



Air Land Sea Application Center

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A Whole-of-Government Response to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative

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Introduction

In the fall of 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping used the backdrop of state visits to neighboring Kazakhstan and Indonesia to unveil a bold and sweeping foreign policy initiative. Officially termed “The Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Development Strategy,” and now known simply as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), this massive plan calls for approximately \$1 trillion in investments for various projects throughout Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe in a bid to reinvigorate the land and sea trading routes that historically connected the East and West.¹

The BRI includes five major priorities: (1) policy coordination; (2) infrastructure connectivity; (3) unimpeded trade; (4) financial integration; and (5) connecting people.² Much of the plan’s focus to date has centered on developing critical infrastructures such as highways, railways, deepwater ports, airports, fiber optic lines, real estate, and the mining and production of valuable natural resources.³ As of early 2021, nearly 140 countries are participating in the BRI, either through active projects or negotiated memorandums of intent. Some analysts calculate the project’s effects extending to nearly 60% of the world’s population and approximately 35% of the global economy.⁴

The BRI has been described by some critics as “debt-trap diplomacy.” Under this approach, once countries agree to BRI projects, the Chinese government offers loans that, in several instances, exceeds the nation’s ability to pay. This significant increase in debt subsequently forces other concessions, such as the trading of valuable resources in return for fiscal relief, ultimately increasing their overall dependence on China. For example, after Sri Lanka found itself unable to pay its debts, state-owned China Merchants Port Holdings leased its Hambantota Port for 99 years.⁵

The BRI now occupies a central role in China’s expansive global ambitions. In 2017, the 19th Chinese Communist Party National Congress added the BRI to the Chinese constitution, firmly enshrining President Jinping’s signature program in the future policy designs of the Chinese nation.⁶ The successful culmination of BRI projects is planned for 2049 to coincide with the centennial of China’s Communist Revolution, the country’s “great rejuvenation” celebration. President Jinping’s BRI pledge, although tempered by

the COVID-19 pandemic, is intended to lead China past the United States (U.S.) as the world's leading economy.⁷

These collective actions have understandably caught the attention of the global audience and, in particular, the United States. The challenge facing any hegemonic power like the U.S. is how to treat a rising power like China, which threatens to displace its central position of global leadership, without triggering armed conflict. Harvard historian Graham Allison coined this challenge the "Thucydides Trap," stemming from the study of the Peloponnesian War. He noted that 12 of the previous 16 historical instances that were similar to the current Sino-U.S. relationship have resulted in armed conflict.⁸

The U.S. response to China's BRI might serve as the first—and best—litmus test for how both nations might manage the shifting geostrategic relationship. To achieve its strategic objectives, the U.S. will need to bring to bear the full weight of its instruments of national power. This paper will assess U.S. challenges and opportunities concerning the BRI through a strategic lens consisting of the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) instruments of power. It will deliver key decision makers an array of options to consider as the U.S. seeks to address the BRI.

Diplomatic Instrument of Power

Diplomacy is "the established method of influencing the decisions and behaviors of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiation, and other measures short of war or violence."⁹ It occurs primarily in the "competition" portion of the competition continuum (cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict) and consists of four pillars - security, prosperity, democracy, and development. Diplomacy is the primary instrument of power applied when working toward a peaceful resolution of differences between nation states. China, however, is utilizing the BRI's "debt-trap diplomacy" to gain diplomatic leverage over other countries and as a disruptive force among its competitors.

Thus far, the U.S. response to the BRI has evolved from the ad hoc policies present during the Obama administration to a more holistic, yet uneven, approach under the Trump administration. The U.S. has yet to address the BRI through a systematic and well-resourced effort that seeks to: shape it where possible, compete when required, and offer other nations an alternative vision.¹⁰ As of February 2021, the new Biden administration had not released a formal policy or strategy specifically addressing the BRI, with President Biden instead simply stating, "China should expect extreme competition from the United States."¹¹

To effectively meet the President Biden's intent to counter the BRI, the U.S. must design a comprehensive, whole-of-government (WOG) diplomatic campaign. A concerted and coordinated effort, led by the Department of State (DoS), would allow the U.S. to leverage its allies and partners to unify the regions of the world affected by the BRI. This effort would help all nations prosper and avoid the adverse consequences of allowing their nations to be a part of the BRI.



WASHINGTON, District of Columbia - Defense Secretary Dr. Mark T. Esper, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar participate in a press event after the U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial, New Delhi, India, Oct. 27, 2020. (Photo by Lisa Ferdinando; <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Photos/igphoto/2002526449/>)

One significant problem, however, is that U.S. diplomacy has long been underfunded. The overall budget for foreign affairs is only approximately 1% of the total federal budget. In comparison, the Department of Defense receives 16% of the federal budget.¹² The U.S. spends more on diplomacy and foreign aid than any other country. But, as a more effective measure, it should be examined as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). In reality, the U.S. only devotes approximately 0.2% of its GDP compared to other leading countries that spend in the 0.5-0.7% range.¹³ To set a clear example to the international community, the U.S. should strive to match that higher spending percentage to further cement its position as the world leader in fostering diplomatic initiatives rather than military actions to further its national security aims.

There is another component of diplomacy that the U.S. often lacks...*patience*. As the world is learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing global problems often takes time and there are rarely, if ever, any overnight successes. Over the last few decades, U.S. diplomacy has been increasingly shaped by the news cycle, election politics, and even presidential tweets. This prioritizes short-term wins, not proactive long-term engagement leading to sustainable achievement.¹⁴

The goal of international diplomacy is to reach mutually acceptable solutions to common challenges facing nations in a peaceful, civil manner. Diplomacy should be the primary instrument of power applied to the Chinese BRI. It is only through increased investment in and application of DoS led diplomacy that the U.S. can “shape and sustain a peaceful, prosperous, just, and democratic world and foster conditions for stability and progress for the benefit of the American people and people everywhere.”¹⁵



DHAKA, U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh - United States Again Delivers Emergency Medical Supplies to Bangladesh to Combat Covid-19. (This a courtesy photo; <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Photos/igphoto/2002737652/>)

Informational Instrument of Power

As the U.S. considers options to counter the BRI, the informational instrument of power may represent the greatest area of opportunity. In the cases of Africa, Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe, the U.S. may achieve positive results simply due to those regions' historical neglect. Before the official creation of U.S. Africa Command in 2007, information operations were disconnected, subsumed under other higher priorities, or an afterthought.¹⁶ Asia and more pointedly Central and Eastern Europe, especially those nations within the former Warsaw Pact, were the primary focus of U.S. Information Agency (USIA) efforts and its immensely effective Radio Free America broadcasts.¹⁷ Those broadcasts ceased with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and USIA was subsequently shuttered in 1999 after nearly a half-century of operations, its responsibilities split among other federal agencies.¹⁸

This action, coupled with a series of other small but similarly disconnected steps, lent weight to the 2017 National Security Strategy's (NSS) assessment that information statecraft has been "tepid, fragmented, and lacking a sustained focus."¹⁹ Part of this critique stems from the difficulty in defining what the information element fully encompasses. The Reagan administration defined information power as "the use of informational content and the technologies and capabilities that enable the exchange of that content, used globally to influence the social, political, economic, or military behavior of human beings, whether one or one billion, in the support of national security objectives."²⁰ Both the 2018 National Cyber Security Strategy and NSS built upon this framework and offer a solid playbook to re-invigorate the information element of power, particularly as it relates to the BRI.²¹ Priorities should include driving effective communication, activating local networks, and divesting legacy platforms in favor of modern and innovative methods of messaging.²²

Given this background, China's BRI offers several opportunities for the U.S. to engage effectively in the information sphere, beginning with communication about both the perceived as well as actual nature of China's investments. Although China has asserted from the BRI's inception that the project's primary goal is "to enhance regional connectivity and embrace a brighter future," this rhetoric masks darker, more predatory aspects of its early implementation that the U.S. should leverage in information campaigns.²³ As previously described, several nations have been saddled with crippling debts as a result of the BRI's "debt-trap diplomacy." The East African nation of Djibouti was forced to cede control of a BRI-funded container terminal after incurring costs equal to 88% of its annual GDP.²⁴ Similarly, Pakistan—one of the earliest and strongest BRI acolytes—was forced to seek a \$6 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) following extensive BRI-related infrastructure overruns.²⁵

Through thoughtful and effective information operations, the U.S. can expose the darker elements of the BRI, including "debt-trap diplomacy" and the dual civil and military use that China mandates for many of these infrastructure investments. As Daniel Kliman suggests, the U.S. should leverage artificial intelligence-powered sentiment analysis of news, social media, and embassy reporting to develop a database demonstrating the growing disillusionment by countries involved in the BRI.²⁶ In doing so, however, it would be wise to follow Africa-expert Caleb Slayton's advice to use local networks and outlets whenever possible to maximize the credibility of the overall message.²⁷

An alternative course of action would be for the U.S. to avoid the negative elements of the BRI, and instead focus on the inherent difficulties associated with large-scale infrastructure projects, especially in the COVID-19 business environment. By utilizing a fact-based approach across a myriad of information platforms, including both traditional methods of communication like speeches, press releases, and conferences as well as less traditional methods of communication like social media, the U.S. can amplify its messaging and sow doubt about China's reliability and desirability as a long-term partner.

Another element of the BRI that the U.S. should focus on is China's Digital Silk Road, one that is embedded in the BRI and complementary to the land and maritime routes. Greece's Port of Piraeus, for example, is managed by the Chinese state-owned logistics company COSCO Shipping that recently contracted its technology support and services

with fellow Chinese super-company Huawei.²⁸ Many analysts note that the expanding digital network of the BRI will provide China a global trade advantage and potentially allow China to export domestic “elements of its digital surveillance regime” to unsuspecting countries.²⁹

The U.S., in concert with other like-minded nations, can offer an alternative infrastructure plan and an alternative narrative. Furthermore, its information statecraft would be well served by highlighting both the troublesome aspects of Chinese policy and its commitment to liberal values. The U.S. should tout its enduring commitment to a free and open internet as well as other means of free speech and communication, a policy that serves as the bedrock for the information instrument of power. Additionally, it should advertise related success stories, such as the U.S.-based consulting group that advised the Malaysian government on technical elements of its port deal with China; in doing so, over \$6 billion in savings were achieved.³⁰

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the information instrument of power to achieve its greatest impact, it must be successfully integrated with the other elements of national power. It is unlikely that the U.S. will ever develop a “Department of Information” because the concept is antithetical to the nation’s core values and beliefs of liberty and freedom.³¹ As such, the functions of information must be seamlessly integrated into the diplomatic, military, and economic instruments to provide greater synergistic effects. Such an approach offers the greatest return on investment in advancing U.S. strategic objectives while addressing the BRI.

Military Instrument of Power

The BRI is one example of how near-peers are competing with the U.S. by employing other instruments of power to facilitate and improve future capabilities for the Chinese military. The history of U.S. military engagement in the regions affected by the BRI, as well as the current engagement strategies, have set the conditions for Chinese success. U.S. military engagement in the BRI regions has been sporadic and has taken the form of a one-sided push for U.S. interests with only notional support for local people and culture due to lack of integration with other instruments of power. Future U.S. military strategy must be fully integrated with all instruments of power to reduce the likelihood that the BRI will challenge the post-WWII world order. This integration of all instruments of power also needs to effectively mitigate China’s ability to employ the BRI’s geostrategic locations and access to resource against the U.S. and its allies in future military actions.³²

From the first six frigates authorized by Congress on March 10, 1794, to our current forward presence, the U.S. military instrument of national power has been engaged around the world.³³ The operational environment of Africa, Central Europe, and South Asia have all been shaped by this engagement. The recent shift in our National Defense Strategy (NDS), away from a focus on violent extremist organizations (VEOs) to near-peer competitors, is necessary and long overdue.

U.S. military history is replete with hundreds of instances of armed intervention by U.S. forces in global conflicts spanning the full spectrum of war. Of those many engagements, only 11 were part of a declaration of war against a foreign nation. Most of the actions before WWII were Naval or Marine actions to protect U.S. citizens or to

promote U.S. interests.³⁴ Many of the activities since WWII have placed the U.S. in the role of “world police” in a stated effort to protect the homeland from attack or to protect citizens of other nations from each other to ensure stability. This stability is seen as the underpinning of the post-WWII world order, from which the U.S. and its allies benefit.

The focus and corresponding transition to great power competition articulated in key U.S. national security strategy guidance offer new opportunities for the American military.^{35,36} If properly implemented by the WOG, the U.S. can move from the role of world police to that of world underwriter. Properly understood, the other instruments of U.S. power would lead efforts through an influx of financial support for the DoS, U.S. Agency for International Development, and other agencies. The U.S. military would move to a supporting role providing training, logistical, and management support for the other instruments of power as well as for vetted and aligned non-governmental organizations. A shift in operational and tactical actions in Africa, Central Europe, and South Asia could move U.S. military actions from the forefront of U.S. instruments of power application to the background. The importance of this shift cannot be understated and has the potential to move U.S. foreign policy into alignment with its grand strategy, as articulated in the Preamble of the Constitution. The first U.S. flag that citizens of the developing world see should be on food crates or other aid rather than on soldiers.



WASHINGTON, D.C. - Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III gives remarks on "The Imperative of Partnership" at the 40th International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Fullerton Lecture in Singapore,

July 27, 2021. Austin is on a week-long trip to reaffirm defense relationships and conduct bilateral meetings with senior officials in Singapore; Hanoi, Vietnam; and Manila, Philippines. (Photo by Chad J. McNeeley; <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Photos/igphoto/2002812824/>)

Despite the guidance from the NSS and NDS, U.S. military combatant commands (CCMDs) continue to include a focus on VEOs in their posture statements.³⁷ To be sure, VEOs did not stop operating when the guidance was published and they will continue to undermine U.S. activities, with ideology as their primary driver. It has been shown throughout history that ideologies cannot be defeated with military force. Shifting the focus from the VEOs themselves to the underlying causes is likely to produce better results. As a result, counter-VEO operational and tactical actions remain, which utilize valuable national resources in both blood and treasure that would be more useful if integrated with other instruments of power in the regions where the BRI is making an impact.

Rather than assuming that all Chinese BRI actions are nefarious, a more detailed understanding of their actions should be pursued. Their “why” could provide U.S. CCMDs and WOG with more effective strategies to counter BRI actions by shaping the operational environment. The U.S. military can and should continue to be America’s “big stick,” but its true weight will be felt as it underpins the other elements of national power. While military force may still be necessary for certain situations, the U.S. government should employ its economic might, its informational superiority, and its diplomatic corps as its primary measures while the strength of potential military action plays that critical but supporting role. The military instrument of power should be closely aligned with the long-term goals of the local and regional DoS leadership rather than simply in coordination with those teams. Under Title 22 USC, the DoS has the lead; conflicting Title 10 roles and responsibilities often confuse the issue.

In shaping the operational environment around BRI activities, relationships matter. At times, the United States’ narrow or short-term mindset is often at odds with the broader, relationship-focused mindset of other nations in Africa, Central Europe, and South Asia. The military leadership and members of the CCMDs are often only in their positions for relatively short periods while foreign service officers have a much longer time in the seat to build the needed relationships. China will always be a neighbor of these nations and the U.S. only seems to show concern sporadically, driving these countries into China’s arms and hurting U.S. strategic goals.



U.S. Army civil affairs Soldiers in support of Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa completed their final lessons of first aid and English at Solidarte Feminine July 1, 2021 in Djibouti City, Djibouti. The team has made Women, Peace and Security a part of their mission to empower the women at Solidarte Feminine, a local organization in Djibouti that provides resources to women in need in Djibouti as well as those directly or indirectly affected by HIV. (Photo by SrA Taylor Davis; <https://www.africom.mil/media-gallery/images>)

To truly leverage the military instrument of power in addressing the activities and implementation of the Chinese BRI, CCMDs and military leaders must consider the strategic guidance as articulated in the NSS and NDS; likewise, they must shift their mental model away from operational and tactical actions against VEOs. Moving to a posture supporting DoS civilian leadership goals and strategy will help to minimize incompatible activities, reducing both the financial and human cost, and begin to align U.S. actions with its grand strategy.³⁸ While security is the backdrop that allows nations to move on from poverty and suffering, the U.S. military, when used to provide security for a foreign nation, can be successful in short-term, localized activities. These actions drain resources from other instruments of power activities, result in loss of American lives, and often create de facto “A-Team or B-Team” mentalities among foreign countries. These negative aspects can prevent the effective use of other U.S. instruments of power to address challenges, such as those posed by the BRI.

Economic Instrument of Power

The economic instrument of power allows countries to use their productivity, financial markets, trade, currency, and capital to influence the world. The BRI is a massive application of economic power by China. It is characterized primarily by bilateral agreements between China and the specific country they are investing in, leading to “debt-trap diplomacy,” as previously described. Utilizing China for sole-sourced BRI projects chains them to China, not only for debt, but also for long-term relationships providing knowledge, technology, spare parts, and maintenance of their infrastructure projects.³⁹

The worldwide economic slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will lead countries to reassess their BRI-related debt loads, and many will require restructuring. To date, there has been little sign that China is willing to renegotiate debts. The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused a global slowing of the BRI. For example, the \$6 billion Jakarta–Bandung high-speed railway project in Indonesia has been delayed multiple times.⁴⁰ Other similar delays and the lack of debt restructuring are causing countries to question their dependency on China.

The economic instrument of power has great potential to counter the BRI simply because the U.S. and China combine to account for 40% of global trade.⁴¹ The U.S. has a history of applying its economic instrument of power to counter communism. After WWII, the U.S. instituted the Marshall Plan as an economic recovery program for war-damaged Europe and to prevent the spread of communism on the continent.

Multilateral trade agreements like the Marshall Plan were deemphasized during President Trump’s administration. For example, he rejected the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an agreement between 12 countries linking Asia and the Americas and representing 40% of global gross domestic product. The TPP was designed to temper China’s growing influence in the region.⁴² In addition, many of the U.S. agreements with African countries were bilateral and focused on larger countries, ignoring countries that were too small to benefit the U.S.⁴³ A reversal of these policies offers an opportunity to counter the BRI. Despite China’s recent growth, the U.S. is still the world’s largest economy. As a result, there are several additional powerful economic levers the U.S. should utilize to mitigate the BRI’s impact.

The U.S. should work to open international markets and replace bilateral Chinese BRI agreements with multilateral agreements. This would limit exposure to Chinese political influence and create more of an international open marketplace from which countries could benefit.^{44,45} One example is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as “the Quad,” which is a partnership between the U.S., India, Australia, and Japan that can be used to counter China’s expanding market reach. Part of these open market initiatives would include removing punitive measures such as tariffs, sanctions, and non-tariff barriers to trade.⁴⁶

In addition to opening markets, the U.S. should increase foreign direct investment. This increase would reverse its decline from \$50.4 billion of foreign direct investment in 2017 to \$43.2 billion in 2019, a time when China increased its direct investment through the BRI.⁴⁷ Subsidies and economic stimulus packages invested directly in infrastructure projects would provide countries an alternative to the BRI. The fact that global interest

rates are at historic lows can make non-Chinese foreign investment that much more attractive.⁴⁸

The U.S., its allies and partners, the IMF, and the World Bank should offer debt relief and assistance packages to BRI partner countries. These would include debt forgiveness, suspension or deferral of payments, emergency credit lines, and debt restructuring. These initiatives would counter the bilateral “debt-trap diplomacy” of the BRI, but would need to be balanced with the risk of inflation that accompanies massive financial stimulus.⁴⁹

Finally, the economic and COVID-19 related problems with the BRI have opened a window of opportunity to convince China to modify the BRI and work with the global community. If China is unwilling to cooperate in this economic sphere, perhaps areas of mutual interest such as counter-terrorism and environmental reforms could serve as additional areas of cooperation.⁵⁰ The BRI has become too big to fail; therefore, if China finds itself struggling to maintain the BRI in its current form, international cooperation maybe its only recourse.⁵¹

Conclusion

Just over two decades into the 21st Century, several pundits have already labeled it “China’s Century,” an acknowledgment of the country’s exceptional growth potential and a simultaneous slight of America’s 20th Century success.⁵² The BRI remains the centerpiece of China’s strategic competition strategy and a viable means to achieve its expansionist ambitions through 2049 and beyond. That strategic success and the displacement of the U.S. global leadership role, however, is neither assured nor inevitable. The U.S. maintains its full complement of national instruments of power, simultaneously capable of both countering the BRI and mitigating the predicted fall of the U.S. from its hegemonic power. Through increased investments in engaged diplomacy, for example, the U.S. can best leverage its powerful network of allies and partners in leading the response to China’s “debt-trap diplomacy” tactics. Similarly, with savvy information campaigns, the U.S. can highlight China’s questionable BRI practices while correspondingly offering a competing narrative based on foundational U.S. beliefs and values. After years of sustained and high-profile operations against VEOs, re-orienting the U.S. military’s focus back toward a supporting role in concert with diplomatic and economic efforts offers to pay increased dividends toward achieving key strategic objectives. An increase in multilateral economic agreements, backed by an enduring commitment to free markets, would continue to curb China’s powerful fiscal influence. A window of opportunity exists to counter China’s global ambitions as manifested through the Belt and Road Initiative. The ultimate success of U.S. efforts will depend on both its skill in effectively coordinating these instruments of power as well as its commitment to their ultimate execution.

Editor’s Note: While the primary focus of the Battlespace Journal (formerly the Air Land Sea Bulletin) is to highlight military operational and tactical interoperability topics, the journal also seeks to inform and expand dialogue regarding key security issues that affect the Joint Force. With that in mind, this month ALSA offers the following article written by a team at JPME II. The article discusses some of the issues surrounding the rise of China and serves as a basis for discussing military/diplomatic options as the United States refocuses effort toward near-peer threats. We hope you enjoy the article.

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