

# The Geotechnical Imaginary of the Belt and Road: Mobilising Imaginative Labour

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## Abstract

What is the Belt and Road? Academics, pundits and policymakers have offered divergent answers ranging from a grand geostrategic gambit to an incoherent frenzy of sub-state commercial opportunism, from an inward-looking hinterland development strategy to the building of a global “community of common destiny for mankind”, and from an overflow of industry to a vacuous propaganda slogan. While there is evidence to support each of these arguments, this long and growing list lacks an integrative framework that could shed light on the relationships among the individual phenomena. This article offers a step in this direction, drawing from science and technology studies. It contends that these disparate perspectives on the BRI can be integrated into an understanding of the BRI as a geotechnical imaginary – a collectively imagined form of global life and order reflected in the design and performance of specific technological projects. This perspective foregrounds how China’s party-state’s capacious BRI slogan has mobilised imaginings – both affirmatory and oppositional – on a global scale. These shared imaginings, with divergent normative implications, suggest a broadening of the existing concept of socio-technical imaginaries.

**Keywords:** China, Belt and Road, geopolitics, imaginative labour, sociotechnical imaginaries

I wisely started with a map, and made the story fit [. . .]. The other way about lands one in confusions and impossibilities. (J.R.R. Tolkien)

## Introduction

What is the Belt and Road? Since late 2013, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has touted the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “New Maritime Silk Road” as a visionary, globe-spanning infrastructure and connectivity program. Academics, pundits and policymakers have offered divergent explanations, ranging from a grand geostrategic plan to dominate Eurasia to an incoherent product of sub-state bargaining and opportunism, from a provincial hinterland develop-

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ment strategy to the construction of a “community of common destiny for mankind”, from an overflow of excess industrial capacity to a vacuous propaganda slogan.<sup>1</sup> There is evidence to support each of these arguments, but the long and growing list lacks an integrative axis that could shed light on the relationships among the diverse phenomena that comprise the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This article makes a modest step in this direction, drawing from science and technology studies (STS). It proposes that many of these disparate views can be integrated into an understanding of the BRI as a geotechnical imaginary – a collectively imagined form of global life and order reflected in the design and performance of technological projects. This global BRI imaginary reflects how the PRC party-state has mobilised imagination on both a national and global scale. However, in contrast with standard understandings of “socio-technical imaginaries” (Jasanoff / Kim 2009, Jasanoff 2015), the normative implications of the BRI imaginary have been sharply contested, lurching between utopia and dystopia.

The PRC’s Belt and Road has been a remarkable success in leveraging the imaginative energies of both Chinese and international intellectual and economic actors. Many areas of contemporary Chinese policymaking have reflected this development, with the party leadership putting forward broad, capacious slogans that invite lower-level agencies, societal actors and even international audiences to fill in the blanks. In the 1980s the party used airy maxims such as “Development is the overriding principle” and “Cross the river by feeling the stones” to mobilise local economic experimentation (Huang 2008). Such slogans set a general overall goal while inducing lower-level actors to imagine ways of moving in that direction based on local conditions. This process of top-down/bottom-up interplay, which Yuen Yuen Ang (2016) encapsulates as “directed improvisation”, has been a highly effective means of mobilising and harnessing imaginative labour in China’s domestic context. Contrary to critics who argue that Beijing’s BRI sloganeering has lacked coherence (Jones / Zeng 2019, Ye 2019, Zeng 2020), this paper argues that the unleashing of such imaginative energies of audiences both at home and abroad has been a core element of the campaign.

However, the PRC’s success in mobilising imaginative labour does not imply that individual BRI projects will succeed, nor that the campaign overall will achieve its multifarious goals. As existing works on the BRI have highlighted, these likely include preserving Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule at home, alleviating industrial overcapacity issues (particularly in construction), developing China’s western hinterland and expanding Beijing’s geostrategic influence abroad. But mobilising forces of imagination on a global scale carries risks that have not been present in the PRC’s domestic context. Unlike within China’s borders, where the ruling party’s supreme political authority has enabled

1 Cf. Yu 2017, Gibson / Lee 2018, Jones / Zeng 2019, Hillman 2018, Zeng 2016.

the party-state to both suppress oppositional imaginings and also to nip nascent economic crises in the bud, the BRI's geotechnical imaginary is a co-creation of both Chinese and foreign actors operating in a world of intensifying hegemonic contestation. This leaves Beijing struggling to control the BRI imaginary's basic normative content and calls into question its ability to cultivate the "directed improvisation" so integral to the PRC's economic success at home.

The paper begins by reviewing the literature on the BRI, highlighting a schism between geostrategic and domestic political accounts of its nature and the more recent emergence of works examining the BRI as a process. Next, it outlines the theoretical framework of "sociotechnical imaginaries", identifying their key features and utility as analytic constructions, and distinguishing the BRI as a geotechnical rather than sociotechnical imaginary. The third section traces the mobilising visions of the BRI – and its component parts, the "New Silk Road Economic Belt" and "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" – via examination of the PRC party-state's key official statements and documents on the subject. Deploying textual analyses of publications from think tanks, organisations and governments on the BRI, together with convenience samples of popular BRI imagery derived from leading internet search engines, the fourth and fifth sections detail the responses of the PRC and overseas actors who have co-produced a BRI imaginary that envisages the PRC as a techno-civilisational hub from which infrastructures of capitalist connectivity radiate.

## Belt and Road Studies – an overview

Studies of the BRI can be divided into three broad categories. One line of analysis, termed here the *strategic BRI* literature, approaches the BRI as a top-down strategy to boost the PRC's global influence with the ultimate goal of building a hegemonic order with the PRC at the top and centre. The second, termed here *domestic BRI* interpretations, views the BRI as a product of internal political priorities, contradictions and processes of contestation, emphasising its uncoordinated implementation, its economic drivers and ultimately non-strategic aspects. A third line of analysis, termed here *BRI-as-process*, has viewed the BRI as a process of interaction between high-level political initiative and lower-level responses, innovations and – the focus of this article – imagination.

Strategic BRI perspectives broadly share the view that the BRI is designed to achieve international political influence. Hong Yu (2017: 356, 367), for example, argues that the BRI represents the PRC's "aspirations for global ascendancy" by "leveraging its financial power and strong manufacturing and infrastructure development capacity". Flynt Leverett and Wu Bingbing (2017) describe it more broadly as a product of China's "grand strategy", meaning the concerted

mobilisation of the state's military, economic and cultural resources for geo-strategic goals. Daniel Kliman and Abigail Grace (2018: 1) take it as a "power play" aimed at realising "Beijing's emerging vision – a world defined by great power spheres of influence, rigged economic interactions, and ascendant authoritarianism". The PRC party-state's own propaganda initially referred to the Belt and Road as a "strategy", though as shown below this was soon replaced with the more semantically indeterminate "initiative".

A closely related lens is that of economic statecraft, or the use of economic inducements and punishments for international political goals (Baldwin 1985). This line of argument points to the BRI as an exercise in the deployment of infrastructure and finance for strategic gain. Proponents of this view point to the potential for PRC infrastructure, especially information and communication systems, to result in long-term dependency and political vulnerability of recipient countries (Kliman / Grace 2018). In the area of finance, critics argue that the BRI constitutes a deliberate campaign of "debt-trap diplomacy" (Chellaney 2017). This argument has mainly relied on the case of the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, which was transferred to PRC state-owned enterprises in 2018 after the Sri Lankan side was unable to keep up with repayments (Kliman / Grace 2018: 9).

Domestic BRI analyses also come in two broad variations, one emphasising China's economic imbalances, the other domestic political contestation. First, it has been argued that the BRI's infrastructure projects reflect the imperatives of correcting regional underdevelopment and deploying excess industrial capacity and capital – a "spatial fix" for issues of Chinese capitalism (Harvey 2001, Sum 2019). John Gibson and Chao Lee (2018) note that major economic investments are most likely in areas of China's western hinterland, which have long been a priority of the central leadership. Raffaello Pantucci and Sarah Lain (2017: 17–29) detail how the BRI addresses domestic insecurity issues, particularly over Xinjiang. The BRI also stands to help address internal imbalances in the PRC economy, particularly industrial overcapacity. Consistent with this domestic-first motivation, Jonathan Hillman's (2018) analysis of the location of 173 PRC infrastructure projects announced between 2013 and 2017 found little correlation with the transnational geographic corridors that officially comprise the BRI.

Domestic political contestation has also been central in numerous analyses of the BRI. Adopting state transformation theory's emphasis on sub-state competition among capitalist interests, Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng (2019) highlight the influence of various domestic Chinese actors' lobbying efforts and narrowly self-interested reinterpretations of the BRI's geography and nature. They present evidence of diverse competing interests that the central agencies in Beijing have struggled to coordinate, resulting in the BRI "unfolding in a fragmented, incoherent fashion" (Jones / Zeng 2019: 1416). Among the strongest evidence for this

interpretation is the fact that the lead agency for the project, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), has repeatedly been overruled or had its preferences disregarded, for instance in the designation of the BRI as an “initiative” rather than a “strategy” and in the BRI’s global scope, as against the NDRC’s preference for specific lists of involved countries.

Yet both the geostrategic and domestic politics interpretations are incomplete, as they fail to account for each other’s empirical observations. Baogang He (2018) notes the paradox of the BRI’s being both strategic and uncoordinated at the same time. Similar potential contradictions abound: How can it be both historical and futuristic? State-led and market-driven? Networked and hierarchical? Sinocentric and all-inclusive?

A third line of analysis has begun to wrestle with such contradictions by focusing on the BRI as a process. In particular, scholars have identified the importance of interplay between Chinese central leaders’ strategic intentions and sub-state actors’ narrowly self-interested responses. Min Ye (2019: 697), for example, argues that the BRI illustrates the nexus of a top-down “mobilization campaign” and “subnational and corporate actors improv[ing] projects and programs that serve their own economic interests”. The targets of such mobilisation – and thus the direct implementers of the policy – are state-owned enterprises, financiers and local governments (Ye 2019: 699). In performing the implementation of the BRI these actors have considerable scope to shape what the BRI actually is.

In a similar vein, Astrid Nordin and Mikael Weissmann (2018) examine how Chinese intellectual elites have imagined the BRI, highlighting the apparently productive interplay of global networked capitalism and China as a national unit in the PRC elites’ future-oriented discourses. Based on interviews with PRC scholars, they find a consensus among Chinese researchers that envisions the BRI as both “government-led” and “market-driven” (Nordin / Weissmann 2018: 240). Nordin and Weissman draw attention to the paradox of China’s communist party-state being imagined as a source of future global capitalism – a form of imagining that, as this article will show, has been shared by numerous international organisations.

Jinghan Zeng (2020) approaches the BRI’s top-down/bottom-up interplay as an example of CCP “slogan politics”. While the primary impetus for such slogans is Xi Jinping’s political power, Zeng argues, the processes they set in motion serve three other purposes: stimulating action by constituencies (such as those described by Ye); persuading domestic and international target audiences; and mobilising intellectual support to fill the empty-vessel concepts with concrete meanings. Building on the latter insight, this article will show how involvement in this process of imaginative labour, and subsequent feedback into the content of the original vision, is not limited to Chinese domestic constituencies.

Following Maximilian Mayer and Dániel Balazs (2018), this paper draws on the concept of imaginaries as used in STS to develop lines of enquiry that this “BRI-as-process” literature has not yet fully explored. This opens up a new interpretation of the BRI as a “geotechnical imaginary”, a dynamic and influential collective imagining that extends well beyond the PRC’s borders, and whose normative implications are sharply contested, even as its underlying visions are shared. This foregrounds the performance of imaginative labour in the production of the BRI imaginary – from economic actors that signal loyalty to Xi by reimagining their own priorities through the lens of Xi’s “Belt and Road” slogan politics, to the international organisations that see in the BRI an opportunity to advance preferred reform agendas, to foreign governments and analysts who leverage the same BRI visions to warn of an impending Sinocentric techno-dystopian future.

## Imaginaries, sociotechnical and geotechnical

The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries refers to processes of collective imagining that constitute societies’ relationships with technologies. Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim (2009: 120) defined sociotechnical imaginaries as

collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfilment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects. [ ... ] Imaginaries, in this sense, at once describe attainable futures and prescribe futures that states believe ought to be attained.

The concept thus focuses attention to how these collective imagining processes have effects on technological policies and practices, which in turn feed back into the process of collective imagining in a process of “co-production”.

Sociotechnical imaginaries have offered an explanation for variation across different states’ and societies’ relationships with particular technologies, or in a single society’s relationship with technology over time. In their paradigmatic case study, Jasanoff and Kim compared the prevailing visions of nuclear power in American and South Korean societies, arguing that variation in such sociotechnical imaginaries produced significantly different outcomes in the relationship between the technology and society. In the US case, where nuclear technology was widely imagined as a threat, the state’s proper role was one of regulation and containment. In Korea, by contrast, where nuclear technology was imagined as a source of development, the state’s proper role was to unleash the technology’s economic potential (Jasanoff / Kim 2009).

Within this original “nation-specific” formulation, the influence of sociotechnical imaginaries could help explain cross-national divergences in a range of policy areas such as genome sequencing, surveillance and nanotechnology.

But many more examples of sociotechnical imaginaries come into view if the “nation-specific” element of the original definition is relaxed (Jasanoff 2015: 4). Utopian and dystopian visions put forward by future-oriented fiction writers like Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* and George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* introduced visions that have profoundly shaped imaginings of the society-technology nexus across borders and generations. Politicians, corporations, activists, legislatures and courts have also helped bring particular visions of future technology to collective prominence. But while competing *visions* proliferate, Jasanoff (2015: 4) emphasises it is only in their communal adoption that they become *imaginaries*.

Jasanoff (2015: 20) has carefully distinguished sociotechnical imaginaries from other alternative concepts. Sociotechnical imaginaries are less specifically goal-directed and institutionally accountable than plans or policies, though they may help explain them. Nor are sociotechnical imaginaries “master narratives” concerning immutable pasts – rather, imaginaries are primarily about the changeable future. Nor are they media frames: imaginaries are more concrete, being associated with “active exercises of state power, such as the selection of development priorities, allocation of funds, investment in material infrastructure, and acceptance or suppression of political dissent” (Jasanoff / Kim 2009: 123).

A key analytic payoff of the concept of the sociotechnical imaginary is its conceptualisation of imagination as a “cultural resource” and “an organized field of social practices” that states and other actors can shape to real-world effect (Jasanoff / Kim 2009: 122, Jasanoff 2015: 8). It offers a way of understanding how collective imaginings – as distinct from the individual visions of brilliant individual scientists, inventors, thinkers, artists or dreamers – impact, and are impacted by, real-world phenomena in a process of “co-production”. As Mayer and Balazs (2018: 205) have shown, applying the lens of sociotechnical imaginaries to the BRI reveals how “seeing, planning, and strategizing the future of Eurasia already affects the present, even before the promised investments in the countries along the modern Silk Road materialize”.

How exactly “imaginative labour” is mobilised as a resource is a subject requiring further research. At least three general mechanisms are plausible. For David Graeber (2006) it is structural violence – the systematic threat of force – that compels the powerless to perform “interpretive labour” that enables the maintenance of social relations. But while the Chinese party-state’s coercive power certainly structures the process of collective imaginings within the PRC’s borders, the BRI case also suggests that material inducements and bureaucratic-organisational practices can generate imaginative labour. As Arjun Appadurai (1996: 31) observed, “the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense of labor and of culturally organized practice)”. In the case examined here, imaginative labour appears to have primarily

been generated through a combination of eye-watering financial inducements and light-touch organisational orchestration (Reilly 2021).

But the BRI imaginary examined here also poses challenges to the standard concept of sociotechnical imaginaries. For Jasanoff (2015: 4) it is the *communal* adoption of visions of *desirable* futures that constitutes imaginaries. Yet shared visions of the future can transcend national borders, in the process acquiring geopolitical dimensions. As this article will show, there is no shortage of commonality in the BRI imaginations of its key proponent, the PRC party-state, and its opponents, whose fears often centre precisely on the same imagined future. This indicates how, when visions of the society-technology nexus spread beyond national borders, their communal adoption may produce imaginaries with sharply disjointed normative significance and an even greater multiplicity of meanings (Kim 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Mayer and Balazs's (2018) detailed study of Chinese BRI cartography emphasised the distinctiveness of the PRC's collective imagining of global futures centred on Eurasia – particularly when compared with competing visions found in India. In contrast, this article focuses on the convergence in the imaginings shared by Chinese and international actors. Rather than a sociotechnical imaginary driving towards a desirable future, the BRI imaginary examined here is akin to Appadurai's (1996) idea of global imaginaries as constituted by a series of "scapes" whose fundamentally common (global) content nonetheless appears differently depending on one's vantage point. Law (2002: 3) describes such processes of collective imagining as "fractional": neither singular nor plural; coherent but without forming a consistent whole.

Jasanoff (2015: 4–5) defends the privileging of "desirable" futures in the definition of sociotechnical imaginaries by observing that "efforts to build new sociotechnical futures are typically grounded in positive visions of social progress". But even if this is so as a general rule, the BRI imaginary examined here offers an illuminating counterexample. It shows how, where sociotechnical and geopolitical visions of the future intersect – and interact – on a global scale, they can be communally adopted without entailing a common normative significance. I term this transnational but fractional and normatively contested vision of a geopolitical-technological future a "geotechnical imaginary": a collectively imagined form of *global* life and *global* order reflected in the design and performance of technological projects.

The remainder of the article examines the BRI as constituted by these processes of collective imagining both within and beyond China. It starts with the PRC party-state, whose leader Xi Jinping, I argue, consciously initiated the process of collective imagining from the top of the party-state apparatus. The focus then turns to Chinese policymakers, intellectuals and economic actors

2 It follows logically that either imaginaries are not singular but multiplicitous, per Appadurai 1996, Law 2002 and Kim 2015, or they are in general nationally bounded, per the original Jasanoff / Kim 2009 definition.

whose imaginative labour was integral in turning a largely empty slogan into a shared but multiplicitous transnational imaginary. The third section examines how the co-imaginings of foreign political, economic and policy actors have made the BRI a global, normatively contested, shared vision of a geotechnical futurescape.

## The official BRI: mobilising imagination

The BRI vision originated in late 2013 with a pair of speeches by Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping introducing, respectively, the idea of a land-based “Silk Road Economic Belt” and a seaborne “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. This was followed up at a central party work meeting on “peripheral diplomacy” (周边外交) in October 2013, at which Xi listed the two as part of China’s policy towards Central and Southeast Asia. By mid-December, officials such as Foreign Minister Wang Yi had begun using the shorthand “One Belt, One Road” (一带一路) in public comments (Zhang / Yang 2013). This marked the synthesis of Xi’s two speeches into a single “Belt and Road”. Below, I argue the content of the two speeches clearly suggests that mobilising imagination was a key goal of Xi himself.

### Xi’s speeches: exhortation, evocation and exemplars

The first reference to the “belt” can be traced to Xi’s speech at Kazakhstan’s top university on 7 September 2013. Prefaced by an exhortation to “expand regional cooperation with a more open mind and broader vision to achieve new glories”, the speech introduced the concept of a “Silk Road Economic Belt”:

To forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region, we should take an innovative approach and jointly build a Silk Road Economic Belt. This will be a great undertaking benefitting the people of all countries along the route.

According to Xi, the Belt was home to 3 billion people, “the biggest market in the world, with unparalleled potential”.

The “great undertaking” was to play out in five areas: policy coordination, road connections, unimpeded trade, monetary circulation, and people-to-people understanding. Far from narrowing the scope or giving the vision concrete definition, these “Five Connectivities” (五个畅通) reinforced the capaciousness of Xi’s vision, expanding its scope from economic activity to cover a broad set of sociopolitical policies.

Four weeks later, in a speech in Jakarta on 2 October 2013, Xi proposed the construction of a “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. This virtually doubled

the geographical scope to cover not only the transcontinental Eurasia-Africa landmass, but also the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean maritime spaces in between.

While Xi's Silk Road exhortations prominently referenced "ancient times", the speeches not only acknowledged the enormous gap between current reality and the vision of the future, they actively emphasised it. In Astana, Xi explicitly stated: "To turn this into a reality, we may start with work in individual areas and link them up over time to cover the whole region." In Jakarta Xi described the Maritime Silk Road as requiring a "joint effort to build", using the occasion to announce an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to fund relevant projects.

Some observers have characterised the expansion of the BRI's geographic scope as a function of domestic and international lobbying that took advantage of Xi's attempt to build domestic legitimacy through grandiose sloganeering (Jones / Zeng 2019). But the above observations indicate that the expansive, flexible and progressively growing scope of the BRI was present in its initiator's vision from the beginning. Indeed, since the initial pair of speeches, Xi has continuously affirmed the "open and inclusive" (开放包容) nature of the BRI. As Xi told the Bo'ao Forum in March 2015: "It is not closed but open and inclusive; it is not a solo by China (中国一家的独奏), but a chorus (合唱) of the countries along the route (沿线国家)." Such comments suggest that the BRI was from the beginning intended to be more than an assertion of individual political supremacy. It was, rather, a conscious invitation to Chinese and foreign actors to unleash imagination and envision a world of comprehensive technological and political connectedness, with the PRC at the centre.

Xi's choice of historical imagery also consistently referenced a Sinocentric past, on both land and sea. At the 2017 BRI Summit meeting in Beijing, Xi exhorted participants to reprise the "glory of the ancient silk routes" in surmounting geographical distance. There is little doubt that such sloganeering was intended in part to legitimise Xi's own authority at home and to generally assert the benign nature of its current political regime abroad. But the historical imagery also serves an arguably even more important function in mobilising imaginations through exemplars. Xi's 2017 BRI Summit speech began by invoking a rollcall of specific ancient characters whose diplomacy, trade and learning had, he said, embodied the "Silk Road Spirit". The elevation of such exemplars has been a hallmark of the PRC's campaign-style governance since before it took power in 1949 (Li 1994). Exemplars are designed to stimulate the target constituencies' activities by offering concrete demonstrations of how to implement the party's goals to real-world action. Xi's own words indicated that such a methodology of mobilisation was once again in play – this time both within and beyond China's borders.

Further evidence of the kind of response Xi sought has emerged in subsequent speeches by the CCP General Secretary. In 2018, at a domestic symposium mark-

ing the fifth anniversary of the BRI, Xi used a Chinese painting analogy to announce a transition in the focus of BRI work from “broad freehand” (大写意) to “meticulous brushwork” (工笔画) – that is, away from freewheeling creativity, towards controlled specific action (Xinhua 2018). Ang (2019) argues that this was a sign that the BRI had failed to achieve its practical goals. However, Xi’s retrospective analogy to traditional freehand painting equally suggested Xi’s BRI sloganeering had, to that point, been significantly oriented towards mobilising imagination and creativity.

## PRC official announcements

Two years after Xi’s speeches, the NDRC, the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) laid out more concretely the “great undertakings” that Xi had flagged. Clarifying the BRI’s scope was a prime task of a document the three agencies issued in March 2015 under the title *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* (推动共建丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路的愿景与行动). Yet, the document did not specify the extent of the BRI, and instead explicitly reinforced its geographical indeterminacy: “It covers, but is not limited to, the area of the ancient Silk Road.”

The *Vision and Actions* document also elaborated on the purposes of the “open and inclusive” designation. According to the document, the BRI

accommodates the interests and concerns of all parties involved, and seeks a conjunction of interests and the “biggest common denominator” for cooperation so as to give full play to the wisdom and creativity, strengths and potentials of all parties. [...] It is a pluralistic and open process of cooperation which can be highly flexible, and does not seek conformity.

Shortly after the release of the *Vision and Actions*, PRC policy banks began announcing financial support for BRI participation. In June 2015, for example, the China Development Bank announced more than \$890 billion to be poured into Belt and Road projects (He 2015). Crucially, while the figures were astronomical, very little prescription was made as to the specific purpose of such funds. At the 2017 BRI summit Xi announced a further 480 billion RMB in finance, and “encourage[ment]” of financial institutions to conduct a further 300 billion in RMB transactions. The deliberate lack of specificity ensured that actors responding to these eye-catching financial incentives would need to mobilise their imaginations in order to access the material benefits. The rhetoric of “openness” and “not seek[ing] conformity” showed that this was intentional.

One component that the *Vision and Actions* document did specify, however, was the BRI’s geopolitical content. Cooperation was to occur “on the basis of respecting each other’s sovereignty and security concerns”. First among the Chinese regions mentioned was Xinjiang, indicating the importance of developing the restive province as part of PRC state security strategy. The *Vision and Actions*

document also called for “creating an Information Silk Road”, an idea with clear techno-political implications associated with the adoption of PRC information technology. This announcement marked the beginning of the idea of a “Digital Silk Road” comprising enhanced internet and communication links emerging from the PRC along the paths of the ancient silk routes. This stands to provide connectivity infrastructure such as fibre optic cables to recipient countries, as well as the potential for PRC modes of internet governance to be adopted by local governments or utilised by PRC actors (Mozur et al. 2019).

The PRC party-state agencies’ preferred mode of implementation of BRI cooperation has been the signing of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs). The primary purpose of such non-binding “soft law” documents is to affirm cooperative intent without generating binding commitments. As Jack Nolan and Wendy Leutert (2020) explain, this “enables each side to flexibly tailor commitments based on circumstances particular to a given time and place”. Such MoUs are understandings to actively dedicate imaginative energies towards integrating the parties’ own agendas into the BRI framework.

Many critics have observed inconsistencies in the official presentation of the BRI. The English-language name vacillated from “One Belt One Road” to “Belt and Road”, and its nature from “strategy” to “initiative”. For authors in the domestic BRI school, these changing characterisations are indicative of a chaotic and un-strategic process of sub-state competition (e.g. Zeng 2020). Yet the party-state’s eventual firm choice of “initiative” (倡议) as the official descriptor does not only reflect its concern that “strategy” could amplify foreign threat perceptions; “initiative” also implies a recognition that the BRI’s eventual form and content would depend on the interpretations – imaginings – of other actors, both Chinese and foreign. This is precisely what has occurred, and the result has been the formation of the collective, transnational BRI imaginary.

To summarise, the PRC party-state’s most authoritative pronouncements on the BRI indicate that a primary goal was to mobilise the imaginative capacities of lower-level institutions and individuals. The combination of capacious vagueness and evocative imagery was accompanied by explicit, materially incentivised invitations to a variety of domestic and international audiences to start filling in the blanks: these ranged from foreign governments and international organisations to local PRC authorities and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), intellectuals and private entrepreneurs. Given this diverse array of target audiences, it was inevitable that the imaginings produced would diverge in important ways and eventually require adjustment – as in the cycles of “directed improvisation” that produced the co-evolution of the PRC state and economy at home (Ang 2016). However, the BRI imaginary has been a co-creation of actors both Chinese and foreign, many located beyond the locus of the PRC’s formal political authority. As the next two sections show, their various BRI imaginings converge

around a vision of a geotechnical future focused on the PRC, but diverge sharply on its desirability.

## Chinese BRI imaginings

General Secretary Xi and the party-state's pronouncements inspired an exponential proliferation of BRI imagery positioning China in the role of a techno-civilisational hub of infrastructure, connectivity and development. Many if not most PRC provinces, prefectures, think tanks, universities and other organisations in China have established a BRI programme and plans (Pantucci / Lain 2017: 51). The party-state's capacious BRI visions mobilised a massive undertaking of research and analysis to fill in the blanks in the concept, while provincial and local governments jostled to position themselves as part of the BRI's geographic scope, and state-owned enterprises and other economic actors have expanded its scope (Zeng 2020). This domestic BRI imaginary has overwhelmingly projected normatively desirable futures based around a coherent, benign PRC bringing state-led capitalist development to the globe.

### Popular imagery

The geotechnical, as opposed to more narrowly sociotechnical, nature of the BRI imaginary is evident first of all in popular imagery. Image search results from China's leading internet search engine, Baidu, are reproduced in Figure 1. Such search results are influenced by the search engine's largely opaque algorithms, which are believed to customise results on the basis of factors such as the user's location, search history and past browsing behaviour, but also the level of user engagement that the content generates. Thus, while the results are neither representative nor replicable, they offer a convenient indicative illustration of how the BRI has been visualised for, and among, China's online population. As of 2018, internet users included more than 60 percent of the total PRC population.<sup>3</sup>

A key feature of the top Baidu results collected is the tight commonality of images, revolving first around maps and then images of technological infrastructure. In the maps, linkages radiate outward from China across the globe, often accompanied by references to the historical narrative of a China-centred trading order. Among the first 20 images collected in 2018, three quarters were world maps, while most of the remainder were Silk Road references and images of Xi Jinping. Within the first 100 images a second key theme, modern technology – overwhelmingly transport infrastructure – rises to prominence.

3 See [https://datacommons.org/place/country/CHN?utm\\_medium=explore&mprop=count&popt=Person&cpv=isInternetUser%2CTrue&hl=en](https://datacommons.org/place/country/CHN?utm_medium=explore&mprop=count&popt=Person&cpv=isInternetUser%2CTrue&hl=en) (accessed 21 September 2022).

Table 1: Thematic breakdown of first 100 “Belt and Road” images on Baidu Image search, compiled by author, September 2018 (images can contain more than one theme; see Appendix for data and coding).

theme	first 100 images		first 20 images	
world map	40	40 %	15	75 %
technology	28	28 %	0	0 %
domestic China maps	9	9 %	0	0 %
historical Silk Road imagery	8	8 %	2	10 %
PRC party-state / leaders	10	10 %	2	10 %



Figure 1: Top 20 Baidu Image search results for “Belt and Road” (一带一路). Screenshots collected by author, 26 September 2018.

A third key feature of this popular online BRI imagescape is its encoded exceptionalism. Consistent with Mayer and Balazs’s (2018: 210) study of Chinese BRI maps, most of the online cartographic depictions of the BRI set China apart from an otherwise undifferentiated Eurasian landmass, while decentring Europe and excluding North America. This is evident first of all in the colouring or shading of China on the maps. However, China’s exceptional status is also implicit in the themes of desert imagery and camel trains, which project the

past glory of Chinese empires inspiring traders from distant, peripheral, locales to undertake arduous expeditions to reach the centre of world civilisation. In short, the breakdown of themes encoded in these popular online images suggests how, in popular imagination within China, the BRI has been constituted as a nexus of geography, technology and politics.

## Intellectual response

The party-state's initial vision-setting mobilisations prompted an enormous intellectual undertaking to fill in its blanks. As Zeng (2020: 84) notes, China's National Social Science Foundation funded hundreds of research projects on the subject. Figure 2 vividly illustrates the explosion in the number of articles with "Belt and Road" in the title in China's leading academic database.

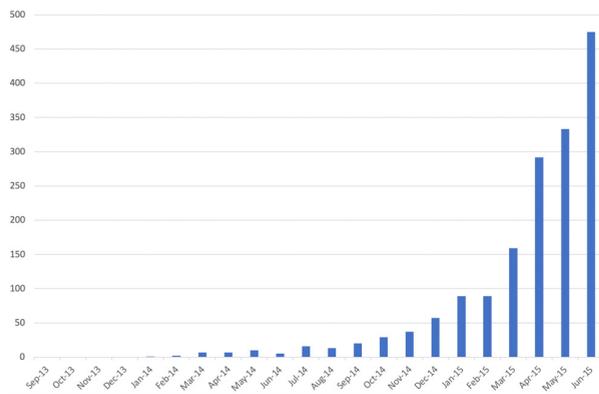


Figure 2: Numbers of CNKI articles with "Belt and Road" in title, 2013–2015, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) academic journals search; 2 September 2020

The intellectual campaign has formed a basis for subsequent real-world BRI activity. As Zeng observes:

the "Belt and Road Initiative" was put forward as an immature idea to be developed, requiring substantial intellectual support. It functions as a slogan to invite China's academic and policy community to devote their expertise to produce concrete, actionable plans. (Zeng 2020: 84)

Academic expertise and attention have been particularly important in interpreting and forecasting – with varying degrees of accuracy – international responses to the BRI, in some cases leading to direct policy impact. Zeng (2020: 85) points out that analysis from strategists in the Central Party School, for example, helped turn the leadership away from an explicitly defined geographical scope for the BRI by emphasising the need to counter foreign perceptions of it as an exclusive economic bloc. As noted above, however, popular imaginings of the BRI have overwhelmingly constructed it as a Sinocentric Eurasia, with Europe on the distant periphery and the Americas invisible.

The first wave of PRC intellectual discussions of the BRI was just showing signs of tailing off in 2015 when the first Belt and Road strategic document, the 2015 Vision and Actions document, was published. This sparked a further acceleration of research efforts; over the next four years China's academic publications averaged more than 700 articles with "One Belt One Road" in the title each month, according to searches of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. Not all of the thousands of books and articles and hundreds of research projects were necessarily rich in imagination, and in many cases the reimagining was oriented towards particular local or provincial interests. Yet even those that did little more than reproduce the sweeping imagery put forward by the party leadership still helped expand the BRI vision into a collective imaginary.

### Local governments and commercial enterprises

Following Xi and the central party-state's mobilising announcements, local governments jostled to position themselves as important nodes on the BRI map, while SOEs and other economic actors sought to maximise their share of the financial and political largesse. Inland provinces competed to claim the mantle of "eastern terminus" of the Silk Road, while coastal provinces argued over where the "Maritime Silk Road" began (Zeng 2020: 91–93). Some launched historical research projects aimed at buttressing their claims, adding further energy to the wave of BRI academic discourse discussed above. As Zeng (2020: 93–94) observes, there is evidence that these and other lobbying campaigns by provinces seeking inclusion resulted in an expansion of the BRI's official geographic scope within China. While only 15 provinces were invited to an early symposium on the subject, 18 provinces were eventually named in the 2015 *Vision and Actions* document.

SOEs and other enterprises rapidly moved to perform their implementation of the BRI, in many cases by rebranding existing projects with BRI labels. According to official statistics from the PRC's State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), central SOEs had undertaken a total of more than 3,100 BRI projects by 2019, with the vast majority of the PRC's 96 central SOEs having participated (Nolan / Leutert 2020). More broadly, PRC commercial actors both inside the PRC and abroad have flocked to reimagine and rebrand their existing projects as part of the BRI and to initiate new projects that could be argued to fall within its scope. In some cases this has produced absurdities, such as a proposed theme park on Australia's Gold Coast and gambling operations in Cambodia being presented (and imagined) as BRI projects (Ang 2019, Ferchen 2021). Such opportunism echoes the "carpetbagging" of the United States' Reconstruction Era, in which northern commercial and political entrepreneurs sought to benefit from post-war reconstruction of the southern

states by aligning their self-interested activities with Washington's abolitionist policies.

In the view of authors such as Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng (2019), provincial lobbying campaigns and commercial opportunism have rendered the BRI an incoherent undertaking that has expanded far beyond its original intent. Such observations may be accurate, but are only partial. Lower-level state and non-state actors who competed to align themselves with the BRI and shape its specific content were not only taking advantage of the central policy slogan for their own purposes, they were simultaneously producing the BRI vision and in many cases performing its specific technological content. The question of Xi Jinping's intention in announcing the "grand undertaking" of the two Silk Roads in late 2013 is central here. Xi's primary motivation may well have been to consolidate his own political authority through the introduction of new foreign policy slogans. But as shown above, Xi made a clear choice to imbue his "Belt and Road" slogan with strong mobilising content, and for the next five years opted not to rein in the "broad freehand" style of response it generated.

The exuberant responses of PRC provincial governments, SOEs and commercial enterprises abroad were a foreseeable consequence of Xi's choice of political slogan – a grandiose geotechnical vision with an indeterminate scope. Even if we assume, for argument's sake, that Xi failed to predict the responses of PRC economic and sub-state actors at the time he launched his BRI slogan, he nonetheless had numerous subsequent decision-points over subsequent years at which he appeared to reinforce, rather than rein in, these trends. Yet, at late as the 2017 BRI Summit, Xi continued to make strong exhortative statements of BRI purpose. On that occasion he called it the "project of the century" and declared:

History is our best teacher. The glory of the ancient silk routes shows that geographical distance is not insurmountable. If we take the first courageous step towards each other, we can embark on a path leading to friendship, shared development, peace, harmony and a better future [...] thanks to our efforts, the vision of the Belt and Road Initiative is becoming a reality and bearing rich fruit.

Delivered directly to an audience of Chinese and foreign leaders eager to engage in BRI projects, the speech strongly affirmed the ongoing surge of imagination and reimagination of a wide array of economic activities through the geotechnical vision of the BRI.

The state's control over domestic actors' real-world performances of the BRI was by no means complete, but it still possessed significant capabilities to curtail these performances, if necessary, and to shape public discourse. One such mechanism was declaratory statements, as in the announced reorientation of the BRI in 2018, away from "broad freehand" to "meticulous brushwork", signalling a greater emphasis on quality and governance of technical projects. A second lever was policy, constraining the funds dispersed by the PRC's key

policy banks, ExImBank and China Development Bank, which peaked at US\$75 billion in 2016 and slowed to \$4 billion in 2019 (Ray / Simmons 2020). Such processes of state mobilisation, sub-state interpretation and implementation, followed by state readjustment, follow a pattern identified as critical to China's economic development (Huang 2008, Ang 2016). But beyond China's borders, as the next section shows, imaginative responses to the initial mobilising vision have proven to be significantly less amenable to adjustment and control.

## International imaginings

International analysts, organisations and governments have applied their imaginations to the vague visions initiated by Xi and the PRC party-state, intellectuals and economic actors. International BRI imaginings overwhelmingly share their vision of the PRC as a hub of networked capitalism from which infrastructural technologies of development and governance are destined to unfold across the globe. Yet, unlike the classic sociotechnical imaginaries that reflect shared norms of the imagining society, the geographical spread of the BRI imaginary has been accompanied by sharp bifurcations on the normative desirability of its envisaged – and performed – geotechnical futures. To be sure, the BRI has had plenty of international proponents, but beyond the PRC's borders, future-oriented analyses have also often focused on downside risks, or even in many cases have characterised the vision itself as dystopian.

Numerous authors in the BRI-as-process literature have picked up on these observations to argue that the BRI vision is ineffective outside of the PRC's borders (e.g. Zeng 2020: 100, Ye 2019: 705). In particular, they point to the vagueness of the initiative as provoking incomprehension, dismissal or apprehension among foreign audiences. Yet, the following sections of this paper show that such a characterisation of the slogan's international uptake is only partly accurate, for the BRI has also generated a broadly shared geotechnical imaginary of a world order connected in commerce via technological infrastructures centred on the PRC and its party-state. As shown below, politicians, institutions and analysts worldwide have taken up Xi's invitation to imagine a global capitalist order constituted by the spatial unfolding of PRC technologies – but have reached diverging conclusions as to its desirability.

## Popular imagery

A rough illustration of the geotechnical nature of international BRI imaginings can be gleaned from search data from Google. The most visible themes correlate with China's Baidu search imagery for "Belt and Road", but with an even greater domination of international maps – especially in the first couple

Table 2: Thematic breakdown of first 100 images resulting from a search for the term “Belt and Road” on Google Image search, sampled by author in January 2021 (images can contain more than one theme; see Appendix for data and coding).

theme	first 100 images		first 20 images	
world map	72	72 %	19	95 %
technology / infrastructure	8	8 %	1	5 %
domestic China maps	0	0 %	0	0 %
historical Silk Road imagery	4	4 %	0	0 %
PRC party-state / leaders	12	12 %	0	0 %

of pages of imagery, where maps were ubiquitous. In common with the Chinese imaginary discussed above, technology and the PRC party-state were the other key motifs among Google’s top BRI imagery. Ancient Silk Road mythology was less visually prominent, while the geographical iconography understandably focused on global maps rather than domestic Chinese ones. The fundamental similarities – mapping, technology, and the PRC party-state – support the notion that the BRI has generated a fundamentally shared geotechnical imaginary spanning Chinese- and English-speaking online populations.

Google Trends search activity data offers a further indication of the key terms through which English-language online audiences worldwide developed an interest in the BRI. The evocative initial vision of a “New Silk Road” evoked interest from late 2013, shortly after Xi’s pair of initial speeches. “One Belt One Road” rose from April 2015, reflecting the release of the *Vision and Actions* document the previous month. The term “Belt and Road”, which replaced “One Belt One Road” as PRC propagandists’ preferred term in 2016, finally caught on from the May 2017 BRI Summit, and overtook the original translation in early 2018.

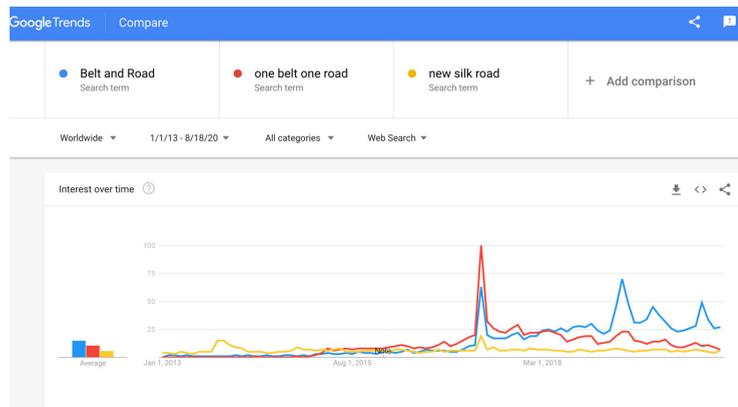


Figure 3: Google search activity data on BRI-related terms, 2013–2020, screenshot by author, 18 August 2020

Finally, data from Google also suggest that interest among the foreign online general public is significantly attributable to the initiative's combination of grandiose scope and indeterminacy. Among users of Google's search engine worldwide, the most popular related search inquiries are variations of "What is the Belt and Road" and "Belt and Road map". While critics have pointed to the confusing name as a weakness, if it were clear what and where the Belt and Road is, such audiences would have less scope to invoke their own imaginations in constructing its meaning. The financially grandiose but linguistically and geographically indeterminate BRI vision, in other words, has been a stimulant for foreign imaginings – but although such imaginative labour may serve to support the PRC's political interests, it could also undermine them.

### Intellectual response

International academia has shown an extraordinary level of interest in the BRI. Policy reports, books and commentaries on the topic have massively proliferated, to the point where WorldCat, a global database of books, contains more than 450 English-language books with "Belt and Road" in the title, as well as books in at least 12 other languages besides Chinese.<sup>4</sup> The majority of these BRI books have focused on economics, political science and law, but interpretations have emerged from authors in a wide variety of other disciplines, from engineering and environmental sciences to history and sociology, education, linguistics, architecture and fine art. Indonesian Christian theologians have examined the "opportunities for mission" arising from the BRI's "global urbanisation", for example, and a German philosophy scholar published a book interpreting the BRI's "Silk Road Diplomacy" from a classical liberal standpoint (Chen 2018, Witzke 2020).

Cartographic imagery created by foreign observers vividly illustrates the global, PRC-centred characteristics of these cross-national imaginings. The Mercator Institute for Chinese Studies, for example, has since 2015 generated a series of spectacular BRI maps depicting the BRI's present and future infrastructural projects (Figure 4). These and other similar visual interpretations have been widely adopted, not only in academic papers such as those listed above and in think tank research, but also in news media reports, expanding the BRI's geotechnical imaginary beyond academia and towards the mainstream of English-language discourse.

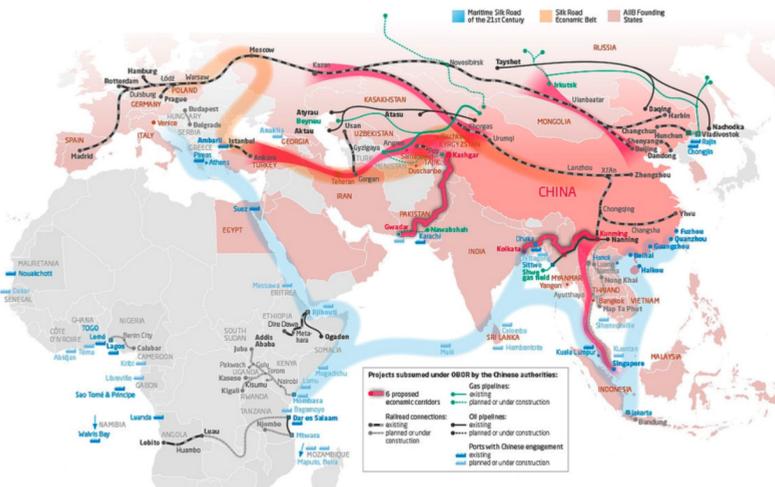
Whether out of conviction or political necessity, PRC interpretations of the BRI virtually all characterise the BRI vision as a positive development. But outside the PRC, many authors have explored its inconsistencies and contradictions. Nadege Rolland's (2017) *China's Eurasian Century? Political and*

4 As of 1 February 2021. See: <https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=ti%3A%22belt+and+road%22&fq=x-0%3Abook&qt=advanced&dblist=638>

*Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road*, for example, argues that the BRI serves the CCP’s ambition of realising a “Sinocentric Eurasian order” but warns of potentially “devastating consequences for the poorest economies of the region, which could find themselves saddled with unmanageable debt and forced to relinquish control over valuable national assets”. In *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order*, former Portuguese government minister Bruno Maçães (2018) declares: “The Belt and Road is the Chinese plan to build a new world order replacing the US-led international system.” English-language think tank reports have envisaged the BRI as a new and innovative system of “weaponising” investment, finance and technology (Russel / Berger 2020).

The diverse foreign intellectualisations of the BRI are all premised on the vision of a global future in which technological infrastructures radiate outward from the PRC. Whether authors ultimately seek to affirm or denounce the idea of an attempt to build a “Sinocentric world order”, it is impossible to do so without first *imagining* what that would mean, in the process consolidating the BRI’s existence as a collectively imagined form of global life and order reflected in the design and performance of technological projects. The present special issue, “China beyond China: Infrastructuring and Ecologising a New Global Hegemony?” illustrates how, even where critical approaches are adopted, the BRI’s very indeterminacy demands engagement with the vision of a PRC-centred, technologically focused, global order as a precondition for any inquiry. To critique, investigate, affirm or debunk the BRI is to expand the reach of its geotechnical imaginary.

Figure 4: Example of foreign cartography of the Belt and Road



Source: Mercator Institute for Chinese Studies’ BRI mapping project in 2015, <https://merics.org/en/analysis/mapping-belt-and-road-initiative-where-we-stand> (accessed 31 January 2021)

## International organisations and business

The work of international organisations (IOs) on the BRI has been an important source of BRI imaginings, as well as stimulating international commercial actors' involvement in its performance. Consistent with Chinese actors' responses, international organisations' analyses have generally focused on the opportunities presented by the BRI, but the vision is complicated by a significantly greater focus on downside risks. These risks, in turn, are to be managed through the adoption of the IOs' preferred policies and standards.

Some of the most vivid international BRI imaginings have been embedded in images produced in the international organisations' reports. The World Bank Group's 2019 report, *Belt and Road Economics: Opportunities and Risks of Transport Corridors*, featured striking cover art envisioning the BRI as a single transcontinental city (Figure 5). The six official "corridors" were represented as brightly coloured subway lines, while nominated BRI nodes such as Kashgar and Urumqi appear as stations. This reflected the report's emphasis on the benefits for particular urban hubs near border crossings, which spatial geographers had found were likely to gain disproportionately (Lall / Lebrand 2019). The PRC appears at the core of the multi-continental city.

The *Belt and Road Economics* report took on the formidable task of quantifying the impact of the BRI using economic modelling. This project demanded imaginative labour in two key respects. First, many missing parameters and assumptions required to model the BRI's economic impact needed to be added. As World Bank Vice President Ceylar Pazarbasioglu noted in an understated foreword to the report: "Quantifying impacts for a project as vast as the BRI is a major challenge." Second, once the models had been run, this produced an array of visions of the future, some diverging from the PRC's political orthodoxy, but all consonant with the broad vision Xi had outlined, such as sharply increased trade and foreign direct investment, and the lifting of 7.6 million people out of extreme poverty.

IOs' reports have projected futures in which the performance of BRI projects is modified and shaped to the IOs' preferred policy reforms. As the World Bank Group's *Belt and Road Economics* report argued: "Complementary policy reforms are essential for countries to unlock BRI benefits. Real incomes for BRI corridor economies could be two to four times larger if trade facilitation is improved and trade restrictions are reduced." Similarly, a 2017 report from the UN Development Programme and the NDRC's think tank – *The Belt and Road Initiative: A New Means to Transformative Global Governance towards Sustainable Development* – provided a detailed "roadmap" for aligning the BRI with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. The future envisaged is one which the IOs' preferred policies are implemented.

The imaginative labour contained in the reports from international institutions such as the World Bank Group, UNDP and OECD have been matched by local and national business lobby groups to imagine the opportunities presented by the Belt and Road. The potential investment and infrastructure largesse linked to the vision has understandably attracted great attention in business circles. As the China-Britain Business Council's (CBBC) chief executive wrote in a 2015 report, *One Belt One Road: New Opportunities in China and Beyond*: "The ambition is high. The complexity is high. And the geopolitics is potentially challenging. *But [BRI] has captured imaginations* (emphasis added)." The report's cover art, like that of the World Bank Group, also invoked the mass rapid transportation metaphor, with a cover depicting warp-speed locomotion of trains on an elevated track overlooking a futuristic city (Figure 5).

In contrast to the IOs' publications on the BRI, the business-oriented reports focus almost exclusively on opportunities. Many business groups' reports acknowledge the existence of risks, and counsel due diligence, but refrain from discussing the specifics or featuring potential downsides associated with the BRI – especially in their choice of titles and imagery. The inattention to risk is, on the surface, counterintuitive given the ubiquity of risk management in business, but becomes more understandable in light of political considerations. With the BRI having been designated as the personal flagship political project of the PRC leader, praise stands to ease the political costs of doing business in China, while dampeners or warnings could do the opposite.

A second feature of business-oriented uptakes of the BRI imaginary has been the construction of a narrative of broad political support for the BRI. This is reflected in the numerous forewords to business groups' publications on the BRI. The CBBC's 2015 report, for example, featured forewords from both its own CEO and the UK's Ambassador to China. A publication from the Australia China One Belt One Road Initiative (ACOBORI) featured no less than four introductions, including one from Ou Xiaoli, the director of the CCP BRI Leading Small Group.

The ACOBORI report's many forewords made clear that its prime purpose was to mobilise the imaginations of Australian businesses. Former Australian Trade Minister Andrew Robb urged Australian businesses to "use this report to reflect on why engagement with Chinese enterprises through the Belt and Road Initiative could benefit them and provide a clear narrative for how they can get involved". Malcolm Broomhead, Chair of the ACOBORI Advisory Board, similarly described the aim of the report as "prompt[ing] companies to question how the Initiative can be applied as a frame-work for strengthening collaboration with the Chinese market". However, as the next section will show, foreign governments have exhibited a range of responses to the BRI imaginary, ranging from enthusiastic collaboration to suspicion and outright hostility.

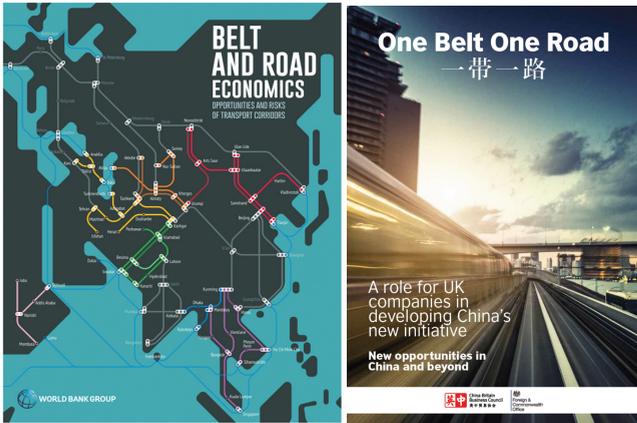


Figure 5: Covers of World Bank Group report of 2019 (left) and of China-Britain Business Council report on BRI 2015 (right)

## Foreign governments

By the start of 2020, 138 countries had formally joined the initiative, most via non-binding MoUs (Nolan / Leutert 2020). The grand rhetoric and indeterminacy that characterises MoUs, combined with the political theatre that has typically surrounded their agreement, has invited widespread local imaginings of what they might mean in practice. As noted in the previous section, for business enterprises and industry groups – along with development and infrastructure bureaucracies – this is likely to prompt a search for ways to locate the country within the BRI’s scope in order to boost economic cooperation. But the sweeping BRI vision has triggered the imaginations not only of governments eager to work with the PRC on development, infrastructure, investment and finance, but also from those keen to build political opposition to the PRC’s rising geopolitical influence.

The BRI vision met with an enthusiastic response from countries on China’s continental periphery, particularly Pakistan, Kazakhstan and other central Asian states (Pantucci / Lain 2017: 47–48). The imaginings of foreign governments further afield also affected on the BRI’s scope. Zeng (2020: 81–84) documents how what began as an initiative of diplomacy towards China’s periphery quickly expanded: first to include Africa and Eastern Europe by 2014; and then again to include the whole world by 2015. Zeng shows how, in particular, interest from countries beyond the originally announced geographic scope, such as the UK and Ireland, led to a series of declarations by PRC officials in response in 2015 that the BRI was in fact open to all, regardless of location. The imaginings of foreign governments had thus fed back into the PRC’s own BRI imaginary in an iterative process of collective, but “fractional” imagining (Law 2002).

In some cases, it has been sub-national foreign governments that co-produce the BRI imaginary. The Australian state of Victoria, for example, signed an MoU with the NDRC in 2018, and followed this with a 2019 Framework

Agreement for implementation. Yet even the latter, a supposedly more concrete document, contained indeterminate, future-oriented language that demands imagination on the part of the reader to make meaning. For example, the agreement hails the two parties' "great future and prospect" in infrastructure development, but the concrete measures agreed were only to "encourage", "promote", "explore", "provide information" and send delegations. The specifics, in other words, were left open to interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is not only foreign governments keen to cooperate whose collective imaginations have been stimulated. China's strategic adversaries, too, have availed themselves of the opportunity to fill in the blanks of Xi's sweeping vision. Commenting on Victoria's BRI agreements in May 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo suggested that the US might "simply disconnect" from its ally Australia over the deal, and claimed that BRI agreements increased Beijing's capacity to "do harm" (Murray-Atfield 2020). At the 2020 Munich Security Conference, US Defense Secretary at the time Mark Esper characterised the BRI as a coercive scheme to undermine the security of smaller states: "Through its Belt and Road Initiative, for example, the PRC is leveraging its overseas investments to force other nations into sub-optimal security decisions."

Indian politicians have likewise exhibited great suspicion towards the BRI vision. Prime Minister Narendra Modi even implicitly criticised the BRI at a 2017 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in China, stating that "connectivity in itself cannot override or undermine the sovereignty of other nations" (Mayer / Balazs 2018: 212). India's suspicions are hardly surprising, given the privileged place of its regional rival Pakistan as the site of one of the six "corridors" and the fact that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor traverses disputed territory claimed by India. In addition, as Pantucci and Lain (2017: 48–49) observe, the BRI's maritime component fitted neatly with existing Indian imaginings of a future PRC "string of pearls" network of bases in the Indian Ocean. Most importantly, Indian officials' comments on the BRI have consistently touted problems with "openness" and "transparency" – precisely the factors of indeterminacy that have made the BRI vision so conducive to varied local imaginings around the world.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to integrate diverse perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative by locating its central features in a cross-national geotechnical imaginary: a collectively imagined form of global life and order reflected in the design and performance of technological projects. The global BRI imaginary reflects how the PRC party-state has successfully mobilised imaginative

<sup>5</sup> See the full text at <https://www.vic.gov.au/bri-framework> (accessed 20 August 2020).

labour on both a national and global scale, but in contrast to the classical sociotechnical concept of imaginaries, the geographical scope and normative implications of the BRI imaginary have been sharply contested. The geotechnical imaginary is fractional in nature, combining convergent global imaginings of a geotechnical future with divergent and contested interpretations of its significance and desirability.

The PRC leadership's official statements on the BRI indicate that the mobilisation of domestic and international imaginative labour was a key goal from the earliest stages of the BRI's existence. In this regard, it arguably represents a scaling-up of the domestic "directed improvisation" development model that has preserved and expanded the party-state's authority within China across the reform era (Ang 2016). Second, the imaginative response from PRC intellectuals, sub-state bureaucracies and economic actors, while also fractional and multifarious, has laid an integral foundation for its performance in real-world projects. Whether such projects will prove to be economical is beyond the scope of this article, but the real-world effects reaffirm that imagination is a resource that can be induced and organised at the societal level. However, as the third section showed, mobilising imaginative labour on a global scale – beyond the bounds of the party-state's powers of compulsion – has produced both utopian and dystopian interpretations of the same imagined future.

This article has not attempted to assess how the real-world performance of BRI projects will feed back into the already fractured global imaginings of the BRI. The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries highlights the interplay between societies' collective imaginings about their nexus with technologies and the performance of specific technological projects at the societal level, and how this feeds back into those collective imagining processes. This article has highlighted collective, but fractional and contested, global imaginings about the intersection of future geopolitics and technology, but it remains to be seen how the *performance* of BRI undertakings will feed back into those collective imaginings.

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