

## Far from Random: Decoding the Geopolitics of the Belt and Road Initiative

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### What does B&RI stand for?

Ten years after Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (September, 2013) at Astana’s Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan and announced the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road Development Strategy” in an address to the Indonesian House of Representatives (October, 2013), it seems to be the right time to decode its geopolitical rationale. Both declarations were initially part of the same initiative designated as the “one belt, one road” (一帶一路) strategy, but were later (in 2015) modified and turned into the “Belt and Road Initiative” (B&RI), with emphasis on “initiative” rather than on “one” or “strategy” (although currently in China, “one belt, one road” is still frequently seen in public communication).

Since its inception, according to the National Development and Reform Commission (2023), China has signed more than 200 cooperation documents related to the B&RI with 152 states and 32 international organizations, investing nearly USD\$1 trillion, covering 83% of states with whom China has established diplomatic relations.

As depicted by Table 1, the B&RI is not a standalone initiative. Rather, it is a framework of policies that have a global reach. The aim of the framework is to facilitate access with consent by combining different, intertwining hardware and software and promoting infrastructural development. As such,

the B&RI has continued to improve, with its initial reach now supplemented and extended by a number of other initiatives that have been put forward since its inception.

The B&RI can be associated with three mutually reinforcing dimensions (as depicted by Table 1): material, immaterial and supplementary initiatives with global reach. In addition, the framework is designed with the following major objectives: (1) to promote connectivity and remove obstacles that may be impeding trade flows between major production centers and both large and niche markets; (2) to access both the rimland and the heartland, as well as to create alternatives to global choke points; (3) to induce an evolution of international trade, and to contribute to the formation of a new financial order; and, ultimately, (4) to advance China’s perceived global power-status.

### What are the B&RI’s geopolitical readings?

The B&RI’s major spatial development initiatives within China are developed across three domestic trade axes that connect the country’s economic heartland to cross-border areas, which, in turn, link the economic heartland to a global access network of economic agents. As Map 1 shows, the three domestic development axes are extended and connected to the B&RI’s six regional economic corridors and three blue economic passages, forming the

B&RI’s material architecture of access via trade and investment with a global vision and certainly a geopolitical purpose.

Moreover, the B&RI has been designed to combine critical learnings from classical and contemporary geopolitics, and to function as an instrument to provide economic, social and reputational security. B&RI (re)interpreters use the classic thoughts of Ratzel-Haushofer-Kennam State Darwinism — which stems from the idea of “economic spheres of influence” instead of living spaces to provide the same pivots for engagement — to characterize the Initiative. Their interpretation further combines core lessons from Spykman (especially in regard to the role of the rimland, offshore islands and Eurasia) and from the Haushofer-Mackinder-Mahan geopolitical theories: the three blue economic passages and six land corridors facilitate economic access with consent to the “heartland” and “rimland”, using Mackinder and Spykman’s respective terms (or what Mackinder alternatively calls “the inner marginal crescent” and “the (outer) insular crescent” or “the second heartland”).

Combined, Table 1 and Maps 1 and 2 illustrate the B&RI’s material, immaterial and supplementary initiatives with global reach, as the initiative represents an architecture designed to access what Mackinder calls “the natural seats of power”, using trade and investment as inducements. In

the same line of reasoning, as a global geopolitical framework of policies, the B&RI takes advantage of the combination of land corridors and blue passages (including sea lines of communication (SLOC)) to offer alternatives to choke points across the world, but all the while observing and acting in accordance with contemporary perspectives of geopolitics, including global governance, energy security, sovereign digitalization, cyber-space regulation, environmental security, social integration, and de-dollarization.

Furthermore, the B&RI has been branded as a multi-partner, multi-sector platform that promotes trade flows across multiple spaces. In 2013, China obtained observer status on the Arctic Council, and in 2014 opened its fourth research base in Antarctica (after the Great Wall, Zhongshan and Kunlun bases). It is therefore natural that the B&RI's scope is expansive, extending not only to the Arctic and the Antarctic but also to outer space. In fact, China is well aware that the outer space is the "Lebensraum of galactic proportions".

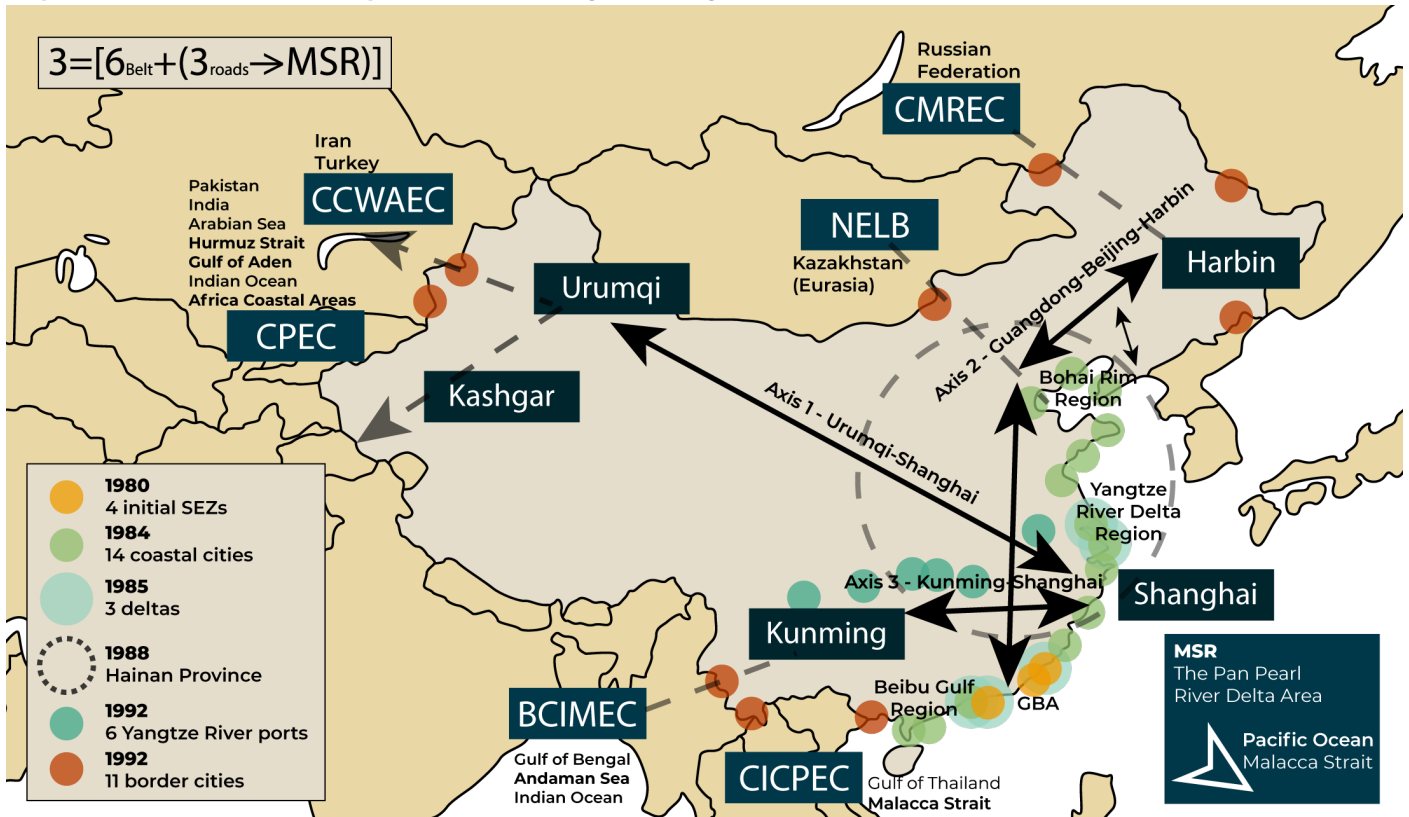
As Deudney describes the overall picture: "China, with its mega-engineering tradition, and powerful central government, is now better situated to make large-scale space to happen than the fiscally hollowed, politically gridlocked, and captured states in the west"<sup>2</sup>. To put it simply, the leading technological and industrial sectors of China are using the three blue economic passages in conjunction with the six land economic corridors to consolidate China's access with consent to an enormous global trade and investment network.

**Table 1 - The Dimensions of B&RI as a Framework of Policies**

<b>Material Dimensions</b>	<b>Land</b>	<b>Three Domestic Axes</b>		<b>The Belt is Composed of Six International Economic Corridors</b>			
		Axis 1 Kashgar-Urumqi-Shanghai		China-Central and Western Asia Economic Corridor		<b>CCWAEC</b>	
		Axis 2 Harbin-Guangdong		China-Pakistan Economic Corridor		<b>CPEC</b>	
		Axis 3 Kunming-Shanghai		China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor		<b>CMREC</b>	
			New Economic Land Belt		<b>NELB</b>		
			China-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor		<b>CBIMEC</b>		
		China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor		<b>CICPEC</b>			
<b>Maritime</b>	<b>Marine Silk Road</b>		<b>The Road is Composed of Three Blue (Maritime) Economic Passages</b>				
	<b>South and Southeast</b>	Guangdong Fujian Zhejiang Shanghai Jiangsu Shandong Hebei	China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Blue Economic Passage (Extension to Lusophone B&RI)				<b>CIOAMBEP</b>
			China-South Pacific Blue Economic Passage				<b>COSPBEP</b>
			China-Arctic-Europe Blue Economic Passage (Silk Polar Maritime Road)	Northwest Passage goes along the Northern Canadian and Alaskan coasts			<b>CAEBEP</b>
				Northeast Passage follows the Russian and Norwegian coasts			
				Transpolar Sea Route crosses the Arctic through the North Pole (Still not available)			
<b>Space Silk Road</b>		The Space Silk Road is composed of China's International Space Programs and the China's Belt and Road Space Information Corridor				<b>SSR</b>	
<b>Immaterial and Global Dimensions</b>	<b>Immaterial Dimensions</b>		<b>Supplementary Initiatives with Global Reach</b>				
	Green Silk Road		2012 Global Governance Concept Community with a Shared Future for Mankind		2023 Global Security Global Security Initiative (GSI)		
	Education Silk Road		2020 Data Global Security Global Initiative on Data Security (GIDS)				
	Cultural Silk Road		2021 Global Development Global Development Initiative (GDI)		2023 Global Culture Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)		
	Digital & Cyber-space Silk Road		2021 Global Visions on Democracy Global Think Tank Network for Democracy Studies - Beijing Initiative (GDS)		2023 Global Artificial Intelligence (AI) Global Initiative for Artificial Intelligence Governance		

Source: Adapted from Leandro (2023, p. 38)

Map 1 - China's Domestic Development Axes and Regional Integration



Source: Adapted from Leandro (2018, p. 89)

China's domestic regional functional economic integration, which organized the whole Chinese territory in cooperative production-developing clusters connected by the three major axes, is allowing transnational flows of goods and services. Cooperative production-developing clusters, such as different types of SEZ and the Bohai Rim Region, the Yangtze River Delta Region, the Greater Bay Area (GBA), and the Beibu Gulf Region are playing a key role in building the B&RI. Map 1 also illustrates China's economic heartland as well as the following formula (Table 2), which has been used to integrate the B&RI's domestic and regional functions with the "going out" strategy:

The three domestic land axes connect the domestic production centers and markets inside China to those in the

"Belt" (i.e., the six land economic corridors) (Table 1). Similarly, the three domestic axes are connected to the three blue passages, which constitute the Maritime Silk "Road". Both the Belt and the Road's connections are facilitated through special economic zones, and this is how the Belt and the Road operate in coordination with each other. These networks of spatial and hard development initiatives are the core of an expanding number of other bilateral and multilateral arrangements, such as B&R MoUs and partnerships. The Maritime Silk "Road" supplements the core network of global material and immaterial infrastructures.

The global reach of this conglomerate of initiatives can be illustrated through the following layout: (1) in Central and Eastern Europe, the B&RI for the Wes-

tern Balkans and the New Economic Land Belt; (2) in Africa, the Maghreb-Sahel Silk Road, the Great Lakes Silk Road, the Trans-Africa Highway, the Western-Africa Railways, the Angola-Tanzania Railways, and the Great Lakes Infrastructure Plan; (3) in Asia, the Great Eurasian Partnership (EAEU), the ASEAN integrated master plan of connectivity (the Thailand Regional Connectivity Plan, the Southeast Asia Railways Plan), the Pan-Asia Railway Network, the Mekong India Economic Corridor; (4) in the Pacific, the Trans-Pacific Maritime Silk Road, and the B&RI for Pacific Island Countries; (5) in the Americas, the Latin America Silk Road, the Inter-Oceanic Railway, the Nicaraguan Canal, and the Cartagena-Caribbean Railway; (6) in the Arctic, the Arctic Silk Road, the Greenland Arctic Base, and the 4+1 Antarc-

tic Research Bases; and (7) the Space Silk Road, which comprises international space programs and the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor.

**Is the B&RI a standalone initiative?**

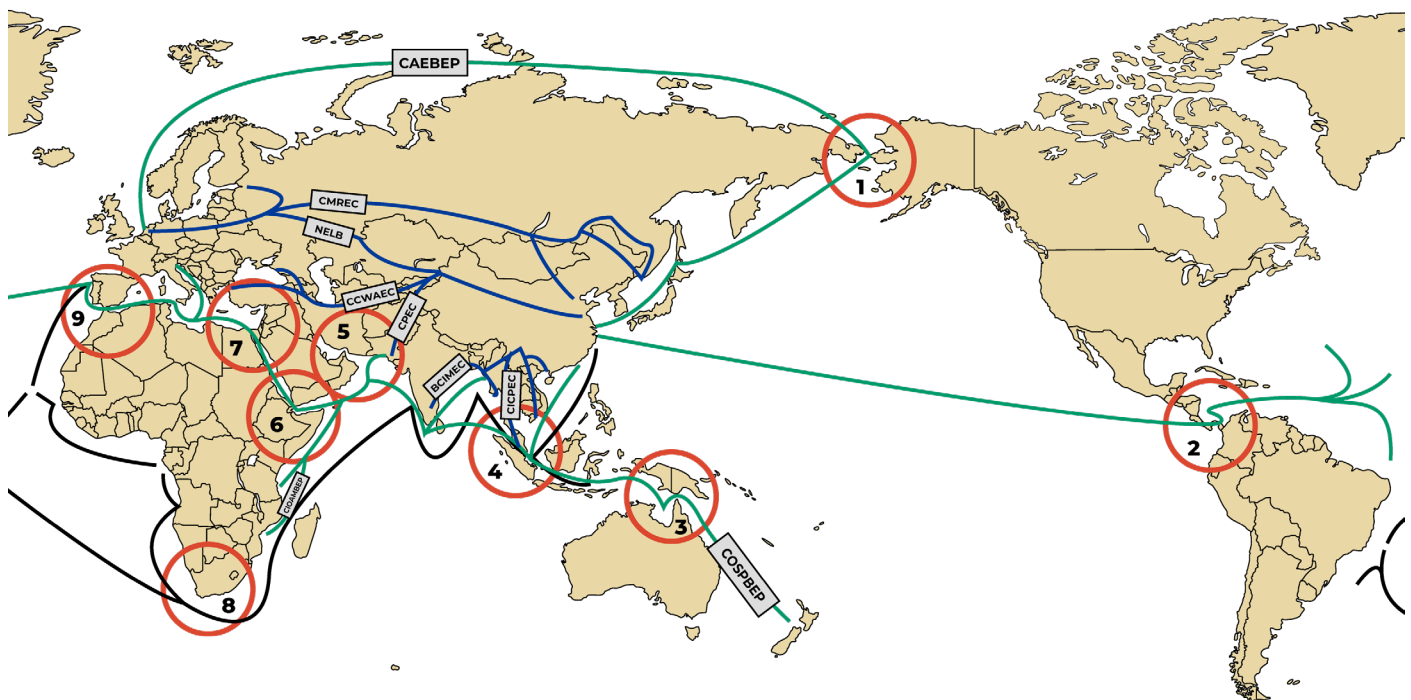
The B&RI is not a standalone initiative. In addition to the B&RI, China has put forward a number of initiatives with global reach (Table 1) that supplement the initial B&RI in different domains. Among them is the announcement at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021 of the Global Deve-

lopment Initiative (GDI). The GDI expands the scope of the B&RI by focusing on distinct issue areas as well as learning from initiatives put forward by China's competitors, with a view to attaining a more comprehensive understanding of development. As such, the GDI puts weight on endorsing the so-called "software for development", addressing different areas such as poverty reduction, food security, pandemic responses, financing for development, climate change and green development, industrialization, digital economy, and connectivity<sup>3</sup>.

Another global initiative is the global governance concept and the community with a shared future for mankind.

**“The B&RI’s major spatial development initiatives within China are developed across three domestic trade axes that connect the country’s economic heartland to cross-border areas(...)”**

**Map 2- China's Economic Heartland and the Global Economic Access Network**



**Legend:**

- GLOBAL CHOCK POINTS
- ▬ BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE
- ▬ THE LUSOPHONE EXTENSION OF THE CIOAM BLUE ECONOMIC PASSAGE

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**Legend 2:**

① BERING STRAIT	④ MALACCA STRAIT	⑦ SUEZ CANAL
② PANAMA CANAL	⑤ ORMUZ STRAIT	⑧ CAPE OF GOOD HOPE
③ TORRES STRAIT	⑥ BAB-EL-MANDEB STRAIT	⑨ GIBRALTAR STRAIT

**Legend 3:**

- BCIMEC: BANGLADESH - CHINA - INDIA - MYANMAR ECONOMIC CORRIDOR
- CAEBEP: CHINA
- CCWAEC: CHINA - CENTRAL ASIA - WEST ASIA ECONOMIC CORRIDOR
- CICPEC: CHINA - INDOCHINA PENINSULA ECONOMIC CORRIDOR
- CIOAMBP: CHINA
- CNREC: CHINA - MONGOLIA - RUSSIAN FEDERATION ECONOMIC CORRIDOR
- COSBEP: CHINA
- CPEC: CHINA - PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR
- NELB: NEW EURASIAN LAND BRIDGE

Source: Paulo Gonçalves (2024)

The idea was unveiled by President Xi during the 18th CPC Congress (2012). Then, in a 2023 speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Xi introduced the notion of “mankind as a community of common destiny” outside China for the first time. “A community with a shared future” is also the guiding principle of China’s international relations, and China advocates it to promote common development and the fight against hegemonism.

**Who are the B&RI’s competitors?**

Since its inception, the B&RI has faced consistently growing competition from similar hard and soft initiatives —

a testament to the rest of the world’s implicit recognition of the B&RI’s geopolitical values. These initiatives are mostly based on massive investments in infrastructure, as they are a result of a coalition of will among a number of states or international organizations. As depicted by Table 3, in 2016, India and Japan launched the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which was designed to be an open, inclusive, sustainable, and innovative growth of the entire Asia-Africa region, in cooperation with the international community. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor is an India-Japan economic cooperation agreement aimed at the socio-economic development of Asia and Africa using infrastructure and digital con-

nectivity based on Indo-Japan collaboration.

The vision document for AAGC was released by India during the 2017 African Development Bank meeting<sup>4</sup>. In 2019, the United States, Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom and the OECD inaugurated the Blue Dot Network (BDN), which, according to the U. S. Department of State (2023), “aims to promote quality infrastructure investment that is open and inclusive, transparent, economically viable, Paris Agreement aligned, financially, environmentally and socially sustainable, and compliant with international standards, laws and regulations [... by certifying] infrastructure projects against robust criteria and standards”. In addition,

<b>Table 2 - The B&amp;RI Formula</b>	
<p><b>3 = [(1+1+1)] x Immaterial and global dimensions</b></p> <p><b>3 Domestic Axes =</b>  <b>[(1 Land Belt* + (1 Road** -&gt; Maritime Silk Road (MSR) + 1 SSR ***)] x Immaterial and global dimensions</b></p> <p><b>*1 Land Belt = 6 Land Corridors</b>  <b>**1 Maritime Road = 3 Blue Passages</b>  <b>***1 Space Silk Road = Space program and space information corridor</b></p>	

Source: Author

<b>Table 3 - Global (soft and hard) Infrastructure Initiatives</b>					
<b>2013</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>June 2021</b>	<b>December 2021</b>	<b>2023</b>
<b>B&amp;RI</b>	Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)	Blue Dot Network (BDN)	Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII)	Global Gateway	G20 Summit - India - Middle East - Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)
<b>China</b>	Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)	United States, Australia, Japan, United Kingdom and OECD	G7	European Union	India, U.S., Saudi-Arabia, UAE, France, Germany, Italy, European Union

Source: Author



launched in 2021 at the UK-hosted G7 summit, the B3W declared itself to be “a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership”, with a focus on investments in renewable energy, digital technology, healthcare and female-led business<sup>5</sup>.

Of particular note is the Global Gateway, launched in 2021 by the European Union as a means to narrow the global investment gap. The Global Gateway is also a values-driven, high-standard and transparent infrastructure partnership to meet global infrastructure development needs, and is fully aligned with the UN’s Agenda 2030, its Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the Paris Agreement<sup>6</sup>. Through the Global Gateway, the European Commission has clearly laid out its commitment to Africa (Africa-Europe Investment Package), the Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2023, 90 key projects were launched worldwide across the digital, energy and transport sectors through the Global Gateway to strengthen health, education, and research systems globally.

Finally, in 2023, the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was announced on the side-lines of the G20 meeting in New Delhi, when a memorandum of understanding was signed between the European Union and seven states: India, the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), France, Germany, and Italy. The IMEC has been designed to include a shipping route connecting Mumbai and Mundra (Gujarat) with the UAE, and a rail network connecting the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan

with the Israeli seaport of Haifa in the Mediterranean Sea. Haifa will be connected by a SLOC to Europe via the seaport of Piraeus in Greece<sup>7</sup>.

### How do we decode the Geopolitics of B&RI?

The B&RI is a framework of policies that has been expanding beyond its visible infrastructural dimension. It is the result of combining lessons from both classical and contemporary narratives of geopolitics. One of these narratives is the Portuguese sea-trade global strategy — to rely on establishing new commercial routes and having presence in key coastal locales, without attempting large occupation (i.e., crab civilization)<sup>8</sup>; another one is to engage in what Mackinder calls the “heartland” and to be present in what Spykman calls the “rimland” — both envisaging economic and trade access with consent to an extended network of agents located in natural seats of power. Moreover, the B&RI learns from Mahan the need to control SLOC, to access dual-use sea-related facilities, to maintain a commercial navy, and to invest in sea-related technology (i.e., transforming a continental power into one capable of bi-Oceanic engagement). In addition, the B&RI is building hard infrastructure to connect production centers and markets and to provide alternatives to global choke points.

Furthermore, the initiative learns from contemporary narratives, as it is designed as a framework of policies with reinforcing soft and hard dimensions, and involves different moments, geo-

graphies and matters (such as outer space, development, technology, digitalization, currency, health, and culture), all with a global reach. The B&RI is therefore an intergenerational, multi-sector, multi-agent and multi-regional initiative that is purposefully and carefully designed, and is implicitly recognized by other leading international actors, as they are replicating, individually or in coalitions, the same normative idea at smaller scales. Indeed, the Belt and Road initiative is far from random, as it has a clear rationale, allocation of resources and political purpose — to advance the global power-status of China.

### References

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