

China and the Global South: Many Initiatives, One Narrative

by Marina Rudyak

ABSTRACT

Since its 2013 launch, the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has stirred heated debates. Despite Beijing framing it as win-win cooperation, concerns mounted over BRI's risks for involved countries, especially in the Global South. China's narrative merely signals a search for an effective communication strategy and international discourse power, while its understanding of development remains constant. Developing countries play a crucial role in China's pursuit of global status. Firstly, it positions itself as the advocate for developing nations, promoting "diverse paths to modernisation" and "true multilateralism". Secondly, China aims to redefine major power by prioritising development and security over liberal democracy.

China | Chinese foreign policy | Belt and Road Initiative | Global South

keywords

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by Marina Rudyak*

1. The BRI: More foreign policy evolution than a radical change

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) sparked a heated debate when it was launched in 2013. It was the most visible manifestation of President Xi Jinping's abandoning of the reactive approach put in place by Deng Xiaoping – *taoguang yanghui*, *yousuo zuowei* 韬光养晦, 有所作为, literally "hide your talents and bide your time" – and a shift toward a proactive "major power" (*daguo* 大国) foreign policy.¹ Initially aimed at increasing cooperation with neighbouring countries, the BRI's scope swiftly broadened into a globally oriented endeavour. Xi himself characterised the BRI as encompassing nearly everything: finance, infrastructure, innovation, trade, transportation, sustainability, and people-to-people connectivity² while China's state news agency Xinhua hailed it as the "Chinese solution to global economic blues".³

Did the BRI represent a radical transformation of China's foreign policy? Taking a deeper look, what appears to be a new assertiveness could also be read as the logical next step on China's "Road to Revival" – the term used in the official narrative to describe the journey from the loss of self-perceived centrality and power through the Opium Wars with the British Empire in 1839–42 and 1856–60 back to being the "country in the centre of the world". The "Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation" (*weida fuxing de Zhongguo meng* 伟大复兴的中国梦) was first mentioned by Xi when visiting a "The Road to Revival" (*Fuxing zhilu* 复兴之路) exhibition in the National Museum in November 2012 as newly appointed General Secretary of the

¹ Hongying Wang, "From 'Taoguang Yanghui' to 'Yousuo Zuowei': China's Engagement in Financial Minilateralism", in *CIGI Papers*, No. 52 (December 2014), <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/taoguang-yanghui-yousuo-zuowei-chinas-engagement-financial-minilateralism>.

² Xi Jinping, "Full Text of President Xi's Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum", in *Xinhua*, 14 May 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm.

³ "Economic Watch: Key Forum to Rally Support for Belt and Road Initiative", in *Xinhua*, 18 April 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/18/c_136218567.htm.

* Marina Rudyak is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Chinese Studies at Heidelberg University. Paper produced in the framework of the project "Countering Chinese Disinformation in Italy".

Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁴ When Xi, by then already president, announced the BRI the following year, the party discourse was quick to link it to the “road to revival” theme. For instance, Zhang Hongzhi, then Deputy Director of the Document Research Centre of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee, wrote in 2016 that the BRI was a major strategic policy decision to realise national rejuvenation.⁵ In a similar vein, Wang Yiwei, director of the Centre for European Studies at Renmin University and a former diplomat, wrote in the party journal *Hongqi Wengao* 红旗文稿 (“Red Flag Manuscript”) that the BRI sustains the dream of national rejuvenation and will hopefully help China to attain more structural power⁶ – that is, to create an alternative within the existing globalisation and to gain influence over ideas, norms and knowledge. Therefore, what many in the West perceived as a major change in China’s foreign policy, was just the next step on the “Road to Revival”. Xi concluded that China had hidden its talents long enough and now came the time to “strive for achievements” (*fenfa youwei* 奋发有为), as Xi’s new foreign policy went.⁷

2. Can China, being a major power, still be a “developing country”?

China has become one of the world’s largest providers of international development finance. While the exact volume and impact are difficult to estimate because the Chinese government does not fully disclose its figures, recent estimates suggest that China outspends the United States and other major powers on a 2-to-1 basis or more.⁸ “How can China then still call itself a developing country when it has become a major development provider itself?” ask many in the West. The answer is that China – like India for that matter – has been both, donor and recipient, for the most of its existence.⁹ More importantly, however, for China, a dual identity as great power and developing country is not a contradiction in terms because it understands development not just in economic terms, but also in ideological and

⁴ Kirk A. Denton, “China Dreams and the ‘Road to Revival’”, in *Origins*, 30 November 2014. <https://origins.osu.edu/node/1116>.

⁵ Zhang Hongzhi, “古路新生与民族复兴——正确认识“一带一路”建设在国家长远发展战略中的重要地位” [Rebirth of the old road and national rejuvenation - Correctly understanding the important position of the construction of ‘Belt and Road’ in the country’s long term development strategy], in *党的文献* [Literature of Chinese Communist Party], 10 December 2016, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5Nzk1NTc4MA==&mid=2650585679&idx=1&sn=7b535d6fda275b8fabf0aee706c3fa41&chksm.

⁶ Wang Yiwei, ““一带一路”：重塑经济全球化话语权” [‘Belt and Road’: Reshaping the discourse of economic globalisation], in *红旗文稿* [Red Flag Manuscript], 9 November 2016, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1109/c143844-28847161.html>.

⁷ Yan Xuetong, “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement”, in *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 2014), p. 153-184, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pou027>.

⁸ Ammar A. Malik et al., *Banking on the Belt and Road: Insights from a New Global Dataset of 13,427 Chinese Development Projects*, Williamsburg, AidData at William & Mary, September 2021, <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/banking-on-the-belt-and-road>.

⁹ Marina Rudyak, “The Past in the Present of Chinese International Development Cooperation”, in *Made in China Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (May-August 2021), p. 80-86, <https://doi.org/10.22459/MIC.06.02.2021.10>; <https://madeinchinajournal.com/?p=23144>.

historical terms.¹⁰ The Chinese leadership believes to draw much of its legitimacy vis-a-vis the Global South, including in the BRI, from its history as a developing country that transitioned from poverty to the world's second largest economy. Because of that, so the official narrative, China knows better what *other* developing countries need.¹¹ And so, the statements that China is willing to share "Chinese wisdom and Chinese solutions" to address global development challenges¹² – and, as stated by Xi, that "China will always be part of the developing world",¹³ can stand side by side.

None of these should be dismissed as mere rhetoric. Chinese leaders do hold the belief that China's economic progress has been driven by infrastructure development. A widespread Chinese saying goes: "If you want to get rich, build a road".¹⁴ Thus, while China certainly uses the BRI to build structural power and to address its domestic overcapacities, it also believes that the BRI helps to bridge the infrastructure financing gap to which Western donors and the Western-led multilateral system were not sufficiently attentive.¹⁵ This, in turn, highlights the differences in how China and the West understand development. While the development consensus of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) understands development as a multidimensional process, with the political dimension, i.e. good governance, rule of law and the promotion of human rights, being essential to achieving development, Chinese leaders believe infrastructure and connectivity to be essential prerequisites for progress in all other sectors.¹⁶ Moreover, they also believe that development requires stability – and since the "right to development" is framed as the highest human right, suppression of dissent or mass surveillance can be justified as protection of human rights. "Chinese-style modernisation", meaning a modernisation without political liberalisation or democracy is, in the words of Xi, not only the pathway to the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese

¹⁰ Yu Xiaoqing, "对话阎学通：中国外交发生了怎样的范式转变？" [Conversation with Yan Xuetong: What paradigm shift has occurred in Chinese diplomacy?], in 澎湃 [The Paper], 3 July 2021, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_13414037.

¹¹ "GT Voice: World Bank Needs to Avoid Bias in Aiding Developing Countries", in *Global Times*, 21 April 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1259993.shtml>.

¹² Liu Jianwu, "新时代的中国智慧和方案" [Chinese wisdom and Chinese solutions for a new era], in 求是 [Qiushi], 15 November 2017, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-11/15/c_1121947733.htm.

¹³ Shi Qing, "中国永远是发展中国家大家庭的一员" [China will always be a member of the big family of developing countries], in *People's Daily*, 12 April 2023, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0412/c1002-32661975.html>; Xi Jinping, *Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, 16 October 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html.

¹⁴ Fan Zhengli, "'要想富，先修路'，一条中国式'民谚'的国际化实践" ['To get rich, first build a road', a Chinese 'folk proverb' in international practice], in *China Daily*, 30 September 2018. http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-09/30/content_37010654.htm.

¹⁵ Marina Rudyak, "China's Relations with the World Bank: Between Great Power and Developing Country", in Antje Vetterlein and Tobias Schmidtke (eds), *The Elgar Companion to the World Bank*, Cheltenham/Northampton, Edward Elgar, forthcoming.

¹⁶ Marina Rudyak, "Development", in Malin Oud and Katja Drinhausen (eds), *Decoding China Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 2023, p. 29-30, <https://decodingchina.eu/development>.

nation"¹⁷ – it is also a model for other developing countries. Therefore, to drop the “developing country” status would mean to switch sides ideologically, and that is – so much can be derived from the official rhetoric – unlikely to happen. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated at a press conference in May 2023 that given its postcolonial history, China cannot enter the Western “rich countries’ club”.¹⁸

3. Development partnerships and debt risks

Within the BRI, China likes to portray itself as a development partner who in the spirit of South-South Cooperation provides horizontal, “win-win” cooperation different from vertical “Western” aid. When Chinese leaders address their African counterparts, they often invoke an image of a shared past of joint “anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggle”, highlighting how China has consistently provided assistance to Africa to the best of its ability, even in the face of its own economic challenges and poverty.¹⁹ While this narrative is certainly employed strategically and cannot hide the real existing asymmetries, the fact that terms like “mutual benefit” or “friendship” have remained fairly constant in use from the mid-1950s till today merits attention.²⁰ A central motive of Chinese development cooperation from the start in the early 1950s was to enable other developing countries to be independent – meaning, independent from the West. In 1956, after the Bandung Conference (the historic Asian-African gathering that committed to Asia-Africa cooperation based on the rejection of colonialism and neocolonialism), China’s Premier Zhou Enlai justified Chinese aid in front of the National People’s Congress with the words

we have understood that economic independence is of major significance for consolidating political independence. Therefore, while we advance the building up of our own economy, we wish, within the bounds of our possibilities, to contribute our meagre forces to help the economic development of other countries.²¹

¹⁷ “习近平强调，以中国式现代化全面推进中华民族伟大复兴” [Xi Jinping stresses Chinese-style modernisation to comprehensively promote the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation], in *Xinhua*, 16 October 2022, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/16/content_5718810.htm.

¹⁸ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on May 12, 2023*, 12 May 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202305/t20230512_11076522.html. Original version: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202305/t20230512_11076477.shtml.

¹⁹ Marina Rudyak, “‘We Help Them, and They Help Us’: Reciprocity and Relationality in Chinese Aid to Africa”, in *Journal of International Development*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (May 2023), p. 583-599, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3699>.

²⁰ Ibid.; Julia C. Strauss, “Layered Rhetorics and Multiple Realities: China and Africa”, in Christof Hartmann and Nele Noesselt (eds), *China’s New Role in African Politics. From Non-intervention towards Stabilization*, London/New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 32-47.

²¹ Zhou Enlai, “周恩来总理兼外交部长关于目前国际形势、我国外交政策和解放台湾问题的发言” [*The speech of Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs Zhou Enlai on the current international situation, China’s foreign policy and the issue of liberating Taiwan*], 28 June 1956, <https://www.gov.cn/test/2008-03/06/>

While China is no longer poor, the motive of supporting what used to be “The Third World” to be independent from the West remains. Speaking at a party study session in February 2023, Xi stated that:

China’s modernisation has broken with the myth that “modernisation equals Westernisation”, it has expanded the possibilities of paths for developing countries to modernise and provided a Chinese solution for mankind’s search for a better social system.²²

From 2013 to mid-2022, the cumulative engagement of the BRI had reached 932 billion US dollars, with approximately 561 billion US dollars dedicated to construction contracts.²³ While China argues that it aims to bridge connectivity gaps, the sheer volumes of BRI loans and the lack of transparency in loan contracts have raised concerns regarding debt sustainability.²⁴ The Sri Lankan port of Hambantota is frequently cited as an example of how countries can fall into a debt trap with China: because Sri Lanka was unable to pay, so the story, China had taken over the port.²⁵ Based on this premise, many raise concerns about whether China is more of a neo-colonial power rather than a sincere development partner.

The real picture is more complicated. In Africa, for instance, according to Debt Justice, while China holds the largest share of bilateral debt, it accounts only for just 12 per cent of African governments’ external debt, compared to 35 per cent owned by Western private lenders.²⁶ When Sri Lanka leased the Hambantota Port to China Merchants Port, it was not defaulting on its debt to China, or at all. While China was the country’s largest bilateral lender, the lease was used for the upcoming repayment of commercial borrowings Sri Lanka obtained from international capital markets since 2007.²⁷ Yet, China’s function as a de facto rescue lender was instrumental in delaying Sri Lanka’s default, which happened in April 2022.

content_911550.htm. See also Marina Rudyak, “The Past in the Present of Chinese International Development Cooperation”, cit., p. 85.

²² “习近平在学习贯彻党的二十大精神研讨班开班式上发表重要讲话” [Xi Jinping delivered an important speech at the opening ceremony of the Seminar on the Study and Implementation of the 20th NPC Spirit], in *Xinhua*, 7 February 2023, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2023-02/07/content_5740520.htm; Xu Wei, “Xi: Forge New Drivers for Modernization”, in *China Daily*, 8 February 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202302/08/WS63e2765da31057c47ebad75c.html>.

²³ Christoph Nedopil Wang, “China’s Role in Addressing Post-Covid Debt Challenges in the Global South”, in *Panda Paw Dragon Claw*, 4 May 2023, <https://wp.me/p9iyTF-1zF>.

²⁴ Sebastian Horn, Carmen M. Reinhart and Cristoph Trebesch, “China’s Overseas Lending”, in *Journal of International Economics*, Vol. 133 (November 2021), Article 103539, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jinteco.2021.103539>.

²⁵ Deborah Brautigam, “A Critical Look at Chinese ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’: The Rise of a Meme”, in *Area Development and Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2020), p. 1-14, DOI 10.1080/23792949.2019.1689828.

²⁶ Debt Justice, *African Governments Owe Three Times More Debt to Private Lenders than China*, 11 July 2022, <https://debtjustice.org.uk/?p=9946>.

²⁷ Marina Rudyak, “Why Sri Lanka’s Default Was Not Caused by China”, in *9DashLine*, 20 September 2022, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/why-sri-lankas-default-was-not-caused-by-china>.

The China scholarship agrees that China does not lure countries into debt traps, but nevertheless, the risk that countries overborrow is real.²⁸ For many countries in the Global South, China's transport and digital infrastructure solutions are attractive not only because Chinese projects come without political conditions (aside from non-recognition of Taiwan), but because they come as bundle solutions: Chinese companies bring their own funding sources – Chinese subsidised loans for the purchase of equipment and services with a repayment period of 15–20 years. Recipient country governments can acquire roads and technology without depleting their cash reserves – and in hopes that by the time the grace period is over, the projects will pay for themselves. Western commercial banks can rarely beat such offers – and more often than not, the Chinese offer is the only one on the table. For all their partnership rhetoric, such deals are highly asymmetrical. Whether there are any wider development benefits depends on how well host country governments can manage China's offer. Chinese actors, on the other hand, are often inexperienced with managing development outside China. They are trying to export a development model that worked in China – but may not work in other cultural contexts. A mix of host country governments greedy for loans because they promised their constituencies new roads and new ports but with limited capacities to manage an actor like China, and Chinese counterparts eager to book big contracts but with little awareness of local contexts and credit risks, breeds a perfect ground for debt distress.

4. From BRI to GDI: Development and international status

After China announced the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in September 2021, the question emerged whether the BRI was losing relevance, in particular since it was barely mentioned at the 20th CCP Party Congress. The GDI, it seemed, was there to resolve the BRI's shortcomings by focusing more on developing countries and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and leveraging multilateral platforms, notably the United Nations. However, even though there is somewhat less mention of it, the BRI has certainly not gone away. It is still part of the CCP constitution, into which it was incorporated in 2017, which means that every CCP member is still obliged to contribute to its success.²⁹ Second, next to foreign aid, it is still officially defined as one of the pillars of China's international development cooperation.³⁰ Nor has the way China provides international development finance

²⁸ See, for example, Matt Ferchen, "China, Venezuela, and the Illusion of Debt-Trap Diplomacy", in *AsiaGlobal Online*, 16 August 2018, <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/china-venezuela-debt-trap-diplomacy>; Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy'. How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative", in *Chatham House Research Papers*, August 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/23768>; or Deborah Brautigam and Won Kidane, "China, Africa, and Debt Distress: Fact and Fiction about Asset Seizures", in *SAIS-CARI Policy Briefs*, No. 47 (2020), <http://www.sais-cari.org/s/PB-47-Brautigam-Kidane-Debt-distress-Asset-seizure.pdf>.

²⁹ "'Belt and Road' Incorporated into CPC Constitution", in *Xinhua*, 24 October 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c_136702025.htm.

³⁰ China's State Council Information Office, *China's International Development Cooperation in the*

changed.

What has changed, is the narrative. While the BRI was still largely framed as a platform for South-South cooperation,³¹ the GDI, along with the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and the Global Civilisations Initiative (GCI) that followed it, are signals of China's ambition to shape agendas in multilateral settings. The BRI is now an initiative under this umbrella, while the GDI is now the main vehicle to communicate China's vision of development. The narrative change is, therefore, merely a visible sign of China's search for an effective communication strategy vis-à-vis the outside world and its search for international discourse power, while China's understanding of development has not changed.

For China, endorsement carries great significance. The Chinese government typically cites the number of signed memoranda of understanding to prove the success of the BRI rather than speaking about developmental effects. Similarly, the first progress report on the GDI, published in June 2022, highlights as its "early harvest" the launch of the "Group of Friends of the GDI" at the UN and the acknowledgement of the GDI in joint statements of various "China Plus" fora with developing countries.³²

Developing countries have always played a crucial role in China's search for international status.³³ Now, capitalising on its bilateral relations (and possibly liabilities from loans) from the context of the BRI, China is mobilising the GDI to achieve two objectives: first, to mainstream or at least to normalise its vision of development as one concept that can exist legitimately parallel to other concepts, which liberal democracies have considered to be universal. Second, to put the topic of development back on the table – as a right in itself and over the emphasis on liberal democracy. By advocating for the developing world and posing as an aid worker, China is attempting to establish itself as an alternative, development-oriented great power and, at the same time, to create an alternative benchmark for what it means to be a great power.

New Era, January 2021, http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2021-01/10/content_77099782.htm.

³¹ Zhou Taidong and Zhang Haibing, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: An Opportunity to Re-Energize South-South Cooperation", in *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2018), p. 559-576, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740018500264>.

³² Center for International Knowledge on Development (CIKD), *Global Development Report*, June 2022, p. 39, <https://en.cikd.org/knowledge-detail?id=1664114740662804482>. See also CIKD, *Progress Report on the Global Development Initiative*, June 2023, <https://en.cikd.org/knowledge-detail?id=1671669857628889090>. According to the 2023 report, the group has been joined by 70 countries.

³³ Marina Rudyak, "We Help Them, and They Help Us", cit.

Concluding thoughts

With the GDI, China is trying to give legitimacy to its own vision of development internationally while putting development back onto global centre-stage. On the first topic, we may disagree with China on what is development, how it is supposed to happen and on what it entails in terms of material, cultural and normative progress. But the second point, bringing development back into the debate, is a legitimate proposition which Western countries have regrettably neglected for too long. We may question whether China does indeed have the rights solutions, but we cannot doubt the centrality of development in today's increasingly complex and multcentred world.

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