

Will China Lead the World by Land and Sea? THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

By Andrew M. McGreevy



Poster of Xi Jinping pointing to the future. Source: *China Rising* website at <https://tinyurl.com/ydcqskff>.

To know about Asia, we must be prepared for the question of world leadership by the People's Republic of China. President Xi Jinping has been identified as the world's most powerful man, and the US and Chinese economies have the world's largest GDPs.¹ China is first in world shipbuilding, and troubling military questions about the ability of China to challenge the United States Navy in the Pacific Ocean are present. In several business, industrial, communications, scientific, technical, computing, transportation, and educational fields, China is known as a leading or rising nation. Artificial intelligence, hyperloop transportation, and hypersonic missiles are included in recent developments. Xi is using history to explain celebrations to mark the progress of China toward regional, international, and global leadership. Also, because of the Belt and Road Initiative, the question of the future role of China should be seen as involving thousands of miles of new transportation routes, billions of people, much of global trade, and many of the world's nations. There is no doubt that the question of world leadership by China is now before us.

The Belt and Road Initiative: Land and Sea

In 2013, Xi announced the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road projects, popularly known as the New Silk Roads or One Belt, One Road Initiative and now translated in official Chinese sources as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).² The term "Silk Road(s)" invoked the ancient past of Chinese trade and travels to the west by land and sea. As explained in the Chinese government's March 2015 BRI Action Plan:

More than two millennia ago, the diligent and courageous people of Eurasia explored and opened up several routes of trade and cultural exchanges that linked the major civilizations of Asia, Europe, and Africa, collectively called the Silk Road by later generations.³

Silk and other valuable goods were traded from China to Europe, and the Chinese certainly sailed to the east coast of Africa and the Middle East. Thus, again, Xi is teaching a history lesson.

However, given the enormous geographical magnitude of the BRI, consider the new roads, highways, railroad lines, pipelines, and cities that will potentially be required for the development of infrastructure on land in the

While the scope of the project may appear to be a fantasy, the BRI already involves many nations globally with functioning railroad lines and sea routes.

future for these massive projects. Via the seas, commerce will be advanced with improved ports, harbors, and infrastructure for more shipping that increases the use of sea routes. Thus, on land

and sea, economic growth of untold billions of dollars is the goal for China and nations along the routes. New airline routes are to be added. China stands ready to finance these projects and offers its expertise in construction work to participating nations. A Digital Information Silk Road is to be built. China also envisions many types of people-to-people programs, such as educational and cultural centers already started in Egypt, Jordan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Turkey.

While the scope of the project may appear to be a fantasy, the BRI already involves many nations globally with functioning railroad lines and sea routes. Of course, "potential" is the keyword to ponder as we observe the beginnings of the Belt and Road Initiative. The home page for the Belt and Road Initiative, plus the previously discussed official documents, can be used to teach about the program.⁴ Other resources (see endnote 5 for full titles) include a book by Xi and excellent books on the old and new Silk Roads.⁵

The BRI Action Plan is under the aegis of the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, and authorized by the State Council. The Action Plan is organized in eight sections with a preface: "Background," "Principles," "Framework," "Cooperative Priorities," "Cooperative Mechanisms," "China's Regions in Pursuing Opening-Up," "China in Action," and "Embracing a Brighter Future Together."

The language used in the Action Plan illuminates Beijing's desire to be seen as a modern and peaceful dynamic leader. For example, there is repeated emphasis on how linking Asia, Europe, Africa, and eventually the whole world will advance globalization, free trade, cultural diversity, and world peace. The BRI is thus not at all limited to the regions of the historic Silk Roads. The Action Plan's authors attempt to illustrate China's peaceful intentions by referring to the United Nations Charter. More specifically, the Action Plan describes connectivity on land and sea between China, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe, including the Baltic region; the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea are referenced; links to the South

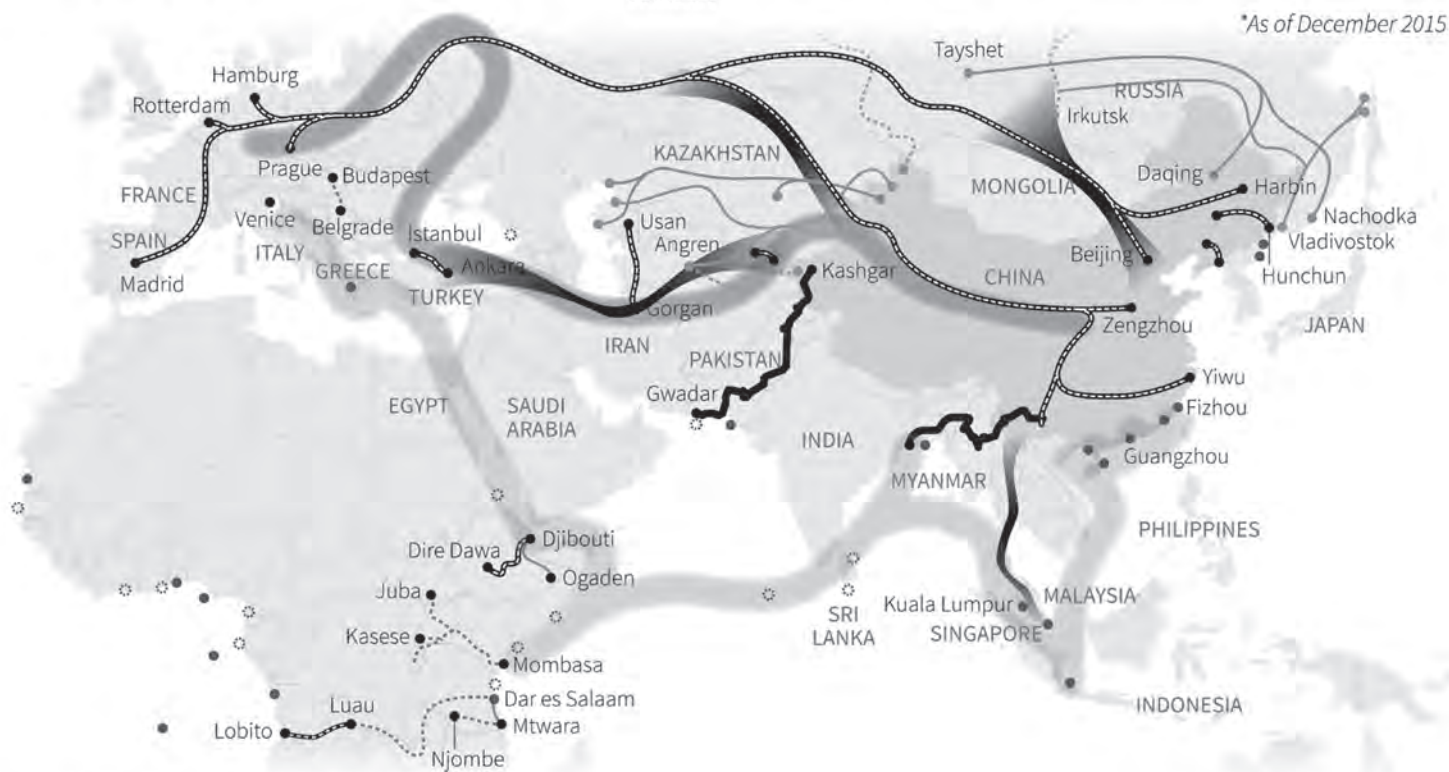
What Should We Know About Asia?

Key

- Silk Road Economic Belt
- New Maritime Silk Road

Projects subsumed under China's Belt and Road initiative

- Gas pipelines
- Oil pipelines
- Railroad
- Proposed economic corridors
- Ports with Chinese engagement
- ⊛ Planned or under construction



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies.

Source: *The Straits Times* at <https://tinyurl.com/y986bwh8>.

The serious issues related to global health are addressed with concepts such as information exchanges on epidemics, health technologies, and the training of healthcare professionals.

China Sea, the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the South Pacific, and West Asia are indicated. A Eurasian land bridge is mentioned as a concept to be developed. Nations such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar are discussed as contacts to be explored in the future.

Technical, environmental, and energy-saving projects are featured and include an Information Silk Road with e-commerce. Optical cable technology, under-seas cables, and outer space satellites are planned to improve communications. "Green" and low-carbon principles are to be used in the construction of projects to address climate change. Other concepts for food production, forestry, fishing, water desalination, and ocean engineering (even marine biopharmacy) are included in a call for environmental protection. Energy saving in many ways is cited and includes controversial coal, oil, and gas resources. Renewable energy is to be sought from all water, nuclear, wind, solar, and any other clean resources.

As sometimes occurred in the case of the historic Silk Roads, in addition to facilitating trade and commerce, the Chinese government's expectation is that the New Silk Roads will develop many forms of friendly contacts among people, especially in education and culture. Beijing almost certainly conceptualizes these contacts as a form of "soft power," i.e., the use of these contacts to positively influence other nations' views of China. Academic exchanges, scholarships, media projects, arts and film festivals, and book fairs are listed in the Action Plan. The plan also includes an articulation of the ambitious concept of partnering to apply for the creation

of World Cultural Heritage locations. Projects designated for youth groups and women are specifically cited. With an eye on increased tourism, several ideas, such as featuring products of the Silk Road, are suggested,

along with shipboard travels to include the sea routes. China made sure to include sports exchanges and international sports competitions to build friendship among nations.

The serious issues related to global health are addressed with concepts such as information exchanges on epidemics, health technologies, and the training of healthcare professionals. Emergency medical aid is promised. For all these issues, the use of related science and technologies is featured. Similarly, the internet is mentioned as a tool to be used to deal with problems in education and healthcare, and in areas such as fighting poverty and protecting ecological resources. China is stressing the use of technology in dealing with all areas of human concerns. Thus, China is offering assistance and education to participating nations in Asia, Europe, and Africa, with a lot of attention to Southeast Asia.

The Action Plan also contains an interesting feature titled "Contact the Premier," currently Li Keqiang, who administers the many departments and offices of the government of China. This feature invites questions by email to the Premier of China and the English-language website of the government. The Premier of China is not expected to personally answer all these messages, but the messages are to be answered by representatives of the various departments. This could be a very creative learning tool for



Source: World Economic Forum at <https://tinyurl.com/y87fm4x3>.

teachers and students. For example, this feature presents answers to questions relating to student internships, driver's licenses, marriages to foreigners, working in China, and medications. The Action Plan and other online resources give us information on how China wants to be seen in announcing the creation of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Vision for the Maritime Silk Road

In 2015, China went further to explain the concepts of expansion with *The Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road*.⁶ This document is known as *The Vision* and is organized in five parts focused on the seas: "Background," "Principles"; "Framework"; "Cooperative Priorities—Green Development, Ocean-Based Prosperity, Maritime Security, Innovative Growth, Collaborative Governance"; and "China in Action." *The Vision* came forth under the aegis of the National Development and Reform Commission and the State Oceanic Administration. *The Vision* takes us into an interesting and unique vocabulary, and plans for specific maritime and geographic regions include the far north—the Arctic. With *The Vision*, China is offering a bold plan to go to sea.

Using terms such as "Blue Partnership" and "Blue Economic Passage," *The Vision* invokes "blue" to describe a vast new system of economic and cultural ties based on the use of ships and the seas. To support this effort, China has become the world leader in shipbuilding. The idea of a Blue Partnership was tied to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development along sea coasts. *The Vision* describes a system starting

with the coast of China that will eventually become a China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage. This system will include the China-Indo China Peninsula Economic Corridor. It will also extend to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to link with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and to the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor. The final stage will include Oceania and the South Pacific, the Pacific Ocean, and eventually Europe from the Arctic Ocean. These plans are detailed; they start with China and go out to the Pacific Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Europe will be reached from two directions.

Describing the seas as a huge ecosystem, *The Vision* also includes a section titled "Green Development," which is devoted to ocean ecological preservation. Looking into the future, "Green Development" is described in terms of saving marine ecology and providing a wide variety of marine ecological safeguards. Ecosystems and biodiversity are to be combined with the saving of endangered life forms through ecological corridors involving islands and coastal regions. There is no mention of the Chinese military or military forces of other nations present because of the controversy over ownership of islands in the South China Sea. *The Vision* document only indicates that international cooperation will function under the existing China-ASEAN Environment

Cooperation Strategy and a projected Plan of Green Silk Road Envoys. Climate change is specifically addressed, with ideas to deal with carbon reduction through a Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road Blue Carbon Program.

Maritime economic development is detailed in a section titled "Ocean-Based Prosperity," which begins with the goal of ending poverty along the ocean routes. Tourism is included in the economic theme, but the emphasis is upon the building of shipping services and international and regional shipping facilities, especially new ports. This important and ambitious subject is also linked to the addition of new information infrastructure networks. Thus, new and advanced technology is woven into all the BRI projects.

The Arctic, the farthest north region of Earth, is also included in maritime economic activities in *The Vision* statement. China is proclaiming a willingness to work with any nation in mapping Arctic sea routes, building scientific monitoring stations, and studying climate change. An important goal in the Arctic is to participate in the commercialization of new sea routes. China regards shipping through the Arctic region as yet another way to get to Europe. Always looking for new resources, China also views the Arctic as a possible source of clean energy. An examination of a world map indicates that the Arctic is not so far from northern China, yet historically, China has ventured much more to the south and the Middle East.

While much of *The Vision* describes far-reaching plans for the future for the Maritime Silk Road, the document concludes with a reminder titled

“China in Action” that reviews what has already been started. Returning to activities toward the south, agreements have been signed for maritime ventures with many Southeast Asian nations, and also strategically and politically important India and Pakistan, plus far-off South Africa. On the cultural theme, a Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road Expo and an International Art Festival have taken place. To emphasize that a Blue Economy might be coming together, a list of projects underway, from Asia to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, is provided. It includes activities with Malaysia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Iran, Djibouti, Kenya, Egypt, Greece, and the Netherlands.

Xi looked backward into Chinese history when he started to teach about the “Chinese Dream”—more recently, he has been looking forward to how progress will be measured.⁷ Xi emphasizes that China is still a developing nation with perhaps 200 million citizens living below world poverty standards. Satisfactory progress will be measured according to two centenary goals. The centenaries, or 100-year celebrations, are 2021, which will mark the creation of the Communist Party of China in 1921; and 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The first ambitious goal is to double the incomes of most Chinese by 2020, thereby creating a “moderately prosperous society. . . .” By 2049, China is to be a “modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious. . . .” The middle of the twenty-first century is to mark the rejuvenation of China. Xi’s policies provide broad visions. The Belt and Road Initiative is a detailed plan. Thus the question, “Will China lead the world by land and sea?”⁸ ■

NOTES

1. “Xi Jinping Has More Clout Than Donald Trump. The World Should be Wary,” *The Economist*, October 14, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ycq6uyzu>.
2. “China Unveils Action Plan on Belt and Road Initiative,” *The State Council of the People’s Republic of China*, revised March 28, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y7s89d6k>.
3. “Full Text Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative,” *The State Council of the People’s Republic of China*, revised March 30, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y9bj33a4>. Sources in notes 4 and 5 have similar titles but different content.
4. “Home: The Belt and Road Initiative,” *The State Council of the People’s Republic of China*, <http://english.gov.cn/beltAndRoad/>.
5. Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China, II* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2017). This long book is an easily accessible collection of Xi Jinping’s important speeches and printed works from 2014 to 2017. Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016). At 645 pages, this recent study provides an enthusiastic and creative review of many sources. Lincoln P. Paine, *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). Paine’s discussion of the maritime Silk Roads is very good reading.
6. “Full Text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative,” *The State Council of the People’s Republic of China*, updated June 20, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y9bfpmgp>.
7. Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China, II*, 30. Xi Jinping, on one page, conveniently provides an overview of how he sees Chinese history advancing through the two centenaries to 2049.
8. Robert D. Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo’s World: War, Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Random House, 2018). This thought-provoking book is highly recommended for further reading. Kaplan sees a “Eurasian Question” arising in the East.

ANDREW M. MCGREEVY, PhD, teaches a course on modern Asian history at Ohio University–Lancaster. He has previously written for *EAA* on the geography of China and the rise of the Chinese Navy. McGreevy’s travels in Asia and Russia have taken him across some of the routes of the Belt and Road Initiative.



2019 AAS
ANNUAL CONFERENCE

DENVER, COLORADO
SHERATON DOWNTOWN HOTEL MARCH 21-24

PRE-REGISTRATION DEADLINE:
02.26.2019

 Housing is now open. Book soon.

 Stay up-to-date with conference announcements. Sign-up online.

 Visit denver.org to learn more about the 2019 annual conference destination.

 Association for Asian Studies

<http://bit.do/AAS2019>