Chapter

1

Background and Origin

The Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (in Chinese: 絲綢之路經濟帶和 21 世紀海上絲綢之路) is the official name of this initiative. It was abbreviated as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Adopted by the Chinese government in 2013, this global infrastructure initiative connects Asia with Africa and Europe, and other continents through land and maritime networks. It aims to enhance regional integration, increase trade, and stimulate economic growth.

The BRI involves investments in different countries and international organizations and serves as a centerpiece of Chinese President Xi Jinping's foreign policy. The BRI is a crucial component of Xi's "Major Country Diplomacy" strategy (in Chinese: 大國外交), which seeks to enhance China's leadership role in global affairs commensurate with its growing power and status.

The initiative was officially included in the Chinese Communist Party's Constitution in 2017. The Xi Jinping Administration has characterized the initiative as a means to enhance regional connectivity and build a better future, with a completion target of 2049, which marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

As of May 2025, the BRI has been signed by 152 countries. These countries represent approximately 75% of the world's population and contribute over half of the global GDP.

The initiative defines five major priorities: (1) policy coordination; (2) infrastructure connectivity; (3) unimpeded trade; (4) financial integration; and (5) connecting people. It has been linked with a substantial investment program aimed at developing infrastructure for ports, roads, railways, and airports. Additionally, it includes the construction of power plants and telecommunications networks.

The BRI encompasses 6 economic corridors and 34 economic hubs along the Maritime Silk Road. It aims to facilitate the flow of goods, capital, and information through infrastructure development, trade and economic zones, and the establishment of logistics and financial services. This synergistic approach is intended to foster economic growth and regional integration.

The 6 economic corridors are respectively:

1. The New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor

Also known as the second Eurasia Land Bridge, it is a major international railway connection that spans from Lianyungang in China's eastern Jiangsu province, passes through Alataw Pass (in Chinese: 阿拉山口) in Xinjiang's western region, and terminates at Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

2. The China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor

China, Mongolia, and Russia have developed strong economic ties and cooperation through cross-border trade and collaboration due to their shared land borders.

3. China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor

It begins in Xinjiang, China and exits through Alataw Pass to join the railway networks of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) and West Asia (Iran, Turkey, etc.).

4. China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor

It mainly covers the Greater Mekong Sub-region. Guangxi has opened an international rail line running from Nanning to Hanoi and introduced air routes to several major Southeast Asian cities.

5. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

It is to build an economic route from Kashgar, Xinjiang in the north to Pakistan's Gwadar Port in the south.

6. Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor

It develops the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor to facilitate cooperation through building a closer relationship.

The BRI serves a major objective for China. It is a tool to reinforce its ideologies of China's peaceful rise / development, Chinese Century, Beijing Consensus and Chinese Dream (In Chinese: 中國和平崛起 / 發展、中國世紀、北京共識和中國夢).

"China's Peaceful Rise," also known as "China's Peaceful Development," was an official policy and political ideology during the leadership of former General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Hu Jintao. The policy aimed to reassure the international community that China's growing political, economic, and military power would not threaten international peace and security.

The term "Chinese Century" refers to the idea that China may play a leading role in the 21st century in terms of geoeconomics or geopolitics. This parallels how the 20th century was labeled the "American Century" and how the 18th and 19th centuries were known as the "British Centuries." This concept is frequently associated with forecasts that China's economy will become the largest in the world.

The "Beijing Consensus" is also being known as China Model (in Chinese: 中國模式). It refers to the Chinese Economic Model, which is a set of political and economic policies implemented by Deng Xiaoping after Mao Zedong's death in 1976 in the People's Republic of China. These policies are widely believed to have contributed to China's economic growth and development, with the country's gross national product increasing eightfold over two decades.

The phrase "Beijing Consensus" was coined by Joshua Cooper Ramo (the vice chairman and co-chief executive of Kissinger Associate) in 2004. It serves as an alternative development model for developing countries to the market-friendly policies of the Washington Consensus promoted by the IMF, World Bank, and US Treasury. Ramo later stated that the Beijing Consensus does not suggest that every nation should follow China's development model. Instead, it legitimizes the concept of particularity instead of the universality assumed in the Washington model.

The final concept is the "Chinese Dream," which is closely associated with President Xi Jinping, China's paramount leader and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China. Xi began promoting the concept of "Chinese Dream" during a high-profile tour of the "Road to National Rejuvenation" exhibit at the National Museum of China in November 2012, shortly after becoming CPC leader. He defined the Chinese Dream as representing the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

The "Chinese Dream" concept has deep historical roots in Chinese literary and intellectual tradition, fundamentally connected to aspirations of national restoration. In the ancient Classic of Poetry "Shi Jing" (in Chinese: 詩經), the poem "Flowing Spring" (in Chinese: 下泉) portrays the poet who wakes in sorrow after dreaming about the former glory of the Western Zhou dynasty. Subsequently, during the turbulent Southern Song dynasty, the poet Zheng Sixiao coined the phrase "Chinese Dream" (in Chinese: 中國夢) in his writing " 一心中國夢，萬古下泉詩 ". Through the reference to the ancient poem "Flowing Spring", Zheng articulated his profound longing for national restoration of strength and prosperity, demonstrating his deep patriotism.

Furthermore, the "Chinese Dream" includes various elements such as sustainable development, individual dreams, economic and political reform. The idea of sustainable development is essential to China's long-term growth and prosperity, while the ethnic nationalist revival promotes a strong sense of national identity and pride among the Chinese people. Individual dreams reflect the desire of Chinese citizens to pursue their own goals and aspirations. Economic and political reform represent ongoing efforts to improve China's governance and economy. In summary, the Chinese Dream is a multifaceted concept that has deep roots in Chinese history and culture. It represents a vision of national rejuvenation and renewal, along with a commitment to sustainable development, ethnic pride, individual aspirations, and political and economic reform. As suggested by Suisheng Zhao, a professor of Chinese politics and foreign policy at the University of Denver's Josef Korbel School of Global and Public Affairs, "*Chinese Dream is thus distinguished from the American dream. In Chinese Dream people can pursue individual dreams and contribute to the national dream at the same time.*"

To sum up, the "Chinese Century" and "China's Peaceful Rise" have given China a greater role on the world stage, and the "Beijing Consensus" has served as an alternative development model for other countries to follow. These conceptions have helped to increase China's economic and political power, with the "Chinese

Dream" embodying a vision of national renewal.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, extends China's reach through a vast infrastructure network connecting Asia, Europe, Africa and other continents via roads, railways, and ports. This initiative serves multiple purposes: asserting China's regional influence, promoting its vision for a new world order, and addressing domestic economic challenges like industrial overcapacity and the need for new export markets. In essence, China's peaceful rise, the Beijing Consensus, and the Chinese Dream have all culminated in the BRI–a strategic effort to expand influence, advance economic and political interests, and address its own economic challenges.

I The Fundamental Purpose of the Belt and Road Initiative

As mentioned above, the BRI connects Asia with Africa, Europe and other continents through land and maritime networks to improve regional integration, increase trade, and stimulate economic growth. The significance of the BRI lies in its aim to build a forward-looking, more diversified, and inclusive international civilization beyond the current international order and world pattern. In other words, the initiative uniquely combines both innovative ideas and historical elements.

The initiative innovatively aims to reshape the existing unipolar system by including marginalized, less developed ethnic groups, regions, societies, and nations that the current international order has long overlooked. Historically, many of these now less developed nations once boasted glorious civilizations and served as centers of the world. The Ancient Silk Road both symbolized and emerged from the prosperity of its era, making the BRI not just a new concept but also a revival of ancient civilizations.

Economics and trade exchanges have always been the fundamental driving force of human interactions. It was the case for ancient Silk Road, as well as the Maritime civilization of Western Europe. As the infrastructure connectivity in many of the BRI countries are less developed, enhancing the infrastructure development in these countries has become a prerequisite for promoting trade activities and cultural exchanges among BRI nations across Africa and Eurasia.

Therefore, BRI is primarily a means to seek common prosperity, with the ultimate objective to enhance culture exchanges and interactions across Africa and Eurasia, and to build a pluralistic world of civilization. The change of the existing international order is merely a by-product of the initiative.

The economic aspect of the initiative commonly attracts the most attention. While economics is indeed a critical component, the initiative is much broader and deeper in scope. The BRI embodies oriental wisdom characterized by inclusiveness, openness, and flexibility–in contrast to traditional FTAs that impose binding legal obligations. Encompassing free trade, human mobility, cultural exchange, infrastructure construction, cooperative development, and interconnection, the BRI will have far-reaching impacts on future international developments.

The BRI consists of four layers. First, it coordinates member nations' development planning, provides collaborative policy support, and enhances implementation effectiveness. For example, Mongolia's "Initiative for Passage to Grassland" and Kazakhstan's "Bright Road" economic stimulus can both be effectively incorporated into the BRI.

Second, the BRI fosters increasing exchange, interaction and integration among societies and social groups, facilitating the exchange of ideas, values, and cultural practices. This process strengthens social bonds, promotes empathy, and enhances mutual understanding.

Third, the BRI facilities infrastructure development, including high-speed railways, extensive highway networks, and transnational natural gas pipelines in participating countries. To finance these ambitious projects, dedicated financial institutions have been established: the Silk Road Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the BRICS Development Bank. These infrastructure initiatives and their supporting financial mechanisms form the essential foundation of the BRI.

Fourth, the ultimate objective of the initiative is to increase trade and people interaction, promote mutual investment, and achieve common prosperity. As many of the participating nations