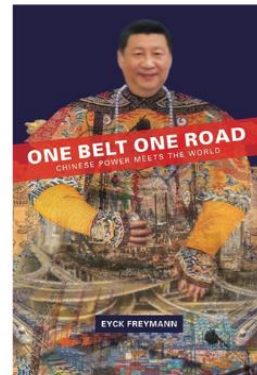
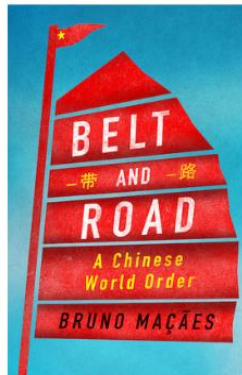
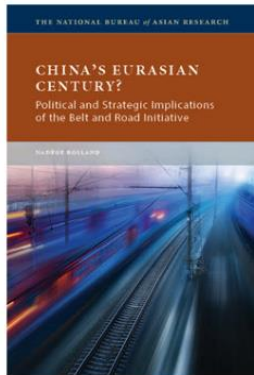


BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE THE BIG PICTURE



China's Eurasian Century?: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative by Nadège Rolland (2017)

Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order by Bruno Maçães (2019)

One Belt One Road: Chinese Power Meets the World by Eyck Freymann (2020)

Takeaways

1. BRI is not just a series of heavy infrastructure projects and loans—it is bigger, more ambitious, and more long-term than you might think. But that doesn't mean its direction is clearly defined—or that it will be successful.
2. BRI at the very least is an aspiration to build material and non-material connections between China and the eastern hemisphere that might move the gravity of global political, economic, and institutional power toward China.
3. Xi is, unsurprisingly, central and BRI is informed by Chinese political values.
4. The “West” has not yet begun to understand or reckon with it.

Belt and Road Initiative: The Big Picture

Brian Spivey

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a much publicized and debated "initiative" that seeks to build a mutually beneficial land-based "belt" and maritime "road" of trade relations and infrastructure connecting China to Eurasia and the Indian Ocean. During speeches in Indonesia and Kazakhstan in 2013, General Secretary Xi Jinping outlined this hugely ambitious and expensive plan to infrastructurally knit together a Eurasian community with China at the center. Drawing rhetorically on the romantic imagery of the historical "Silk Road," Xi described how Chinese investment in numerous ports, railroads, power grids, and highways across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean would lead to a more connected, prosperous, and cooperative world. If fully realized, BRI will ultimately impact roughly 65% of the global population.

Or, at least, that is a safe, conventional explanation of BRI familiar to most readers. Three recent books by Nadège Rolland, Bruno Maçães, and Eyck Freymann are unified in trying to define, complicate, and expand what we – and more importantly the Chinese government – think constitutes BRI. They are not principally concerned with wading into debates about the success or failure of individual construction projects. Instead, the essential conclusion of these "big picture" books is that those debates miss the forest for the trees. BRI is nebulous, ill-defined, and ever-changing. It also, somehow, appears to be even more ambitious and capacious than the trillion dollars' worth of infrastructure construction that make up its constituent parts.

Because of BRI's enormous scope and significance, countless think tank policy reports, blogs, opinion pieces, databases, investment guides, books, and

even podcasts have been produced in an attempt to understand BRI. Judgments abound. Supporters describe it using positive language: cooperation, connectivity, mutual benefit, sustainable, development, win-win cooperation. Its skeptics and opponents use a different vocabulary: neocolonial, debt trap diplomacy, a one-way road to China, wasteful. Its geographic expansiveness makes it even more challenging to develop a simple "good" or "bad" consensus: the Greek longshoreman, the Kazakh train conductor, the American geostrategist, and the Zambian politician will not see the same BRI or hold the same verdict about it.

The official BRI website defines its "cooperation priorities" in the realms of policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. The result is a jumble of headlines, all under the umbrella of BRI: "China, Pakistan sign memorandum on translation, publication of classics," "Tanzanian girl's love for Chinese language brings her career in education," and "China-Central Asia gas pipeline transports over 39 bln cubic meters in 2020." One would be forgiven for thinking that BRI can be taken to mean basically anything that China does in the eastern hemisphere. At times, that description does not seem far off.

In her 2017 book *China's Eurasian Century?*, Nadège Rolland, Senior Fellow for Political and Security Affairs at the National Bureau of Asian Research, tries to cut through this problem by focusing on the "Chinese conception" (p. 3) and "ideational narrative" of BRI (p. xi) as it has been expressed in Chinese speeches, official documents, and policy papers. She concludes that BRI is best understood as the operating mechanism of a centrally-planned, comprehensive geopolitical grand strategy meant to realize Xi Jinping's vision of a revitalized China leading the Eurasian

continent and, ultimately, solidify China's position as the principal global power. It reflects China's "newfound willingness to play a leading role in reshaping the world, starting with its extended periphery" (p. 3). Rolland furthermore emphasizes that BRI is composed of more than just "hard" connections like integrated transportation and energy infrastructures, but also "soft" connections like financial integration, people-to-people initiatives, and political coordination. These less visible connections might be more long-lasting and impactful insofar as they could change the rules and norms of post-Bretton Woods international trade.

In *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order*, Bruno Maçães, Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC, describes something even bigger: BRI is nothing less than a "project meant to encompass the whole world and totality of human life. No other organized project or idea can rival it in this respect" (p. 11-12). He argues that BRI is an attempt to reorient the poles of the global economy away from the Atlantic and toward China, a process that will allow China to replace the economic and geopolitical world order (and the values that underwrite it) currently dominated by the "West." This order will be defined by Chinese political values like *tianxia* (all-under-heaven) that emphasize mutual benefit and shared obligations, rather than individual autonomy.

The "West" as a foil to "Belt and Road" (note that Maçães drops the word "initiative" from BRI) is a useful framing. In the same way that the dominance of the "West" has defined, promoted, and imposed values and institutions that have shaped the economics, politics, and culture of societies all around the world, "Belt and Road" might do the same for the next epoch. What the exact influence of BRI might be is still inconclusive. Indeed, Maçães emphasizes that BRI is still very much in its early stages, as it is meant to "end" in

2049. How will Japan, India, or the United States respond? Will China's leadership make mistakes and miscalculations? Maçães's book paints a picture where the most important road is the one that BRI itself is on, whose turns cannot so much be predicted and planned as characterized retrospectively—the principal driver being China's ambition.

In *One Belt One Road: Chinese Power Meets the World*, Eyck Freymann, a doctoral candidate at Oxford University and Indo-Pacific director for Greenmantle, also argues that BRI is something much bigger than the sum of its parts. Where Rolland describes BRI as a geopolitical grand strategy and Maçães describes it as an epoch-defining attempt to redefine the global order according to Chinese political values, Freymann looks at domestic Chinese messaging about BRI and finds in it the vocabulary of empire. BRI, he argues, is aimed at the imperial rejuvenation of China with Xi Jinping at the imperial center. Xi has been explicit in saying that BRI is his idea. Its definitional vagueness is one of its primary assets, as it provides room for practically any person or organization in China to contribute to it, thus signaling their allegiance to Xi. In this sense, Freymann sees a less centralized, more bottom-up BRI. China's grand imperial past has already provided the blueprints for its grand 21st century future. That basic blueprint is the imperial tributary system, in which a nation's political vassalage to China was exchanged for money and access to Chinese goods and technology. BRI is Xi's attempt to use that past model to build China's future glory.

Each of these books contains a warning that is hard to tune out. Rolland cautions Western policymakers and strategic planners against "underestim[ing] the potential implications of BRI for the liberal international order writ large" (p. 179). Maçães suggests that BRI can create a

rivalrous, non-Western world order with a new set of universalized values. Freymann emphasizes that many countries have, in fact, bought into BRI and Western nations need to think more seriously about how to compete. Importantly, none of the authors believe that BRI is just a cynical ploy to hugely expand China's influence through neocolonial debt-trap diplomacy. Rather, the message that comes through is that the conversation about BRI needs to be massively expanded and reconceptualized beyond the vocabulary given to us by its proponents and

opponents. For one thing, the prevailing binary of BRI as either a tool for global development or as a tool for global dominance occludes the degree to which it can be both. Regardless of one's kneejerk response to the statement "China is trying to establish a new world order with itself at the center," these books together stress that to evaluate and respond to BRI, we must first define it – and that is easier said than done.

For more information on BRI, check out the following recent publications:

High-Speed Empire: Chinese Expansion and the Future of Southeast Asia by Will Doig (2018)

China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia by Dan Markey (2020)

The Emperor's New Road by Jonathan Hillman (2020)

The Belt Road and Beyond: State-Mobilized Globalization in China: 1998–2018 by Min Ye (2020)

The Belt and Road Podcast by Erik Myxter-lino and Juliet Lu.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-belt-and-road-podcast/id1419143614>

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