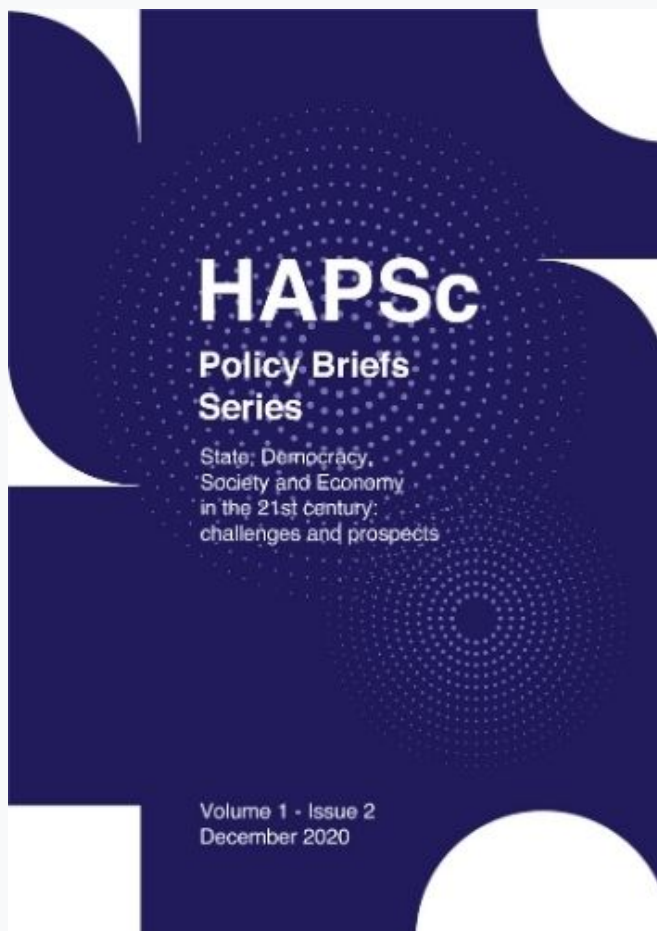


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### The Militarization of the Belt and Road Initiative

*Themistoklis Z. Zanidis*

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# The Militarization of the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>1</sup>

Themistoklis Z. Zanidis<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the potential militarization of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative which is expected to change the current balance of power in the Indo-pacific Region, Africa, Central Asia, Middle East, Europe and South America. Inevitable, such an extensive and expensive investment program, which of great economic and political importance to China, is considered to be the indicator of the country's global ambitions. Simultaneously, the military dimension of the BRI is also extremely important for China as enables it to gradually become a reliable security partner at least for developing initiative member states which do not have the resources to provide security to these infrastructures in their own territory. This is also crucial for Beijing's competitors, the European Union and especially the United States which realize that via the BRI China will be able to project military power in an extended geographical area way greater than the China Sea. Undoubtedly, for the Westerners, BRI and its potential militarization is a threat to their cohesion and global dominance.

**Keywords:** International Relations; China; USA; EU; BRI; Economy; Trade; Trade War; Competition; Policy.

## Introduction

It was no sooner than 2017 when the Chinese Armed Forces (People's Liberation Army-PLA) launch its first military base outside China's geographical borders, in remote Djibouti. This specific step signified the abandonment, in the most tangible way, of the previous country's doctrine according to which China does not place military units or establish military bases abroad (permanent military presence abroad). It is obvious that this move reflected the new role that Beijing wants to play in Global Affairs. In the context of the Chinese emergence, therefore, the country's Armed Forces had to protect its national interests across borders. In fact, as China's aspirations and, consequently its interests expand, its armed forces extend their strategic horizon respectively. Literally, the Chinese Defense White Paper in 2015 pointed out the country's maritime interests as well as the responsibility of the Chinese armed forces to protect them as one of their main tasks (The State Council Information

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<sup>2</sup> Themistoklis Z. Zanidis is political scientist/international relations specialist. He has a BA in Cultural Studies (concentration Hellenic Civilization) from the Hellenic Open University and a MSc in International and European Studies from University of Piraeus (concentration Strategic Studies). Furthermore, he is a graduate student of MA in Political Science (United Nations and Global Policy Studies) at Rutgers University in United States. He is Research Intern at the Institute of International Relations (I.D.I.S.) on the field of Strategic Culture of Greece and Turkey and Analyst at the Center for International Strategic Analyses (KEDISA).

Office of People's Republic of China, 2015)<sup>3</sup>. China's national security limits no longer attach to the country's borders but expand according to the extent of its overseas interests. However, at the present day, where exactly are these particular Chinese interests located besides of course the China Sea? Moreover, the questions remain: Will China resort to military force in order to defend the BRI? In addition, can the development of the initiative on a global scale serve as an excuse for the increased Chinese military presence abroad? Does China intend to use the BRI infrastructure to support military projection? Last but not least, what about the reaction of the Westerner powers, US and EU regarding the Chinese plans?

### **Main Considerations**

Since 2013, when it was officially announced, the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative, also known as the new Silk Road<sup>4</sup>) has been constantly expanding Chinese interests in Asia, Africa, Europe and yet in Latin America. This indicated that in any geographical area the BRI extends, the Chinese Armed Forces will inevitably follow in order to protect it. The Chinese authorities, struggling not to provoke possible reactions by the countries participating in this initiative, which already are more than 70 worldwide<sup>5</sup>, officially deny, through the Ministry of Defense, that the BRI has any geostrategic parameter. However, despite all the Chinese assurances, it is certain that this enormous investment, which has no precedent in history, will inevitably need some kind of military protection from Beijing. In effect, the nature of the BRI and its importance regarding the increasing Chinese influence worldwide and the seamless continuation of the country's development has expanded both its geographical scope and its subject matter as it now includes the Arctic (which is of particular interest to China even if it's not an Arctic state), Cyberspace but also Space.

Such a large-scaled and ambitious investment plan will necessarily face a variety of security threats. The aforementioned concern political instability, the existence of extremism, civil wars and conflicts (Libya and Yemen respectively), terrorist attacks, kidnappings from the transnational organized crime and natural disasters in many regions where the BRI operates, render BRI's safety (including project workers who are of Chinese descent as well as the numerous Chinese companies active in the

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, you can read the Chinese Defense White Paper for 2019 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> The Silk Road dates back to the Han Dynasty 2,000 years ago and was essentially a network of trade routes connecting China with the Mediterranean via Eurasia for centuries (Chatzky and McBride, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The geographical scope of the BRI is constantly expanding. It so far covers more than 70 countries, representing about 65% of the world's population and about a third of the world's gross domestic product (GDP). BRI's scope is constantly expanding to cover 138 countries, including 38 in sub-Saharan Africa and 18 in Latin America and the Caribbean (Oxford Business Group, 2020).

projects<sup>6</sup>, etc.) imperative for the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party as the aforementioned threats can adversely affect negatively the smooth growth of infrastructure projects by burdening China with additional costs which may be, due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, unbearable. Simultaneously, the traditional security threats of the Chinese initiative derive from the other Great Powers of the International System, especially the United States and their general military presence in Asia which is competitive with the Chinese interests in general.

The actual intentions of the Chinese leadership are clear regarding the extensive program to strengthen the combat readiness of the country's armed forces with a variety of modern equipment in order to be able, in the near future, to meet the increasing security demands<sup>7</sup>. The impressive growth of the Chinese arsenal, both technologically and quantitatively<sup>8</sup>, in turn intensifies the security dilemma of neighboring countries and enhances the development of a new arms race in Asia. The Chinese strategists are trying really hard to reconcile the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, China's consistent tactic of avoiding permanent alliances, with the urgent need to provide security to the BRI and the country's ever-expanding interests. The BRI, as the vanguard of Chinese interests worldwide but also as a measure of Beijing's ambition, is more likely to force the Chinese leadership to reconsider the above-mentioned principles and tactics of the country as already indicated by the moves to establish a military base abroad and the rapid modernization of the country's military capabilities (Sutton, 2020). The ways in which the Chinese leadership will choose to defend its interests overseas remain to be verified in the future.

The BRI is of great economic and political importance to Beijing as is considered to be the indicator of China's global ambitions<sup>9</sup>. Today, the military dimension of the BRI is also extremely important for China as enables it to gradually become a reliable security partner at least for developing initiative member states which do not have the resources to provide security to these infrastructures in their own territory. This is also crucial for Beijing's competitors, the European Union and especially the

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<sup>6</sup>It is estimated that as of January 2020, 2951 BRI-related projects worth \$ 3.87 trillion worldwide were planned or underway with the participation of 2630 companies. See at <https://www.refinitiv.com/en/resources/special-report/belt-and-road-initiative-bri-project-and-investment-report>

<sup>7</sup> China's military budget has been steadily rising since 1994. The increase conforms to the country's economic growth, and shows that Beijing is converting its economic power into military in order to pursue its geopolitical ambitions (Zanidis, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> China ranks at the second place with approximately \$261 billion in military expenditure, almost 1/3 of the respective American. The interesting feature in the case of China is not the 2nd place but the fact that the country already owns 14% of the global share while it shows a steady increase since 2018, equal to 5.1% as well as the amazing 85% since 2010 (Zanidis, 2020)

<sup>9</sup> The project is expected to allocate more than \$ 1 trillion in investments, mainly in the development of infrastructure for ports, roads, railways and airports, as well as power stations and telecommunications networks (5G). Research such as Morgan Stanley predicts that China's total spending on the BRI could reach \$ 1.2-1.3 trillion by 2027 (Chatzky and McBride, 2020).

United States, which previously led the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which excluded China, thus being considered the direct competitor of the BRI. For its part, the EU was very suspicious to the 2012 Chinese 16 + 1 initiative<sup>10</sup>, which involves a 10 billion € investment program in Central and Eastern Europe, as it perceived this Chinese initiative as a hidden operation to erode the cohesion of the European Union. A source of concern is the fact that many of the EU's member states are also members of NATO, while some of them at the Eastern Europe are former Soviet Republics recently turned to democracy and free economy with the result that their structures are still considered by the West vulnerable to external influence. The statement by German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel is indicative of European concern about Chinese penetration on the continent: *If we do not develop a [European] strategy on China, then China will be able to divide Europe* (Sawhney, 2018). Chancellor A. Merkel reiterated similar concerns, as well as the French President E. Macron who warned about the real aspirations of the Chinese investment plan. Furthermore, the BRI poses a threat to EU cohesion due to BREXIT as the United Kingdom seeks other sources of funding besides European with Chinese investments being enticing.

The BRI also concerns other states including the US, Australia, Japan and India which is participating in the Chinese initiative. These specific states have established the *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue* as a counterweight to the Chinese initiative (Lalwani & Byrne, 2017) in the Indo-Pacific region. However, the possible transformation of the BRI into an extended alliance, under the leadership of Beijing, and the possibility of the Chinese military deployment in various member states, in order to protect the infrastructure, are of great concern to the US and NATO military Staffs as it will mean an extensive increasing of Chinese influence on a global scale. Things are getting even worse for the Westerners as the Chinese initiative involves both EU and NATO states threatening its overall cohesion.

At this point, we will focus again on the American attitude as the two powers, United States and China, constitute the modern hegemonic dipole competing for Global hegemony. Regarding US, the BRI is nothing more than a Chinese attempt to unify all of Eurasia under its rule with incalculable consequences for the global balance of power. Modernization and expansion of the Chinese Armed Forces is part of Beijing's broader pursuit of extending its influence in Eurasia by protecting its most valuable investment but also removing US Armed Forces from Southeast Asia where their presence is significant. For the United States, China has merged its trade and military ambitions into a

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<sup>10</sup> Besides from China, it consists of Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia (EU members) as well as five Balkan states, Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

comprehensive strategy to guide its rise to World Power since President Xi himself has openly linked trade with military power, arguing that: *The implementation of the military-political integration strategy is essential condition for building integrated national strategies and strategic capabilities and for achieving the Party's goal of building a strong army in a new era* (Gjedde, 2020). In particular, the US Navy is principally concerned about Beijing's pursuit of access to various ports including Burma, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Djibouti, Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Spain, Morocco, France, Belgium and the Netherlands as it foresees a prospect rivalry for maritime control. This contains the rapid growth of the Chinese fleet, which is building modernships, at a frantic pace, in an effort to become a "Blue Water Navy" (Pharis, 2009). The US National Security Strategy identifies China as a strategic competitor (Schneider-Petsinger et al., 2019)<sup>11</sup>, but Chinese investment is welcome in many countries that do not share common interests with Washington.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the BRI is a challenge both for the states in its favor and for their competitors for different reasons. Beijing needs to balance its traditional foreign policy principles with its growing global influence. In this context, inevitably it will need to offer security to its investment, the BRI, while its policies indicate that it is moving towards this goal without provoking, at the same time, too much the neighboring states. Undoubtedly, global ambitions are not in line with any form of isolation, even a military which is something that does not go unnoticed by China's rivals, the EU and especially the US. For the Westerners, the BRI is a threat to their cohesion, as several of their member states are involved in the initiative and consequently a challenge to their interests worldwide for the time being on an economic-commercial level but probably in the future also on a military level. Hegemonic rivalry between the United States and China is already in full swing in all areas, thematically and geographically, with the BRI somehow being the Chinese siege ram threatening to overthrow US hegemony as it's expected to significantly exert Chinese influence globally and make Beijing the new superpower, erasing for good the "Century of Humiliation" from the consciences of the Chinese people. At the same time, the European Union must protect the special interests of its Member States by maintaining its cohesion, which has been hit hard by BREXIT, in consultation with the US, in order to maintain a commonly accepted front against the larger geopolitical and economic competitor. The 21st is expected to be the century of change and the EU must take the position it deserves for its size in the new international system that is gradually taking shape.

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<sup>11</sup> The United States has also been described by China as a strategic competitor as evidenced by the Department of Defense (DoD) National Defense Strategy 2018 (Mattis, 2018).

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