN-China-Centre*, October 2, 2013, http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.

5. Author's interviews, Beijing, November 2015.

6. "Chronology of China's "Belt and Road" Initiatives," Xinhua, February 2, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-02/05/c_133972101.htm.
7. Zhang Yunbi, "Initiative for Eurasia Trade Gains Momentum," China Daily, March 2, 2015, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2015-02/03/content_19476441.htm.
8. "“”" [List of Team Leader and Four Deputies for OBOR Leading Group Revealed], April 5, 2015, <http://finance.china.com.cn/news/gnj/20150405/3041455.shtml>.
9. He Yini, "China to Invest \$900 bn in Belt and Road Initiative," China Daily, May 28, 2015, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-05/28/content_20845687.htm.
10. James Kynge, "Chinese Overseas Lending Dominated by One Belt, One Road Strategy," Financial Times, June 18, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/3/e9dcd674-15d8-11e5-be54-00144feabdc0.html#axzz4540diizH>.
11. Liu Jia, Gao Shuang, "China, EU to Promote Digital Silk Road," China Daily, July 7, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-07/07/content_21202745.htm.
12. Jiang Jie, "Nation Considers Space-Based 'Silk Road of Satellites' to Provide Data Services," Global Times, May 31, 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/924600.shtml>.
13. [Zhou Yanhong], "One Belt One Road," YouTube, August 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ULQk-sM9H0>.
14. Hannah Beech, "Ode to Autocracy: Viral Poem Highlights Cult of China's Leader," Time, February 19, 2016, <http://time.com/4230280/china-xi-jinping-poem-media/>.
15. "“": "”" [Wang Shuguo: Universities Must Serve One Belt One Road Strategy], [China Economic Network], March 6, 2016, http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/201603/06/t20160306_9307346.shtml. Wang Shuguo is the President of Xi'an Jiaotong University, one of China's top academic institutions.
16. The first Silk Road Forum was held in Istanbul, Turkey, in December 2014. Development Research Center of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Inspirations and Opportunities International Conference," China Daily, December 4, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/drc/2014-12/04/content_19024447.htm. It was followed in 2015 by Madrid, Spain: "Silk Road

Forum 2015 Held in Madrid,” Xinhua, October 29, 2015,

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-10/29/c_134760269.htm; and Tbilisi, Georgia: Tbilisi Silk Road Forum, <http://www.tbilisisilkroad.ge/en/home>.

17. He Na, “Think Tank to Support Belt and Road Initiative,” China Daily, February 24, 2016, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-02/24/content_23617083.htm.

18. For example, “The Potential of One Belt, One Road,” Global Capital, November 30, 2015, <http://www.globalcapital.com/article/vf5bsfykt1tj/the-potential-of-one-belt-one-road>; “China’s New Silk Road: New Funding for Overseas Infrastructure Investment,” HSBC Global Banking and Markets, November 18, 2014,

<http://www.gbm.hsbc.com/insights/infrastructure/china-new-silk-road>; “GII Beijing: Navigating One Belt One Road,” Global Infrastructure Initiative, May 2015,

<http://www.globalinfrastructureinitiative.com/article/gii-beijing-navigating-one-belt-one-road>; Christopher O’Dea, “Logistics Asia: Respinning the Silk Road,” IPE & Real Estate, November-December 2015, <http://realestate.ipe.com/markets-/sectors/industrial/logistics-asia-respinning-the-silk-road/10010677.fullarticle>.

19. Christopher K. Johnson, “President Xi Jinping’s ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative: A Practical Assessment of the Chinese Roadmap for China’s Global Resurgence,” Report, CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies, March 2016,

http://csis.org/files/publication/160328_Johnson_PresidentXiJinping_Web.pdf.

20. Simeon Djankov and Sean Miner, eds., “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Motives, Scope, and Challenges,” PIIE Briefing 16-2, Peterson Institute for International Economics, March 2016, https://piie.com/system/files/documents/piieb16-2_1.pdf.

21. According to: “Infrastructure for a Seamless Asia,” Asian Development Bank, report, September 2009, <http://www.adb.org/publications/infrastructure-seamless-asia>.

22. David Dollar, “China’s Rise as a Regional and Global Power: The AIIB and the ‘One Belt, One Road,’” Brookings Paper, Summer 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/07/china-regional-global-power-dollar>;

Bert Hofman, “China’s One Belt One Road Initiative: What We Know Thus Far,” The World Bank, April 12, 2015, <http://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/china-one-belt-one-road-initiative-what-we-know-thus-far>.

23. Charles Clover and Lucy Hornby, "China's Great Game: Road to a New Empire," Financial Times, October 12, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/6e098274-587a-11e5-a28b-50226830d644.html#axzz3oTDW37mz>.
24. Jacob L. Shapiro, "One Belt, One Road, No Dice," Geopolitical Futures, January 12, 2017, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/one-belt-one-road-no-dice/>; Vassilis Ntousas, "Back to the Future: China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative," FEPS Policy Brief, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, March 2016, <http://www.feps-europe.eu/assets/6b12aa95-9d47-466f-a791-fa02a5d5c7d3/backtothefuture-feps-policybriefpdf.pdf>; Jiafeng Chen, "Camel Bells and Smoky Deserts," Harvard Political Review, March 13, 2016, <http://harvardpolitics.com/world/camel-bells-and-smoky-deserts/>.
25. Harry G. Broadman, "Will China's One Belt, One Road' Become a 'Bridge to Nowhere'?" Forbes, January 6, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/harrybroadman/2016/01/06/will-chinas-one-belt-one-road-become-a-bridge-to-nowhere/#40e1504d1de8>.
26. Alexandre Cooley, "New Silk Route or Classic Developmental Cul-de-Sac? The Prospects and Challenges of China's OBOR Initiative," PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo 372, July 2015, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm372_Cooley_July2015.pdf.
27. In 2012, China's GDP growth fell to 7.6 percent, its lowest rate since the depths of the global financial crisis in 2009. "China GDP Annual Growth Rate," Trading Economics, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/china/gdp-growth-annual>.
28. As described by Wang Wen, Executive Dean of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies (Renmin University) during a CSIS conference on "Asian Development, the OBOR Initiative, and US-China Relations," Washington, DC, April 18, 2016. See also 王文 [Feng Zongxian], 欧亚大陆的发展与前景 [Eurasia's Economic Development Trends, Analysis and Outlook], 2013 欧亚大陆论坛 [2013 Eurasia Economic Forum Report], 交通大学出版社 [Jiaotong University Press], Xi'an (2013), 55-63. (Feng Zongxian is professor of international trade at the Xi'an Jiaotong University). 甘俊贤 [Gan Junxian], "规划丝绸之路与中国的对外战略" [Planning for a Revival of the "Silk Road" and China's Diplomacy], 东北亚论坛 [Northeast Asia Forum] 19, no 5, (September 2010) 65-73 (Gan Junxian is professor of political science at Zhejiang University). 杨梅, 郭芳, 姚东琴 [Yang Mei, Guo Fang, Yao Dongqin], "丝绸之路经济带" [The New Silk Road Strategy's Economic Fulcrum], 中国

29. As defined by State Council in 2006, “Strategic industries,” where the State will keep absolute control, are: defense, electricity, petroleum, telecommunication, aviation, coal, shipping. There are also “pillar industries,” where the State will maintain a “strong influence”: machinery, electronic, information technologies, automobiles, steel, non-ferrous metals, chemicals and construction. The lists of strategic and pillar industries match with the ones that the BRI intends to boost.
30. Nadège Rolland, “China’s National Power: A Colossus With Iron or Clay Feet?” in Ashley Tellis, ed., *Strategic Asia 2015-16*, National Bureau of Asian Research (2015), 23-54.
31. 朱先平 [Zhu Xianping], 邹翔阳 [Zou Xiangyang], “中—亚新丝绸之路经济带发展走廊概念” [The China-Central Asia New Silk Road Economic Development Corridor Concept], 东北亚论坛 [Northeast Asia Forum] (September 2006).
32. 孙志远 [Sun Zhiyuan] “三内容”解读“一带一路” [The Three Contents of OBOR Strategy Concept], 中国经济时报 [China Economic Times], August 12, 2014, <http://www.rmlt.com.cn/2014/0812/304996.shtml>. (Sun Zhiyuan teaches at the Chinese Academy of Governance, former National School of Administration); 江 Zhida [Jiang Zhida], “‘一带一路’:从‘空间’到‘时间’的发展战略” [‘OBOR’, the Development Strategy That Will Turn ‘Space’ Into ‘Time’], 和平与发展 [Peace and Development] 4 (2015) (Jiang Zhida is a research fellow with CIIS); 甘俊贤 [Gan Junxian], “‘一带一路’的规划” [Planning for a revival of the “Silk Road” and China’s Diplomacy], 2010.
33. Gao Junxian and Mao Yan, “China’s New Silk Road: Where Does it Lead?,” *Asian Perspective* 40 (2016), 105-130.
34. For example, Myanmar’s political reforms initiated in 2011 triggered protests against China-backed infrastructure projects, which led to the suspension of the Myitsone dam and the Leptadaung copper mine projects by the Thein Sein government. In December 2015, Sri Lanka’s government chose to go ahead with sixteen infrastructure projects signed with China, a year after declaring it would cancel them because of corruption and overpricing.
35. Marc Lanteigne, “China’s Maritime Security and the ‘Malacca Dilemma’,” *Asian Security* 4, no 2 (2008), 143-161; 刘江平 [Liu Jiangping], 冯宪辉 [Feng Xianhui], “‘一带一路’: 600 亿”

“” [Going out, a dialogue across 600 years], [Liaowang] 28, (2005), 14-19.

36. [Han Jingkuan] ““” [Seizing the Opportunity of ‘OBOR’ Important Strategy’s National Construction], [Oil Observer], July 11, 2015, <http://www.oborr.com/Index/detail/id/1628> (Han Jingkuan is Vice-President of CNPC’s China Petroleum Planning and Engineering Institute).

37. Wang Jisi, “‘Marching Westwards’: The Rebalancing of China’s Geostrategy,” in Shao Binhong, eds., *The World in 2020 According to China: Chinese Foreign Policy Elites Discuss Emerging Trends in International Politics* (Brill: Boston, 2014), 129-136.

38. For example, [Ye Zicheng], “ : ” [China’s Peaceful Development and the Return to Land Power], [World Economics and Politics] 2 (2007); [Li Xiaohua], “ ” [New geopolitical setting in Eurasia, and China’s choice], [Contemporary International Relations] 4 (1999).

39. [Liu Yazhou], “ ” [The Grand National Strategy] (2001) <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/2884.html>. An English translation can be found in *Chinese Law and Government*, 40, no 2, (March-April 2007), 13-36.

40. [Niu Xinchun], “ ” [China’s Diplomacy Requires a Strategic Transformation], [Contemporary International Relations] 1 (2013). At the time of his writing, Niu Xinchun was Deputy Director of CICIR’s Institute of American Studies).

41. Shi Yinhong, “China’s Complicated Foreign Policy,” *ECFR Commentary*, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 31, 2015, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_chinas_complicated_foreign_policy311562.

42. Nadège Rolland, “Europe’s Cooperation with China Under “Belt and Road” is not Business as Usual,” *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, March 7, 2016, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2016/03/07/Europes-cooperation-with-China-under-Belt-and-Road-is-not-business-as-usual.aspx>; “The Expulsion From China of Our Colleague Ursula Gauthier is Unjustifiable”, *Le Monde*, December 30, 2015, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/12/30/the-expulsion-from-china-of-our-colleague-ursula-gauthier-is-unjustifiable_4839571_3232.html; Kenji Kawase, “Norway Tones Down Its China Criticism to Boost Business,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, December 29, 2016, <http://asia.nikkei.com/magazine/Agents-of-Change-in-2017/Business/Norway-tones-down-its-China-criticism-to-boost-business?page=2>.

43. 卞 [Chu Yin], ““一带一路”战略需要更清醒的考虑”, 中国网 [China Network], January 18, 2015, http://opinion.china.com.cn/opinion_92_119792.html. (Chu Yin is an associate professor of public administration at the University of International Relations, which trains Chinese diplomats).
44. Henry Kissinger, *Does America need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 52.
45. 李兴 [Li Xing], “丝绸之路经济带：战术还是战略才能实现‘中国梦’?”, 东北亚论坛 [Northeast Asia Forum], 2 (2015). (Li Xing is professor of Russian and Asian affairs, School of Government, Beijing Normal University.) 霍建国 [Huo Jianguo], “‘一带一路’是战略构想，不是工程建设项目”, 中国经济网 [China Economic Network], March 19, 2015, http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/201503/19/t20150319_4869701.shtml. (Huo Jianguo is Dean of the Ministry of Commerce’s Research Institute).
46. “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, March 28, 2015, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html
47. Ibid.
48. 李希光 [Li Xiguang], “在‘一带一路’上建设强大的文化软实力”, 人民论坛网 [People’s Forum Network], November 6, 2015, http://news.hsw.cn/system/2015/1106/322963_3.shtml. (Li Xiguang is President of Tsinghua University’s International Center for Communication Studies.) 孟宏华 [Men Honghua], “全球化和中国的身份”, 中国社会科学报 [China Social Sciences News] 780, July 26, 2013, <http://www.csstoday.net/xueshuzixun/guoneixinwen/82940.html>. (Men Honghua teaches at the Party School of the CCP Central Committee and is Director of the World Thoughts Program, CISS).
49. 薛利 [Xue Li], “‘一带一路’战略面临的国际外交风险”, 国际经济评论 [International Economic Review] 2 (2015) 68-79. (Xue Li is director, Department of International Strategy, CASS.) See also François Godement,

"One Belt, One Road': China's Great Leap Outward," China Analysis, ECFR, June 2015, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China_analysis_belt_road.pdf.

50. Author's interviews with CIIS, CASS, CICIR representatives and Tsinghua University professors, Beijing, November 2015; and with Academy of Social Sciences and Fudan University professors, Shanghai, November 2015.

51. Gan Junxian, Mao Yan, "China' New Silk Road: Where Does it Lead?"

52. 薛利 [Xue Li], "一带一路战略是积极的计划" [One Belt One Road Strategy is a Positive Plan for Great Power-ness], Chinese Financial Times, December 14, 2015, <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001065182?full=y>.

53. "China Creates Information Bank Serving Belt and Road," Xinhua, July 16, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/16/c_134418978.htm; "Xinhua Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau Promotes 'Xinhua Silk Road' Information Products at 'One Belt, One Road' Forum," Xinhua, December 7, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/07/c_134893836.htm.

54. Nicola Casarini, "The Role of Think Tanks in China," Europe-China Research and Advice Network Policy Brief 33, 2010, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/division_ecran/ecran_is37_paper_33_the_role_of_think_tanks_in_china_nicola_casarini_en.pdf.

55. Ben Simpfendorfer, "How China's Silk Road Policy is Shaping Up in Neighboring Countries," Forbes, November 24, 2015, http://www.forbes.com/sites/bensimpfendorfer/2015/11/24/kazakhstan_china_onebeltoneroad/#c0b3bdb1a23b

Log in via your institution

➤ [Access through your institution](#)

Log in to Taylor & Francis Online

➤ [Log in](#)

Restore content access

➤ Restore content access for purchases made as guest


Purchase options *

Save for later

Article Purchase

- 48 hours access to article PDF & online version
- Article PDF can be downloaded
- Article PDF can be printed


EUR 39.00

 Add to
cart

Issue Purchase

- 30 days online access to complete issue
- Article PDFs can be downloaded
- Article PDFs can be printed

EUR 217.00

 Add to
cart

* Local tax will be added as applicable

Related Research

People also read

Recommended articles

Cited by
142

Information for

[Authors](#)

[R&D professionals](#)

[Editors](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Societies](#)

Opportunities

[Reprints and e-prints](#)

[Advertising solutions](#)

[Accelerated publication](#)

[Corporate access solutions](#)

Open access

[Overview](#)

[Open journals](#)

[Open Select](#)

[Dove Medical Press](#)

[F1000Research](#)

Help and information

[Help and contact](#)

[Newsroom](#)

[All journals](#)

[Books](#)

Keep up to date

Register to receive personalised research and resources by email



Sign me up



Copyright © 2026 Informa UK Limited [Privacy policy](#)

[Cookies](#) [Terms & conditions](#) [Accessibility](#)

Registered in England & Wales No. 01072954
5 Howick Place | London | SW1P 1WG



Taylor & Francis
by informa