

The Belt & Road Initiative's Odyssey from a Vision to an Organization



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What BRI Has Achieved So Far

Six years, hundreds of projects and plenty of labels. This is how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has impacted the world. Started in 2013, as a Chinese project aiming to win over the international community, the BRI has become mostly a catchphrase and sometimes a boogeyman for big powers, such as the United States or the European Union.

At the beginning, the BRI was a slogan, but it started to be seen as an infrastructure project and with this label a Pandora's Box of nicknames opened. From monikers like the New Silk Road, or a new Marshall Plan, to an economic corridor, a debt trap or a branding strategy, all of them have been used to describe the BRI over the past six years. But the BRI is more than that, or at least it should be. If, in the past, I argued elsewhere that the BRI is more like a branding strategy than an infrastructure project, because it gathers under its umbrella all types of sectors, from infrastructure, to finance and business, to social and cultural contacts, today the BRI has become an empty word, with no definition. Without having a clear definition, the BRI has been caught between two perspectives: the Chinese one and the Western one.

If Chinese academia perceives the BRI mainly as an economic corridor and sometimes as a tool for global governance, focusing on its holistic aspects, Western observers see it through the lens of an infrastructure project and a debt trap. It can be some of these, all of these, or none of these, but what is clear is that the BRI is not yet an organization. But things may change in the future.

At its inception, the BRI was more of a vision than a real foreign policy strategy. But being so well received in 2013, it gave the BRI the momentum to enhance its image and to pursue its initial goals, to develop fields like "policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, people-to-people ties", in order to facilitate China's integration in the international economy. In these six years, the BRI completed more than 100 projects, especially in infrastructure (transport, energy, mining, IT communications), but also in Special Economic Zones (SEZs), industrial parks, tourism, urban development and people-to-people exchanges. After all these years, Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed, during the second BRI Forum in April 2019, the need to give a new impulse to the BRI, engaging it in becoming more transparent, green and multilateral.

If we look at these six years, many BRI projects succeeded in being implemented, but not all because of the BRI's success, but thanks to other factors. For example, BRI projects include a plethora

of projects related to other Chinese initiatives, like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or the 17+1 mechanism between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and numerous projects were proposed long before the BRI came to life, or are just activities of Chinese companies, which shouldn't give them the status of a BRI or even a Chinese project. For example, China likes to promote the project of building the Pelješac Bridge in Croatia. But, actually, the project was made possible by the EU, which finances it, and a Chinese company only won the tender to construct it. The same thing happened with some projects in Pakistan, like the M-8 Motorway, which are labeled BRI projects only because they are part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), but they are Pakistani investments. In addition, although the AIIB and BRI are two different Chinese initiatives, sometimes the AIIB is mistakenly placed under the BRI's umbrella.

There is another type of BRI success which China promotes, that of the trains which connect China with Europe. They are the most visible and successful story of the BRI, reinforcing the narrative of BRI as an infrastructure project. But, in fact, they are a link between China and Europe based on reusing the old Eurasian railways in order to transport goods, without even refurbishing these old tracks. The idea was hatched by a private company, Hewlett-Packard, in 2012, but was successfully taken over by China and implemented because it didn't necessitate large costs, apart from the trains and government subsidies. The subsidies were used to promote the usage of the trains instead of maritime shipping, making them cheaper, but the Europe-China railways still aren't an economic success story, taking into account that many trains travels empty to and from Europe.

So six years and counting, the BRI's biggest achievements have failed to some extent, although they have been sold as success stories. The Port of Hambantota, the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, the Montenegro Motorway, the Port of Piraeus, the Port of Gwadar, the Europe-China railways – all had problems at some point. Apart from this, many parts of BRI projects are stuck in negotiations and are lagging behind. The SEZs and regenerable energy parks are the only BRI projects which have been implemented on time. The other ones, like the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway or the Budapest-Belgrade Railway, two flagship BRI projects, remain only plans.

Major Nations' Response to BRI

Because of these setbacks and problems, the BRI has failed to

deliver the impact and influence that was expected. But the BRI didn't pass unnoticed by the big powers. The US, the EU, Japan and India have all perceived the BRI mainly through negative optics, as a project that needs to be contained.

Japan and India came up with some ideas to compete with the BRI, the best known being the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), an Indo-Japanese version of the Maritime Silk Road, focused on the Indian Ocean and Africa. Yet, just like the BRI, it is still only a vision. But they didn't stop there. In order to reduce China's influence in Asia, together with the US and Australia, they also tried to revive the Quad (a security dialogue between the four countries). India, Japan and the US all used at some point in time another catchy phrase: the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept. It is best known as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's strategy toward the Indian Ocean, but it is said to have been coined by an Indian naval officer and it has also been used by the US, under the administration of President Donald Trump, to emphasize its interest in the Indian Ocean.

The EU perceives the BRI as a potentially dangerous initiative and, earlier this year, branded China as a "systemic rival". The EU has been doubtful about the BRI ever since its inception. In private conversations with European officials four years ago, they told me that many EU members didn't want to sign an MoU with China on the BRI because they didn't know what the BRI meant. The lack of a definition from the Chinese side only succeeded in making the EU reluctant to embrace it, being concerned about the divisive power of the BRI. The EU feared that through its bilateral MoUs with EU members, China would try to attract these countries to its side, dividing the bloc. Italy's recent signing of an MoU with China regarding the BRI was the climax of the EU's fears.

Regarding the US, although Trump focused his narrative on Huawei, Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have emphasized in their foreign trips the need to contain the BRI. The US put a lot of pressure on Italy when it signed an MoU with China regarding the BRI and also tries to undermine Chinese investments in BRI countries. For example, in Myanmar, a team of American consultants succeeded in helping the government in renegotiating the Chinese investment in the Port of Kyaukphyu and in its SEZ.

Yet, there is something important to notice in US behavior. While the BRI has been criticized, the main target of the US government over the past two years has been a private Chinese company, Huawei. That can mean only one thing: Huawei is a greater threat for the US than the BRI. Because the BRI isn't yet a force that can affect the US, the initiative has remained an afterthought, in comparison to the trade war or the Huawei saga.

BRI Could Be Successful by Being Multilateralized

Six years after it was first articulated by Xi, the BRI risks remaining only a catchy phrase. But things can change if China offers countries the opportunity to not only observe the initiative, but to actually act. Today, the BRI is only a "one-way project" – in the words of French President Emmanuel Macron – based on one big power, China, and a plethora of host countries. By signing MoUs with every country

along the BRI, China only succeeds in improving its bilateral relations with those countries and not creating a path for investments and regional development, as it wished at its inception. The BRI is in fact a large web of bilateral MoUs between China and dozens of countries.

Following the path of the AIIB, which was successfully transformed from a Chinese project into a well-regarded international bank, by opening to the world and to other great powers, the BRI should do the same and become an international organization where China will be the designer, but not the leader, which will allow countries to interact with one another and to merge projects and funds. A BRI led by the *primus inter pares* rule will be better than a BRI focused on China and led only by China. And once again, I will use the AIIB example to highlight why an international organization status would best suit the BRI. Like the BRI, the AIIB was once seen as a threatening initiative coming from an emerging great power, when it was first proposed by China. But after European countries stepped in, with the United Kingdom, Germany and France at the forefront, the AIIB changed its image and became a success story.

So, abandoning the infrastructure project label and becoming an organization, which can play a crucial role in Asia and beyond, should be China main's goal. As my RISAP colleague Andrei Lungu argued in a recent article, China should renounce its focus on hard power (especially military power) and try to follow in Germany's footsteps: when it abandoned territorial ambitions and became part of an international organization, establishing the EU, its dream of becoming the leading power of Europe came true. This path should be followed by China. In a period when East Asia is defined by territorial claims and conflicts, a peaceful China will help stabilize the region. Germany and Japan have proved that the period when they didn't focus on their military was the best time of their history, using their resources for economic development. Although a China which reduces its military capabilities is a far-fetched goal, because unlike Japan or Germany it doesn't enjoy the protection of another great power, China becoming a regional leader through an international organization is a more achievable goal.

Following these ideas, China should focus its energy in the near future on transforming the BRI into a strong international organization, whose outcome could be a China whose power doesn't "grow out of the barrel of a gun", but from the wisdom of its soft power strategy. Doing so, many countries will be willing to join the initiative in order to gain benefits and to take part in shaping this global project. A multilateral BRI will enjoy the contribution of numerous other countries, making it more efficient and more successful.

If the BRI won't take these steps, it risks remaining a vision without significant achievements, a target for nicknames and opinion articles and a disappointment for the countries that signed on to it. Six years after it appeared on the international scene, the BRI needs a new face if it is to succeed, and becoming an international organization is its best chance.

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