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# Be Afraid? Be Very Afraid? — Why the United States Needs a Counterstrategy to China’s Belt and Road Initiative

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Although rhetorically grounded under the rubric of a [“win-win”](#) philosophy, Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) poses a significant long-term strategic threat to U.S. interests that now spans across the globe. Now in its fifth year of implementation, there is enough evidence to suggest that BRI is much more than a liberal economic development plan. That analysis indicates that BRI could be more analogous to a [neo-colonialist](#) and [imperialistic](#) China, under the guise of an economic plan. The fact of the matter is that BRI is part of Xi Jinping’s grand nationalistic strategy to ensure that he and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remain in power. BRI provides Xi with the means to pursue “[t]he great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and help China’s ambitions of regional, if not global, hegemony.

Unfortunately, U.S. efforts to counter BRI thus far have been largely ineffective, insufficient in scale, or too recently implemented to realize their impacts. Both President Trump’s National Security Strategy (NSS) and Secretary Mattis’ National Defense Strategy (NDS) frame China as a [“peer-competitor”](#) and as a [“challenger”](#) to the United States, but both fail to recognize that BRI is China’s likely gambit to make the [“string of pearls”](#) theory come to life.

In addition to President Trump’s [“America First”](#) policy, there are two reasons BRI has been pushed toward the bottom of the U.S. priority action list. The first is that BRI is not an existential threat to the United States, and the second, taken within the context of the first, is that BRI is not currently an imminent threat. The potential that the nature of this threat could become existential to the United States is real, and China’s leadership, policies, and actions are making it appear ever more probable. The United States needs to acknowledge BRI as a geostrategic weapon, and it needs to develop a feasible and comprehensive counterstrategy lest it finds itself alone with little control over its own global

interests. In addition to China's militarization efforts (which will not be discussed here), the scale of BRI, Xi Jinping's increasingly authoritarian rule, and China's coercive economic strategy demand it.

## Scale

BRI is a robust plan aimed at increasing economic growth and interconnectedness through a \$1 trillion investment in major infrastructure projects within developing nations from Asia to Europe. Today, over 80 nations extending from Asia to Central America are [involved in BRI](#) in some form. Moreover, there are almost [550 Chinese-funded projects](#) currently underway. That equates to 550 separate and distinct opportunities for China to potentially gain strategic leverage within sovereign states encompassing nearly five billion people. The NDS states the ["security environment \[is\] more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory."](#) China's investments could vastly complicate this picture further.

The sheer volume that exists for China to exert its influence and to gain strategic access, even if BRI only partially succeeds, has the potential to threaten U.S. and allied interests. This is especially true given that China is investing in nations highly vulnerable to its influence and coercion.

## Power and Rhetoric

Xi Jinping's recent rhetoric offers insight into the objectives and approach of his leadership, and it also indicates how he intends to use BRI as the tool to achieve his objectives. Statements such as: ["Chinese Dream"](#); ["righting the injustice of 'the century of humiliation' "](#); ["\[China\] cannot lose even one inch of the territory left behind by our ancestors"](#); ["to achieve great dreams there must be a great struggle"](#); and ["we are resolved to fight the bloody battle against our enemies...to take our place in the world,"](#) are all highly suggestive of a neo-imperialist desire to supplant the United States, seek retribution for past transgressions, and create a new world order that serves only the interests of China.

What makes this more troubling is Xi's successful efforts to consolidate power. He has eliminated presidential term limits, incorporated his very own doctrine (["Xi Jinping Thought"](#)) into the Chinese Constitution, ["purged" opposition from the Chinese Communist Party under the guise of his anti-corruption campaign](#), and replaced key leaders within the CCP and People's Liberation Army (PLA) with

confidants. Xi has also managed to [maneuver his decision authority directly under himself](#) or under the institutions he heads. All told, [Xi has positioned himself ahead of the Central Committee and given the CCP full control to run the government](#). All of this is very nostalgic of Mao.

Xi also continues to oppress his own people. The lack of due process, pervasive censorship, instituting social credit ratings, and the fact that China now [spends more on keeping its population in check than it does on defense](#) all underscore Xi's efforts to remain in power. In other words, Xi is becoming more and more dictatorial as each day and each new law passes. Taken together, his nationalistic desires and increasing grasp on power are forcing the stars to align such that a highly capable nation is under the control of a single ruler with potentially ["revisionist"](#) aspirations. In other words, Xi has the power, desire, and, with BRI, now the means to continue his push for Chinese hegemony.

## Contradictions

At the BRI Forum in May 2017, Xi explained that BRI, ["should focus on the fundamental issue of development, release the growth potential of various countries and achieve economic integration and interconnected development and deliver benefits to all."](#) That is a concerning statement given the litany of contradictions unfolding now that BRI is in full implementation. Foremost is the fact that China is investing in projects it does not expect to provide a return on investment. China has admitted that it [expects to lose one-third of its investment in Central Asia and over three-fourths of their investment in Pakistan](#). BRI projects focused on economic development should be expected to have a net-positive economic return, especially given [China's flat-lining economic growth rate](#). The lack of a net-positive economic return is an indication that China may be more interested in gaining access and leverage than it is about viable economic development.

In addition, BRI's overriding "win-win" principle is dubious. As Dr. Robert Sutter stated during a recent [panel discussion](#) on trends in the India-Pacific region, China's "win-win" policy really means, ["we \[China\] will win and we hope you will win, but we will win."](#) China really has no interest in seeing other nations win—only serving its own interests. One example is that [89 percent of BRI projects are being executed by Chinese contractors, while less than 8 percent are being executed by local contractors](#). Similarly, [China has largely ignored the many environmental impacts associated with BRI](#) project construction leaving recipient nations holding the bag to deal with the fallout.

[“\[D\]ebt-trap diplomacy”](#) is another aspect that makes the “win-win” philosophy a fallacy. Whether through predatory loan terms, corruption, or myriad other tactics, China is setting the conditions for BRI-partners to default on their loans. This is a boon for China because it creates additional vulnerabilities within countries that China is able to exploit for manipulation to achieve China’s objectives, which could mean the introduction of military forces, especially if these countries are strategically located. Although initiated prior to BRI’s official launch, the recent [surrender of the Hambantota port](#) in Sri Lanka is a prime example, and eight other countries are at risk of a similar fate: Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, the Maldives, Mongolia, Montenegro, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.

These are but a few examples of the ways China is using BRI to win. What is most disturbing is the fact that these contradictions do little to boost the economic viability of BRI, and taken collectively, provide evidence that BRI is something other than what it has been sold as: a “win-win” to gain access to sovereign nations. Once inside, China is then free to use [“gray zone”](#) tactics to exert its influence and gain the leverage it may need to be used at a time of their choosing. This should instill considerable angst and suspicion within the United States and its allies.

China has not learned, or is more likely choosing to ignore, these history lessons. The United States needs a more comprehensive counterstrategy to BRI. It needs a non-bellacose strategy that looks after the interests of vulnerable nations and hedges against the geopolitical advantages China is gaining. Toward that end, the NDS provides a solid start outlining how the military instrument of U.S. national power should be employed to handle China’s inevitable rise. Unfortunately, it is going to take much more than a purely military approach—it must.

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