

# 6

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### China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) at Ten: The World According to China, and China According to the World

Rebin Najmalddin

#### Introduction

On October 12-13, 2023, the conference "China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) at Ten: The World According to China and China According to the World" was hosted at the Boston University Hillel House.<sup>1</sup> Co-chaired by Andrew R. Wilson and Grant F. Rhode, this event marked the 10th anniversary of China's ambitious BRI project. The conference, a joint endeavor of the U.S. Naval War College and the Pardee School of Global Studies Center for the Study of Asia at Boston University, aimed to critically evaluate the BRI's geopolitical, economic, and strategic influences on the world over the past decade and assess possible futures for the BRI moving forward.

The conference agenda was meticulously planned to offer a comprehensive examination of the BRI from diverse perspectives and regional insights. Grant Rhode and Kathleen Walsh<sup>2</sup> opened the conference by providing context remarks about the BRI. Scott Taylor, Dean of the Pardee School, and Andrew Wilson, John A. van Beuren Chair of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Naval War College, welcomed the conference participants and set the stage for the conference program. The agenda consisted of two keynote talks and four panels with four speakers each, each panel followed by Q&A sessions.

#### Opening Keynote Address: China's Big Vision and the Challenges It Faces

David M. Lampton presented the keynote address for the conference. He focused on China's ambitious global vision and the ensuing challenges, emphasizing the necessity for Western countries to acknowledge the critical role of infrastructure

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: The conference organizers gratefully acknowledge conference sponsor financial support from the John A. Beuren Chair of Asia-Pacific Studies through the US Naval War College Foundation, and administrative and venue support by the Boston University Pardee School of Global Studies through primary sponsorship by the Center for the Study of Asia and co-sponsorship by the African Studies Center, the Global Development Policy Center, and the Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future.

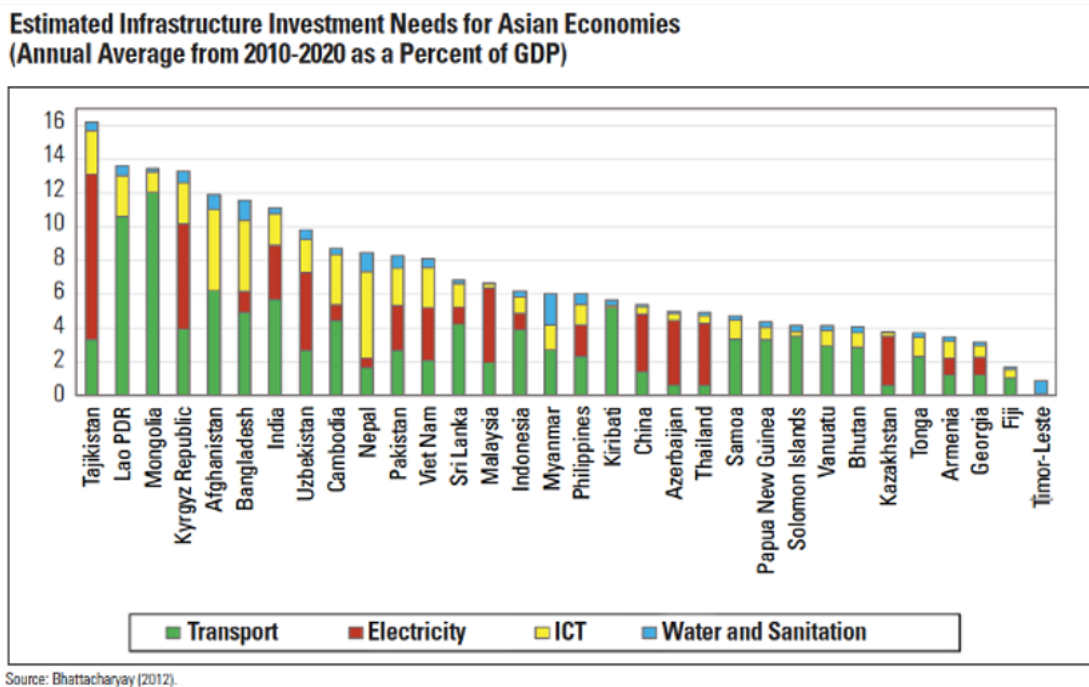
<sup>2</sup> Brief biographies of the speakers appear in the speakers' list at the end of this Occasional Paper text.

in global development, while also advising a more nuanced and balanced approach to engaging with the BRI.<sup>3</sup> He emphasized the complexity of developing global infrastructure projects and argued that it is unreasonable to expect a megaproject like the BRI to be without any challenges. Lampton discussed that China speaks the language of the world in addressing the need for infrastructure, and that the BRI is not merely a Chinese project, but rather a larger regional vision shared with neighboring countries. A key point in Lampton's address was that the U.S. is in the process of recognizing the need to engage more actively in the game of global infrastructure development, and it needs to ask itself what the U.S. brings to the table to have influence, and if it doesn't have much it shouldn't blame the Chinese. He warned against both overestimating and underestimating China and advocated for an appreciation of China's achievements in infrastructure, not as praise but as a recognition of reality.

### Panel I: The BRI at Ten: Where it's Been and Where it's Going

Grant Rhode moderated the first panel, a comprehensive analysis of the BRI's multifaceted impacts and strategic shifts over the years and offering insights from various global vantage points.

William Grimes initiated the panel presentation by examining the BRI's role in bridging Asia's vast infrastructure gap, a significant challenge identified in a 2009 Asia Development Bank (ADB) report.<sup>4</sup> According to this report, Asia's need for infrastructure was about \$8 trillion USD for the period of 2010 – 2020 (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Table of the estimated needs for Asian infrastructure**

Source: Bhattacharyay, B. N., Kawai, M., & Nag, R. M. (Eds.). (2012). *Infrastructure for Asian Connectivity*. Asian Development Bank Institute and Asian Development Bank with Edward Elgar Publishing.

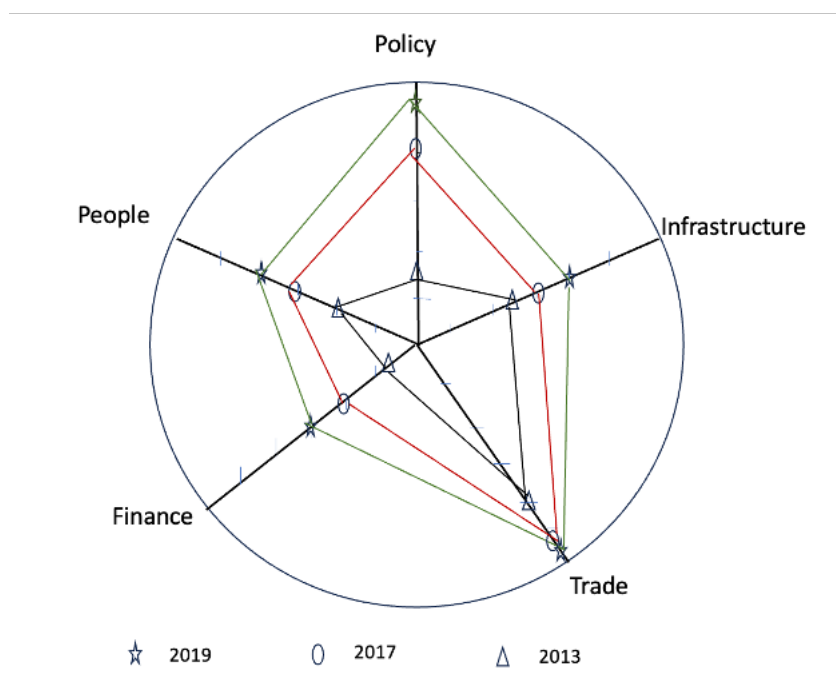
The industrialization and growth trajectory of East Asia has been significantly propelled by the development of regional production networks, which fostered a symbiotic economic expansion across the region. However, this wave of prosperity has not been evenly distributed; Central and South Asia have largely not enjoyed the same benefits, remaining on the periphery of this economic boom. Grimes further drew an intriguing parallel to Japan's economic strategies in the late 1980s, the "Flying Geese" model, which emphasized regional production networks and infra-

<sup>3</sup> Video recordings of the conference keynote talks, and panel presentations are available for viewing on the Boston University Center for the Study of Asia webpage *China's Belt and Road Initiative at Ten*.

<sup>4</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI). 2009. *Infrastructure for a Seamless Asia*. Manila and Tokyo: ADB and ADBI.

structure development as catalysts for economic growth. Contrary to the fears of critics at the time, Japan's efforts did not result in exclusive networks or economic zones dominated by Japanese interests. Instead, the infrastructure developed under this model became a public good, contributing significantly to regional prosperity and governance. The lesson learned from this period emphasized that well-planned infrastructure is a public good that helps economic growth; that exclusivity in such development projects is difficult to maintain unless in specific sectors like extractive industries; and that recipient governments have agency that can influence political and economic outcomes.

Min Ye shifted the focus to the internal Chinese perspective on the BRI and discussed the internal debates and reservations concerning its expansive international investments. Ye argued that China still classifies itself as a developing nation and pointed out the contrast of its considerable domestic expenditures against the backdrop of its global financial commitments, and the security risks for Chinese personnel abroad as evidenced by incidents of kidnapping. Ye revealed a rigorous, systematic approach that is being followed by Chinese policy analysts to evaluate the BRI's progress across five connectivity areas: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, financing integration, and people-to-people communication, as outlined by the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Beijing's Assessment of BRI**

Source: China Academy of Sciences Index (Zhongke zhishu),  
Liu ed. 2021, pp. 6-9.

She further revealed a strategic evolution within China's foreign policy realm, as a consequence of the evolving BRI, that is marked by the rise of scholarly work that adopts scientific methodologies for improved policy programs. This change involves a greater use of scientific methods in policymaking, focusing on adaptable and practical economic strategies. In the Indo-Pacific region, this has led to a strategy of distributing power more widely and aiming to lead in global governance through individual relationships with different countries.

Victor Gao discussed a vision for the second decade of the BRI. He emphasized that the BRI is not China's BRI, and its success can only be guaranteed by the joint efforts of all participating nations. He further reflected on China's remarkable infrastructure transformation since the 1980s, with advances in highways, power generation, and telecommunications now outpacing the combined production capacities of Germany, the USA, and Japan. For Gao, a core lesson for China over the past four decades is that the path to prosperity is through building roads, a lesson that China now seeks to share globally, extending beyond physical to financial and technological connectivity. Concerning the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), Gao expressed skepticism and argued that for the project to really work the geopolitical frictions between countries and security concerns must first be addressed. In

terms of logistics from a navigation and business perspective, it is simply not practical to load goods and sail west across the sea to the eastern part of the Middle East, transit on land, off load in the port of Haifa, and then load ships again to continue to sail west across the Mediterranean. Therefore, from a BRI perspective the IMEC project is not a competition against the BRI, but rather an opportunity to connect all these separate connectivity projects together.

Jorge Heine focused on the Global South's perspective, particularly Latin America's engagement with the BRI, a region not initially included in the BRI's blueprint. Heine revealed the region's growing enthusiasm for the initiative, with 21 signatory countries in Latin America and eight countries as members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Heine argued that the BRI's focus on infrastructure and connectivity particularly appeals to Latin American countries, offering a contrast to traditional development models that prioritize macroeconomic stability. He introduced the concept of the "logistic state," a paradigm shift in which governments facilitate development by providing infrastructure as a foundation for private sector growth. Heine noted the increasing trend of Chinese companies winning open tenders for major infrastructure projects in Latin America. This trend, he suggested, is indicative of a move towards greater transparency and competitive involvement in the region, marking a shift from earlier practices of direct government contracts and 'stadium diplomacy,' or state subsidies provided for the funding of stadium and sports facility construction. Heine concludes by advocating for a competitive, inclusive approach to infrastructure development in Latin America, welcoming participation from various global entities, including American and European companies.

## Panel II: Continental Dimensions of the BRI

Vesko Garcevic moderated the second panel that explored the impact of the BRI on specific regions and presented continental perspectives of the BRI.

Nargis Kassenova provided an overview of the BRI for Central Asia and discussed the region's deepening economic ties with China through BRI. She outlined the progressive demilitarization of borders, border crossings, movement of people, and increased energy cooperation between China and Kazakhstan since the 1990s. One such example is the construction of the East-West gas pipeline that bolstered energy connectivity between China and Central Asia. Kassenova emphasized the strategic role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in facilitating enhanced relationships with China, especially the Chinese loans and financial agreements post-2008 financial crisis which greatly benefited the region during economically hard times. She argued Kazakhstan's role as a transport nexus, particularly through the Khorgos Gateway and how its integration with China's vast logistics network has demonstrated Central Asia's increasing importance as a logistical and economic bridge in Eurasia. The BRI has upgraded connectivity in the region and influenced Central Asian governments to align their development policies in support of the project and revival of a new Silk Road. The introduction of Chinese Safe Cities, a solution aimed at enhancing urban security through the integration of modern technologies, in Central Asia and the development of the Middle Corridor, particularly the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Figure 3), are key components of this enhanced connectivity.



**Figure 3: Middle Corridor, Transcaspian International Transport Route**

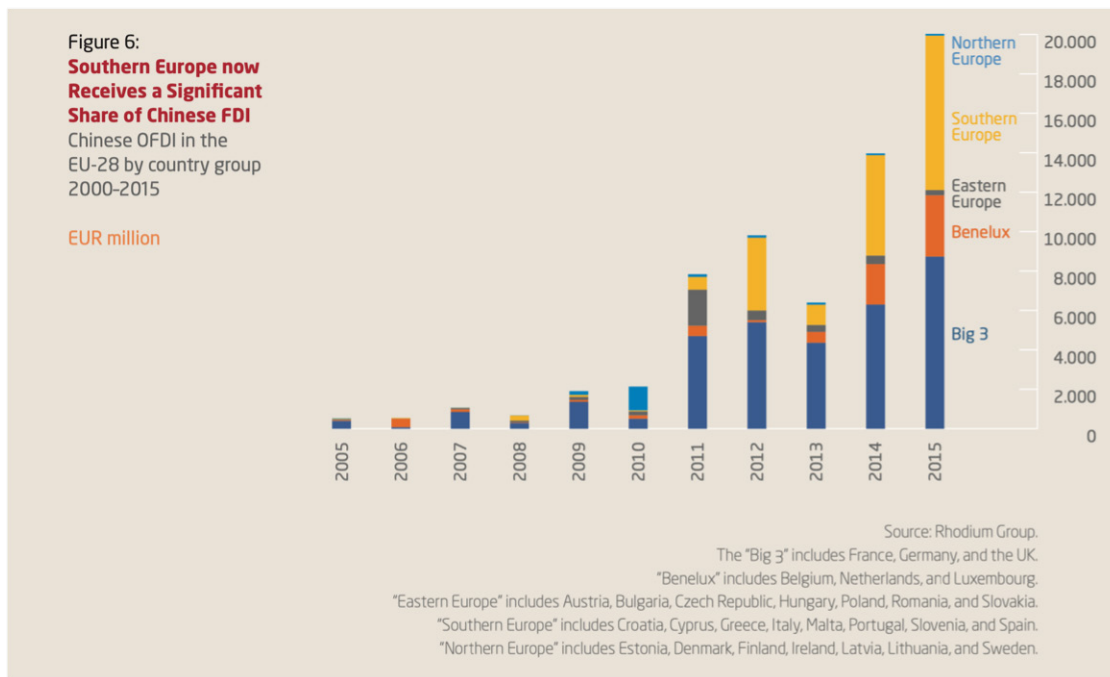
Source: Güngör, G. (2022, September 30). New Opportunities and Initiatives for the Middle Corridor. Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM). Retrieved from <https://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/NEW-OPPORTUNITIES-AND-INITIATIVES-FOR-THE-MIDDLE-CORRIDOR>

Kassenova divided the BRI timeline into two phases, the initial phase from 2013-2019 and a subsequent phase from 2020 to the present. She noted that between 2013-2019, there was a shift from energy sector dominance to diversified investments in transport, metals, finance, and agriculture. She interpreted these initiatives as part of a broader learning process, where Central Asian countries are being socialized into a China-centric political and economic order, subtly moving away from the narrative of a 'community of common destiny' to more pragmatic cooperation based on shared interests.

Carla Freeman focused on BRI implementation in South and Southeast Asia, with a special emphasis on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). She critically evaluated the BRI's ambitious projects and argued that while the initiative aims for economic revitalization, it has inadvertently magnified existing regional frictions and conflicts. The BRI's large-scale infrastructure developments have faced challenges and delays that have proven that infrastructure development takes time and is not always successful. Freeman noted that the CPEC project didn't make India happy in South Asia and the country didn't sign on to the project. In the earlier stages of the development, it was assumed that the project could create the conditions that would foster its success, and recently there's been a pivot from large-scale physical infrastructure to smaller-scale, digitally-focused projects (like digital trading services, e-commerce, and security), with a new emphasis on security enhancements including the deployment of Chinese surveillance technology under the guise of developing 'safe cities'.

Tsitsi Musasike focused on the impact of BRI in the African continent, emphasizing its alignment with the African Union's Agenda 2063, and pointing out the continent's rapid demographic expansion with projections indicating a doubling of its population to 2.2 billion by 2050 from the current 1.1 billion, this alongside its current infrastructure deficits, with just 40% of the population enjoying appropriate access to energy. According to the African Development Bank, its infrastructure funding requirement is \$108 - \$170 billion annually. Between 2000-2022 China contributed \$170 billion, the World Bank \$264 billion, and the African Development Bank \$36.9 billion. The annual funding gap remains between \$68-108 billion; this is while governments are struggling to deliver infrastructure projects and the continent is not connected via rail, road or digitally. This situation has motivated African nations to increasingly lean towards China for development, and countries are significantly committed to the BRI, with 52 out of 55 African nations having signed the MoU. Musasike also mentioned that China doesn't impose stringent funding requirements like political demands or democratic elections, and there is an enabling environment and a clear, transparent procurement process. She argued that the BRI is partly solving Africa's infrastructure challenge, but a lot still needs to be done to rehabilitate existing infrastructure, roads, and power plants. Despite opportunities, she cited challenges such as the enormous funding gaps, reduced Chinese funding, and the continent's struggle with debt absorption, political instability, and projects that often are not properly developed and structured. Additionally, the current model and investments don't necessarily build capacity within the host countries, and there is room for abuse of power.

Philippe Le Corre presented an examination of Europe's engagement with the BRI. He sees the BRI not as China's overarching strategy, but as a component of its long-standing "Going Out" policy, which seeks to address domestic overcapacity through international expansion. As of 2021, 27 countries in Europe had signed the MoU with China. In 2020, trade in goods between China and Europe for the first time was larger than trade in goods between Europe and the United States. The EU is committed to open trading relations with China. However, the EU wants to ensure that China trades fairly, respects intellectual property rights and meets its WTO obligations. LeCorre noted that while the BRI has facilitated connectivity, particularly in transport and digital infrastructure, it has also raised concerns about trade imbalances, indebtedness, and security, especially in EU and NATO member states like Greece, which ceded a major port to Chinese control. The port of Piraeus has raised serious labor and security concerns in Greece and across Europe. Its Chinese management increasingly is seen in the EU as a security liability to Greece. Italy joined the BRI in 2019 after President Xi's visit, however under Prime Minister Meloni Italy started to shift away from BRI and in the G20 summit this year Meloni announced her country's exit from BRI. The response in Hungary and the Balkans also highlights regional variances in receptivity toward Chinese investments, but there are concerns about Montenegro and Serbia falling to China's influence (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Chinese OFDI in the EU-28 by country group 2000-2015**

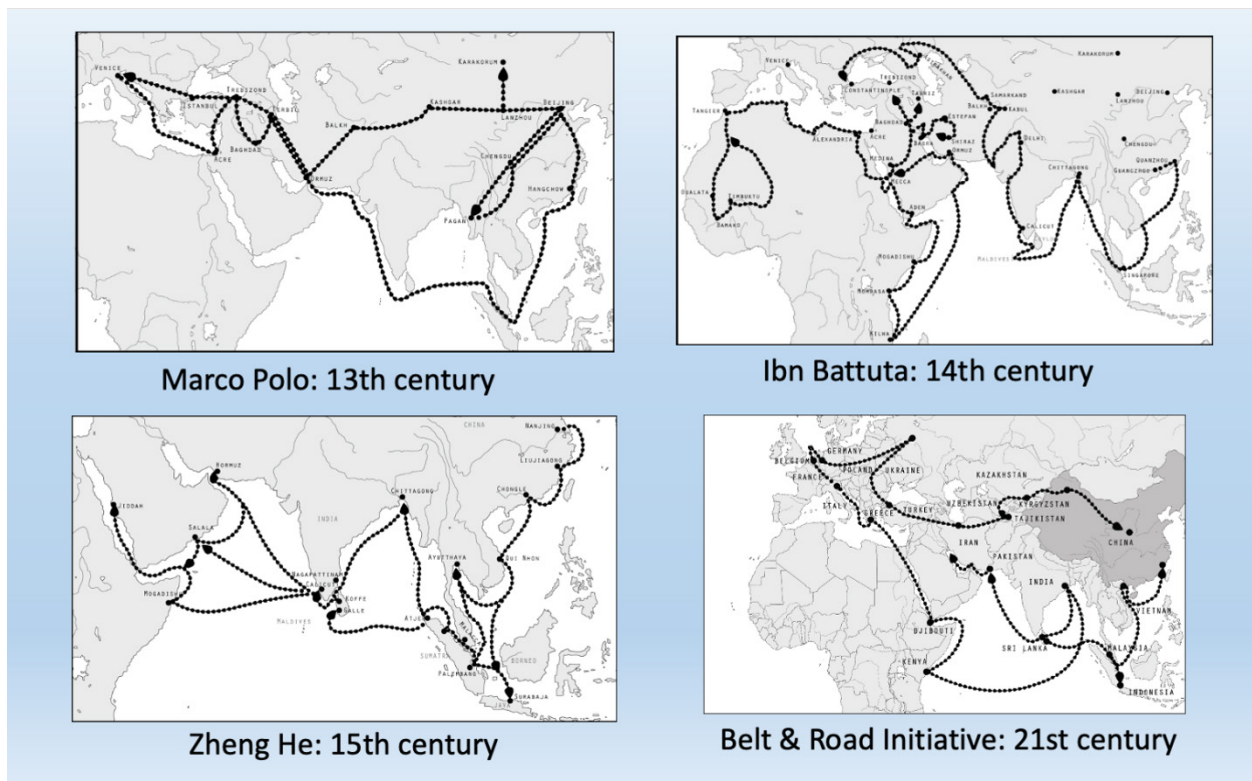
Source: Hanemann, T., & Huotari, M. (2016, February). A New Record Year for Chinese Outbound Investment in Europe. Mercator Institute for China Studies, Rhodium Group.

### Panel III: Maritime Dimensions of the BRI

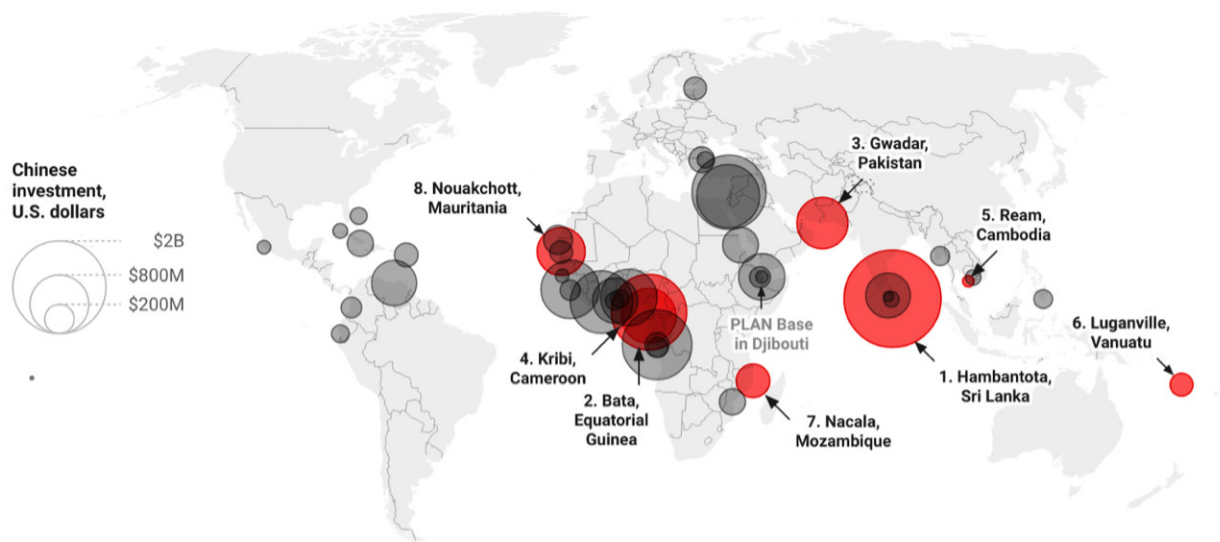
Andrew Wilson moderated the third panel investigating history, strategy, and policy dimensions of maritime silk road aspects of the BRI.

Grant Rhode offered an exploration of historical maritime dynamics between India, China, and Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on the naval exploits of southern India's Chola dynasty (9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> c.) and the voyages of the Chinese admiral and explorer Zheng He (1371-1433). He shared the historical lessons from the Srivijaya empire, a dominant maritime power in Sumatra and the Malay peninsula (7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> c.), which was known for levying significant tolls on passing trade ships, in turn impacting the viability of these trade routes. The narrative centered on Rajendra Chola (r. 1012-1024 CE), son of Raja Raja Chola and praised as one of India's greatest seafarers. Rajendra Chola's naval expeditions expanded the trade routes, profoundly altering regional power balances. This historical backdrop serves as a precursor to the modern-day challenges faced by China, particularly China's "Malacca dilemma," the vulnerability of China-Indian Ocean trade to naval blockade in the Malacca Strait by the U.S. or others, reflecting historical patterns in contemporary geopolitical strategies. Rhode further delved into the 15th-century maritime voyages of Zheng He, the celebrated admiral of the Ming Dynasty. Zheng He's seven voyages, extending from China to Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, were monumental in fostering trade and diplomatic relations. Rhode argued these voyages symbolize China's historical commitment to global connectivity and peaceful diplomacy, though he also pointed out that the voyages created some conflictual incidents. He connected these historical events to the current geopolitical landscape, suggesting how historical maritime strategies continue to influence current economic policies and international affairs (Figure 5).

Alexander Wooley's presentation focused on the strategic implications of China's port infrastructure investments in developing countries. He discussed the AidData research project conducted by his team at the College of William and Mary, which analyzed data to predict potential locations for future Chinese naval bases (Figure 6). Their study led to the identification of 123 seaport projects in 46 countries, valued at \$30 billion, and narrowed down potential sites for Chinese naval bases (Figure 7).



**Figure 5: Ancient and modern Silk Roads**  
 Source: Grant F. Rhode



Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 6: Chinese port investments and potential future naval bases**  
 Source: AidData

Wooley highlighted the concentration of Chinese port investments in Western and Central Africa, where China has poured significant resources into infrastructure development. This investment has potentially provided China with considerable leverage in these regions due to the disproportionate size of the investments relative to the GDPs of these countries. Additionally, many of these ports are in somewhat remote locations, like Mauritania and Angola, which might not be immediately apparent to U.S. policymakers. Wooley emphasized the growth of the Chinese

Rank	Port	Country	Commitment (USD 2021)
1	Hambantota International Port	Sri Lanka	\$2.19 billion
2	Autonomous Port of Kribi	Cameroon	\$1.30 billion
3	Bayport Terminal at Haifa Port	Israel	\$1.25 billion
4	Port of Caio	Angola	\$1.10 billion
5	Port of Ashdod	Israel	\$894 million
6	Autonomous Port of Abidjan	Côte d'Ivoire	\$878 million
7	Queen Elizabeth II Quay, Freetown	Sierra Leone	\$759 million
8	Lekki Deep Sea Port	Nigeria	\$707 million
9	Port of Bata	Equatorial Guinea	\$659 million
10	Gwadar Port	Pakistan	\$577 million
11	Autonomous Port of Nouakchott	Mauritania	\$499 million
12	Doraleh Multipurpose Port and Damerjog Livestock Port*	Djibouti	\$466 million
13	Port of Tema	Ghana	\$443 million
14	José Petroterminal	Venezuela	\$441 million
15	Port of Colombo	Sri Lanka	\$430 million
16	Port of Sudan	Sudan	\$265 million
17	Port of Nacala	Mozambique	\$230 million
18	Nouadhibou Fishing Port	Mauritania	\$165 million
19	Port of Santiago de Cuba	Cuba	\$133 million
20	Beira Fishing Port	Mozambique	\$133 million
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$13.5 billion</b>

**Figure 7: Ports receiving the most funding from China, 2000-2021**

Source: AidData

navy, now larger than the U.S. Navy, and its expanding projection capabilities, including aircraft carriers. He explained that China, lacking typical defensive alliances like those of the U.S., would seek to establish overseas bases. This shift in focus marks a significant change in global maritime dynamics that raises the need for a reevaluation of strategic priorities and responses from the U.S. and other global powers.

Marisol Maddox presented an insightful analysis of China's Polar Silk Road strategy, which is an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative focusing on the Arctic region. In 2018, China declared itself a "near-Arctic state," reflecting its growing interest in the region due to climate change and the opening of new maritime shipping routes. This strategic move aligns with China's broader goals, including access to energy, minerals, and fisheries, which are increasingly important as fish stocks migrate away from equatorial regions due to warming oceans. China's engagement in the arctic is not new and dates back to the 1920s with the Svalbard Treaty, and since then China has grown more confident in asserting its rights under international law, especially in areas like scientific research. In 2013 China gained observer status in the Arctic Council, signed a free trade agreement with Iceland, and purchased a significant share in Yamal LNG natural gas production, liquefaction and shipping project, and in 2017 China envisioned a "blue economic passage" to Europe via the Arctic. The launch in 2018 of China's first domestically built icebreaker, the Xue Long 2, brought them on par with the United States in terms of icebreaking capabilities. Maddox also touched on the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, which China signed in 2018, emphasizing the potential for sus-



tainable fishing in the Arctic and the collaborative research needed to achieve this. The recent cooperation between Russia and China, after the Putin-Xi Summit in 2023, is another significant development, with Russia allowing China a role in the Northern Sea Route and increased maritime law enforcement cooperation.

Kathleen Walsh presented insights on China's Maritime Silk Road and the blue economy. She explored the concept of the blue economy—a strategy for sustainable and smart exploitation of marine resources, ensuring their availability for future generations. The concept includes various sectors like fishing, tourism, commercial shipping, and shipbuilding. Walsh noted that the U.S. originated the term 'ocean economy' in the year 2000, with a focus on sustainability, and the EU uses the term Blue Growth, while China adopted the term 'blue economy,' linking economic prosperity with sustainability as a secondary priority. China's perspective on the blue economy integrates innovation and industrial development, as seen in the designation of Qingdao as a pilot zone for blue economic development. In 2017, Xi Jinping announced a vision for maritime cooperation under the BRI, explicitly linking the blue economy concept to China's global economic strategy. Walsh also discussed China's outreach to the South Pacific, particularly the Solomon Islands, focusing on ports, shipbuilding, and ship repair. This approach indicates China's underappreciated foreign policy aspect, intertwining sustainability, climate change, and maritime/naval implications. She surveyed various organizations and agreements, noting that most, including APEC and ASEAN, favor the term 'blue economy' over 'ocean economy.' This trend suggests China's increasing influence in setting the agenda and terminology in regional maritime economic policy.

#### **Panel IV: Differing BRI Narratives and Policy Implications**

Mark Storella moderated the fourth panel which presented differing media narratives in alternative regions of the world, as well as data-rich examinations of recent Chinese policy agendas, the correlation of host countries' governance quality with Chinese investments, and the relationship of BRI economic interactions and political influence,

Asei Ito presented his research on how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has fit into Xi Jinping's policy agendas over the past decade. His analysis is based on a dataset of about 12,000 articles from Chinese state media sources, focusing specifically on 1,800 BRI-related posts. Ito utilized topic modeling, an unsupervised machine learning technique, to identify underlying themes in the data. His findings revealed the evolution of the BRI from its initial focus on infrastructure to a broader range of themes, including digital technology and sustainable development. His research indicated that while the emphasis on China as a major global power was significant in the early years of Xi's administration, it has become less prominent over time. Instead, topics like global economic governance have gained traction, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis also showed a correlation between the BRI narrative and actual policy implementation, with peaks in discussions about the BRI aligning with spikes in overseas financing. However, a divergence was observed in recent years, where despite continued discussion on the BRI, actual financing appeared to decrease, suggesting a shift towards higher-quality, governance-focused BRI projects.

Jabbar Al-Obaidi-focused on global media coverage of China's BRI. He noted that while Western media tends to frame the BRI in a negative light, emphasizing potential risks and downsides, developing countries often view it more positively. For instance, in the West, the BRI is often seen as a tool for China to gain political leverage and dominance, while in developing countries, it is viewed as a much-needed infrastructure development and economic opportunity. He cited an example of a narrative by the Chinese ambassador to Jordan, emphasizing the BRI's principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution, shared benefits, and meeting global infrastructure needs. This contrasts sharply with the Western media's emphasis on the risks of debt traps and strategic vulnerabilities. This disparity in media coverage not only reveals differing global perspectives but also highlights the importance of understanding the BRI within the context of regional priorities and needs. He suggested that the BRI serves as a Rorschach test, revealing more about the attitudes and priorities of the commentators than about the initiative itself.

Nader Habibi presented research on BRI's investment sensitivity on host country conditions. Habibi questions if the flow of Chinese investments correlates with the quality of the host countries' governance. His findings reveal that China's investment patterns vary across regions, with developed regions receiving more direct investments and developing regions, like Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East, seeing more construction contracts. He also observes an increase in investments in advanced countries post-BRI, while construction contracts have pre-

dominantly risen in developing nations. His analysis utilizes World Bank governance indicators, covering aspects like government efficiency, accountability, and political stability, to assess governance quality in various countries. His study concludes that Chinese investments tend to favor countries with higher regulatory quality, government effectiveness, and rule of law, indicating a positive correlation between investments and business-friendly governance factors. However, no significant correlation was found between Chinese investments and political stability or control of corruption. In contrast, Chinese construction contracts show a different pattern, with a negative correlation in countries with high voice and accountability, suggesting a preference for construction contracts in countries with weaker accountability. Habibi suggested that while China should not impose conditions related to politics or democracy, its investments would be more effective if they were contingent on good governance, particularly in terms of economic performance and public accountability.

M. Taylor Fravel's presentation explored economic interactions and political influence in the BRI and participating countries, focusing on whether the BRI has become a grand strategic tool for China to exert political influence by leveraging economic interactions. For his analysis Fravel compared BRI participant countries with non-participants to understand China's influence in terms of political and economic gains. The primary finding is that the economic benefits of BRI participation are generally limited and short-lived. His study also reveals that China is more likely to increase its influence with states already closely aligned with it, rather than spreading influence more broadly, i.e., China's efforts through the BRI consolidates existing relationships rather than create new ones.

### **Closing Keynote: Maximizing the Benefits, Minimizing the Risks**

Kevin Gallagher presented the concluding talk of the conference, in which he focused on research from Boston University's Global Development Policy Center that examines the benefits the risks of the BRI. He assessed the significance of the BRI in global development, particularly in terms of economic growth, infrastructure development, and energy access, and acknowledged the substantial benefits brought about by the BRI, including a significant increase in development and liquidity finance and a positive impact on economic growth in participating countries. However, he also highlighted the challenges and risks associated with the BRI, including debt distress in emerging markets, environmental concerns, and social risks, particularly in indigenous lands. In his discussion, Gallagher stressed the importance of environmental and social risk management in BRI projects, and mandatory due diligence practices to prevent negative environmental impacts and to respect cultural heritage sites. This approach is crucial for ensuring that both China and the host countries derive mutual benefits from the projects while minimizing harm. He recommended the development of green and low carbon energy projects, aligning with China's commitment to ban funding for overseas coal projects. He pointed out the need for a comprehensive strategy to support sustainable energy projects, even in countries with ongoing demands for coal energy. Gallagher also discussed the need for China to enhance its liquidity and debt management frameworks, through initiatives like the Chiang Mai Initiative and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement. There is a need to develop a new debt sustainability model to address existing financial challenges. Gallagher also stressed the crucial role of partner countries in negotiating the terms of BRI deals. Countries should try to leverage their agency in shaping the initiatives to better align with their needs and priorities.

### **Conclusion**

The conference provided a comprehensive platform for understanding the multifaceted impacts of the BRI over its first decade. The diverse array of perspectives presented by the speakers offered a holistic view of the BRI's role in shaping the global geopolitical and economic landscape.

One of the themes of the conference was the recognition of the BRI's significant role in reshaping global infrastructure and development paradigms. There was a consensus that the BRI, through its vast network of infrastructure projects, has created opportunities for connectivity and economic integration, particularly in regions that have historically been underserved in terms of infrastructure. At the same time, this acknowledgment was tempered by discussions on the challenges and concerns related to the BRI, including issues of debt sustainability, environmental impacts, and the geopolitical implications of China's increasing global influence.

The conference also highlighted the evolutionary nature of the BRI. From its initial focus on large-scale infrastructure projects, there has been a noticeable shift towards smaller projects and more sustainable, environmentally conscious initiatives, and an increased emphasis on digital connectivity. This evolution reflects a response to global trends and criticisms, indicating a level of adaptability and responsiveness within the BRI's framework.

Another key outcome of the conference was the recognition of the need for balanced engagement with the BRI. Speakers discussed the importance of collaboration between China and participating countries to ensure that the benefits of the BRI are maximized while minimizing its risks. This includes addressing concerns about debt, ensuring environmental sustainability, and respecting the autonomy and developmental needs of partner countries. As the conference concluded, it became evident that the BRI, at ten years, stands not just as a testament to China's global aspirations but also as a reflection of the changing nature of international relations. The insights gathered provide a roadmap for understanding the BRI's future trajectory, emphasizing the need for informed and collaborative global engagement with this far-reaching initiative. The BRI, at the decade mark, emerges not just as a subject of debate but as a living, evolving initiative that continues to shape and be shaped by the complex realities of the global order.

### **BRI at Ten Conference Speakers**

**Jabbar Al-Obaidi** is Professor of Communication Studies and Academic Director for International Student Recruitment at Bridgewater State University.

**M. Taylor Fravel** is the Arthur and Ruth Sloan Professor of Political Science and Director of the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

**Carla Freeman** is a Senior Expert for the China Program at the United States Institute of Peace and former Library of Congress Chair in U.S.-China relations.

**Kevin Gallagher** is Professor of Global Development Policy and Director of the Global Development Policy Center at the Pardee School at Boston University.

**Victor Gao** is Chair Professor of Soochow University and Vice President of the Center for China and Globalization in Beijing. He served as translator for CCP leader Deng Xiaoping from 1983-1988.

**Vesko Garcevic** is Professor of the Practice of International Relations at Boston University's Pardee School. He served as Montenegro's Ambassador to NATO, Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

**William Grimes** is a Professor of International Relations at the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University. He served as the founding director of the BU Center for the Study of Asia.

**Nader Habibi** is the Henry J. Leir Professor of Practice in the Economics of the Middle East at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University.

**Jorge Heine** is Research Professor and directs the Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future at Boston University. He served as Chile's Ambassador to China, India, and South Africa, and as a cabinet minister in the Chilean Government.

**Asei Ito** is Associate Professor at the Institute of Social Science at Tokyo University and Visiting Scholar at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.

**Nargis Kassenova** directs the Program on Central Asia at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.

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**Andrew R. Wilson** is Professor of Strategy and Policy and the John A. van Beuren Chair of Asia-Pacific Studies at the US Naval War College.

**Alexander Wooley** is Director of Partnerships and Communications at AidData, and international development research lab at William & Mary. He is a former British Royal Navy officer.

**Min Ye** is Professor of International Relations at the Pardee School at Boston University and Researcher in Residence at Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University.



**BRI Conference speakers, panelists, moderators, and staff (Boston University, Oct. 12, 2023)**

## PARTICIPANT BIOS

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## CONFERENCE PANELISTS AND MODERATORS:

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Carla Freeman is a Senior Expert for the China Program at the United States Institute of Peace and former Library of Congress Chair in U.S.-China relations.

Victor Gao is Chair Professor of Soochow University and Vice President of the Center for China and Globalization in Beijing. He served as translator for Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping from 1983-1988.

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## CHINA'S BELT & ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) AT TEN: The World According to China, and China According to the World



October 12-13, 2023

## Venue:

Boston University Hillel House,  
213 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215

## Co-Sponsors:

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## Co-Chairs:

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Boston University Pardee School of Global Studies  
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DAY 1: THURSDAY OCT. 12, 2023

## Schedule

1:00 REGISTRATION

1:45 CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

Grant Rhode (BU) & Kathleen (Kate) Walsh (NWC)

2:00 WELCOME

Scott Taylor (Dean of the Pardee School of Global Studies,  
Boston University)

Andrew R. Wilson (John A. van Beuren Chair of Asia-Pacific Studies,  
US Naval War College)

2:15 PANEL 1 THE BRI AT TEN: WHERE IT'S BEEN AND WHERE IT'S GOING

Grant Rhode (BU), Moderator

William Grimes (BU), Belt and Road Lessons from Japan

Min Ye (BU), From Grand to Green: BRI's Strategic Shift in China

Victor Gao (Soochow U), A Chinese Vision for the Second Decade of the BRI

Jorge Heine (BU), Global South Views of the BRI

4:00 KEYNOTE ADDRESS

David M. Lampton (SAIS), BRI: China's Big Vision and the Challenges It Faces

5:00 RECEPTION

To participate virtually in this event via Zoom, use this link  
<https://bostonu.zoom.us/j/99056405864?pwd=V3FNZ9Bdmp5R09mV0VuZnBvbWdudz09>



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DAY 2: FRIDAY OCT. 13, 2023

8:00 COFFEE AND BREAKFAST

8:45 PANEL 2: CONTINENTAL DIMENSIONS OF THE BRI

Vesko Garcevic (BU), Moderator

Nargis Kassenova (Harvard), BRI Prospects in Central Asia

Carla Freeman (USIP), BRI Prospects in South and Southeast Asia

Tsitsi Musasike (BU), BRI Prospects in Africa

Philippe LeCorre (Asia Society), BRI Prospects in Europe

10:30 BREAK

10:45 PANEL 3: MARITIME DIMENSIONS OF THE BRI

Andrew R. Wilson (NWC), Moderator

Grant Rhode (BU), Great Power Rivalry along the Historic  
Maritime Silk Road

Alexander Wooley (AidData), Chinese Ports with Military Implications

Marisol Maddox (Wilson Center), China's Polar Silk Road Strategy

Kathleen (Kate) Walsh (NWC), China's Maritime Silk Road and the Blue  
Economy

12:30 LUNCH ON PREMISES

1:30 PANEL 4: DIFFERING BRI NARRATIVES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Mark Storella (BU), Moderator

Asei Ito (U Tokyo), Belt and Road Initiative in Xi Jinping's Policy Agendas

Jabbar Al-Obaidi (Bridgewater), Global Media Coverage of China's BRI

Nader Habibi (Brandeis), Are China's BRI Investments Sensitive to

Host Country Governance Conditions?

M. Taylor Fravel (MIT), Economic Interactions and Political Influence in  
the BRI

3:15 CONCLUDING TALK

Kevin Gallagher (BU), The BRI at Ten: Maximizing the Benefits,  
Minimizing the Risks

4:15 NEXT STEPS

Kathleen (Kate) Walsh (NWC) & Grant Rhode (BU)

4:30 CONFERENCE END