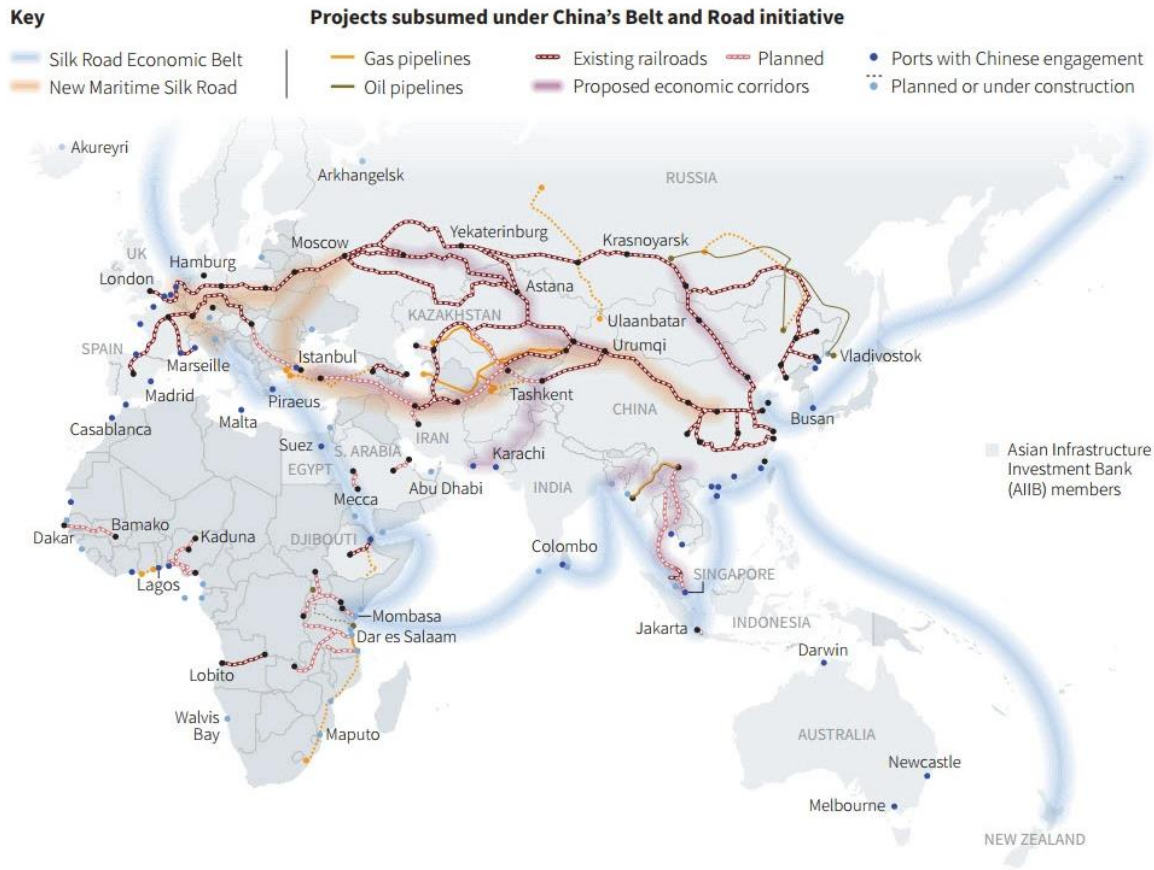


**“A CLOSE NEIGHBOR
IS BETTER THAN
A DISTANT RELATIVE”
- BELT AND ROAD
INITIATIVE: ARE WE
CLOSER AFTER 10
YEARS?**

Šárka Váchalová

On 7 September 2013 at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled the One Belt, One Road project. In his speech he said that “A close neighbor is better than a distant relative.”¹

The BRI, nicknamed the New Silk Road to some extent copies the ancient one that connected the territory of China with the Mediterranean. It is intended to link China with the countries of Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe and maritime networks. Its major priorities are policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and connecting people.²



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies.
C. Inton, 23/04/2018



¹ JIAO, Wu a Zhang YUNBI. Xi proposes a 'new Silk Road' with Central Asia [online]. 2013 [cit. 2022-12-18]. Dostupné z: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xivisitcenterasia/2013-09/08/content_16952228.htm

² Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). *European bank for Reconstruction and Development* [online]. [cit. 2022-12-18]. Dostupné z: <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>



This initiative, however, raised a lot of doubts and questions. China has been overproducing certain goods such as steel for a long time, and they could use the trail to secure an expanded market for them. Furthermore, as the largest investor in the project, it can also be assumed that infrastructure contracts will largely be awarded to Chinese companies and the building of strategic channels for oil and gas cannot be overlooked. The issue of security is also causing concern, given that the route would pass through states with unresolved borders, unresolved territorial disputes or even territory where there are armed forces.³ Professor William Laurance also points out that the belt will have serious environmental impacts. It will affect areas with important biodiversity and hundreds of endangered species.⁴

There is also talk of the so-called debt trap method in connection with the financing of the Silk Road. China is investing up to USD 8 trillion in the project through loans. This divides critics into two camps. Some argue that the route could lower trade costs, improve connectivity and pull some countries out of poverty, and then there are those who talk about China strategically creating debtors to boost its global influence. The claim is supported by the example of taking control of a strategically important port in Sri Lanka, which has been unable to repay its debt to China.⁵

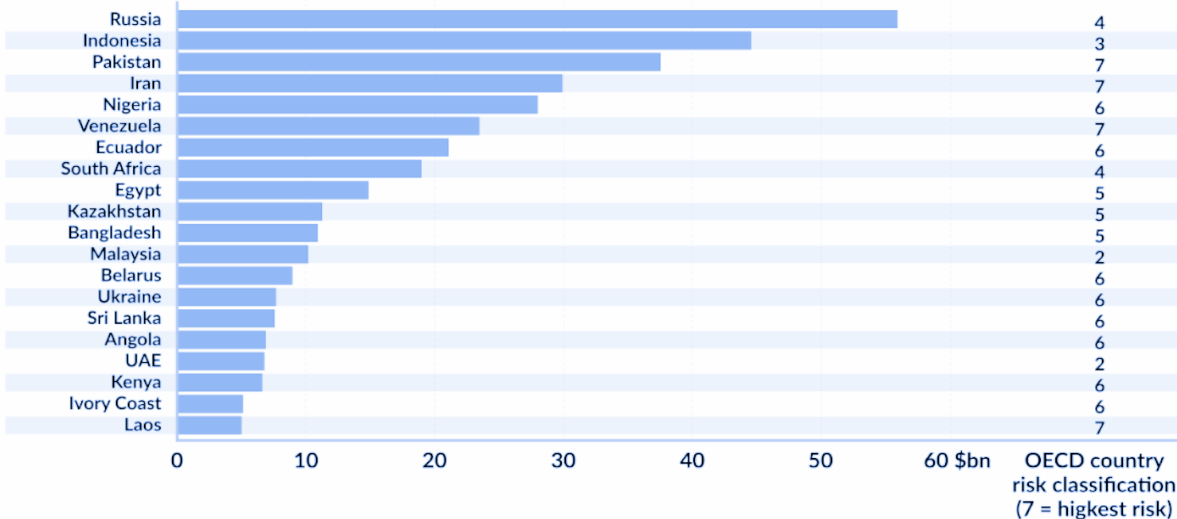
³ ZAIDI, Syed Muhammad Saad a Adam SAUD. Ascent of the dragon: China's growing role in global affairs. *Asian Journal of Political Science* [online]. 2021, (volume 29), 1-19 [cit. 2022-01-11].

⁴ LAURANCE, William F., Fernando ASCENSÃO, Lenore FAHRIG, Anthony P. CLEVINGER, Richard T. CORLETT, Jochen A. G. JAEGER a Henrique M. PEREIRA. Environmental challenges for the Belt and Road Initiative. *Nature Sustainability* [online]. 2018 [cit. 2022-12-18]. Dostupné z: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-018-0059-3>

⁵ ZAIDI, Syed Muhammad Saad a Adam SAUD. Ascent of the dragon: China's growing role in global affairs. *Asian Journal of Political Science* [online]. 2021, (volume 29), 1-19 [cit. 2022-01-11].

This theory may also be supported by the OECD assessment, which has indicated on a scale of 1-7 how risky it is to lend some countries amounts in the tens of trillions of dollars.⁶

China's high-risk loans



Source: UMBACH, FRANK. China's high-risk loans. In: *Giserport* [online]. [cit. 2022-12-18]. Dostupné z: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/belt-road-initiative/>

This was all discussed at the launch of this project. But what is happening to the belt and road initiative now? The global attention has been diverted from this project due to COVID-19 and the invasion of Ukraine, while China itself has also been affected by especially the former through draconian lockdowns and zero-COVID policy. Sanctions against Russia and rising energy prices are another problem. The five-year plan to reduce carbon emissions makes China all the more dependent on gas imports, the situation is unfavorable that the plan was

⁶ UMBACH, FRANK. How China's Belt and Road Initiative is faring. In: *Giserport* [online]. [cit. 2022-12-18]. Dostupné z: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/belt-road-initiative/>



temporarily suspended at meetings of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference⁷.

In President Xi Jinping's speeches, talk of the initiative is slowly starting to fade away. This articulation is beginning to morph into speeches about progress in high-quality Belt and Road cooperation. ⁸It is expected that there will be an expansion of the BRI, but only if it adapts to international criticism and changes a lot of things⁹. This progress could hint at the 2019 promise China made to keep BRI investments open, green and clean. In Xi Jinping speech regarding green and clean BRI he talked about: "Building high-quality, sustainable, risk-resistant, reasonably priced, and inclusive infrastructure will help countries to fully utilize their resource endowments"¹⁰. In 2021, it backed up this promise by issuing guidelines for green development of foreign investment and cooperation, as well as guidelines for environmental and ecological protection of foreign investment cooperation and construction projects. All these promises are overseen by around 20 institutions, including the UN and its Environment Programme. They agree that it is crucial that the BRI does not undermine the environment and advocate that social and environmental safeguards are in place. In particular, they are working to ensure that assistance is provided to countries receiving investments for the initiative and to ensure that the BRI is environmentally sustainable. At the same time, the UN will also work directly with its Chinese counterparts to promote these investments. A Belt and Road Initiative international Green Development Coalition has also been established precisely for policy dialogues, key communications, sharing knowledge, data and analysis related to environmental protection,

⁷ ENDRESEN, Janice. War in Ukraine and Its Impact on the Chinese Economy. *Cornell SC Johnson College of Business* [online]. 2022 [cit. 2023-01-11]. Dostupné z: <https://business.cornell.edu/hub/2022/04/19/war-ukraine-impact-chinese-economy/>

⁸ BRÎNZĂ, Andreea. What Happened to the Belt and Road Initiative?. In: *The diplomat* [online]. [cit. 2022-12-18]. Dostupné z: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/what-happened-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>

⁹ UMBACH, FRANK. How China's Belt and Road Initiative is faring. In: *Giserport* [online]. [cit. 2022-12-18]. Dostupné z: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/belt-road-initiative/>

¹⁰ *China's Xi says Belt and Road must be green, sustainable* [online]. 2019 [cit. 2022-12-22]. Dostupné z: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-idUSKCN1S104I>

pollution, green development and many other topics.¹¹ Whether those safeguards and declaratory commitments will translate into active environmental and climate protection remains to be seen – and will, if China’s general modus operandi is anything to go by, only materialise should it be profitable to do so.

Although Xi Jinping no longer talks so much about the BRI, it is still very likely that China will try to maintain the initiative despite the fact that some of their plans for railways in Asia, for example, have been thwarted by the war in Ukraine. The BRI is still a very important project in terms of power struggles and the expansion of influence in the world.¹²

The IMF and the World Bank do not share such optimism. This is due to the vision of competition in the new Asian Bank for Infrastructure, which is in the process of financing large projects such as the BRI and also now includes 103 member states. The United States has taken a firm stance against the BRI. This linked to the fact that their position of power could suffer, given that the strategic partners for the BRI are European and Asian states as it aims to connect the Eurasian continent.¹³

¹¹ The Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC). *UN environment programme* [online]. [cit. 2023-01-11]. Dostupné z: <https://www.unep.org/regions/asia-and-pacific/regional-initiatives/belt-and-road-initiative-international-green>

¹² UMBACH, FRANK. How China’s Belt and Road Initiative is faring. In: *Giserport* [online]. [cit. 2022-12-18]. Dostupné z: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/belt-road-initiative/>

¹³ LARSEN, Fred. What Does the Belt and Road Initiative Mean for the Future of the International Integration System?. *Harvard International Review* [online]. 2021 [cit. 2023-01-06]. Dostupné z: <https://hir.harvard.edu/what-does-the-belt-and-road-initiative-mean-for-the-future-of-the-international-integration-system/>

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