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A frame analysis of political-media discourse on the Belt and Road Initiative: evidence from China, Australia, India, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States

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Abstract *The article seeks to unpack the increasingly polarised discussion on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and provide a holistic understanding of it by identifying the diverging interpretations in the form of frames and analysing the competing framing practices of actors figuring prominently in the debate. To that end, this study leverages conceptual insights from cultural framing and content-analyses a purpose-built corpus of political and media communications on the BRI gathered from China, India, the US, Japan, the UK and Australia. It first identifies, reconstructs and juxtaposes 14 culturally-embedded frames along five dimensions: China's intensions (Ploy, Zero-sum game, Equality), the BRI's implications for other countries (Bane, Lopsided, Boon), compliance with high standards (Below par, Qualified yes, Up to par), outcomes (Bumpy ride, Catchall, Off with a bang), and linkage to the past (Old wine in new bottles, Historical legacy). A subsequent deductive analysis, along the lines of the 14 frames, sheds light on the core claims constituting China's discursive legitimisation of the BRI, the salient difference between Chinese officials and foreign political-media elites, the continuity or change in the position on the BRI taken by foreign governments and their justifications, and the increasing critical coverage by foreign elite media.*

Introduction

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping publicly unveiled the proposals of building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, first labelled as One Belt One Road (OBOR), and later rebranded as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since then, it has evolved to become the most notable Chinese foreign policy initiative under President Xi. An increasing number of countries have been placed on the BRI roster. The number of foreign leaders and senior officials present at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in 2017 and the second BRF in 2019 showed the Chinese initiative had gained traction. By late 2019, more than 200 BRI agreements had been inked between China and third parties (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020).

The Chinese government seeks to present the BRI as a ‘project of the century’ that brings infrastructure financing and improving connectivity on a pan-continental scale (Xi 2017). Yet the initiative has been contested due to many factors. It claims to be an international initiative but is substantiated mostly by bilateral agreements. It is supposed to focus on infrastructure, but government-backed large infrastructure projects often have geopolitical implications, a fear further heightened by the blurry distinction between public and private spheres in China (A’Zami and Liu 2020). It purports to adopt high standards and best practices, but Chinese policy and commercial banks and state-run companies have long been lambasted for riding roughshod over lending standards and China has remained outside of the traditional donor club despite being a ‘net donor’ (Chin 2013). Development financing is needed in cash-strapped and infrastructure-deficient countries, and yet excessive borrowing is inimical to financial sustainability and increases dependency. Lastly, while the initiative has made inroads, projects in several countries such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia ran into trouble, raising caveats about the sustainability of heavy lending to countries with low credit ratings (Zhao 2020).

Facing sustained doubts and criticisms, China in response crafted an eclectic set of strategic narratives (Van Noort 2020). Still, distrust of the BRI remains high in foreign political and media circles. Contestation over the BRI between political actors drew extensive attention from elite news media.¹ They played a pivotal role in the framing contestation not only by selectively representing interpretations of political actors, but more importantly, by adding some critical reflections and alternative perspectives. To get a holistic understanding of the increasingly polarised discussion on the BRI, it is helpful to identify the different and sometimes diagonally opposite interpretations embedded in political discourse and media reporting, and study how political actors invoked interpretations as justifications for their position on the BRI and how media contributed to the framing process.

Substantively, the study analyses Chinese official rhetoric and political-media content retrieved from India, the United States (US), Japan, the United Kingdom, and Australia.² The overarching research question is formulated as: *What frames, or combinations thereof, did Chinese officials and foreign political-media elites apply to communicate the BRI?* To address the question, the research leverages the analytical purchase of cultural framing (Van Gorp 2007), an apparatus of inquiry suited for unpacking the diversity of views and perspectives on a given issue. Empirically, it is grounded in a purpose-built dataset of 644 Chinese official texts aiming to externally promote the scheme, and 77 BRI-related official texts and 1,116 BRI-centric news articles gathered from the five foreign countries. Methodologically, it performs a two-step content analysis: an inductive phase to identify and reconstruct frames, followed by a deductive phase to examine the frames used by different key actors.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. The first part gives an overview of the burgeoning body of literature on the BRI with a view to contextualising

¹ ‘Elite media’ refer to media outlets that shape the agenda of other mass media. It is used here interchangeably with ‘quality press’. The reason for focusing on elite media is twofold. First, they are generally more influential internationally. Second, elite media, as against other mass media that are fixated on national affairs, had more coverage of BRI events worldwide.

² The focus on Chinese official rhetoric and the selection of countries are explained later.

this study. The second part presents framing in broad strokes before fleshing out the cultural framing approach applied here. The third part explains the selection of cases and the collection and analysis of data. The empirical parts describe the set of frames uncovered in the inductive phase and analyse the frame use by key actors. Finally, some implications of this research are discussed.

Situating the research

As a potentially game-changing initiative, the BRI has attracted significant attention from policy pundits and scholars, resulting in a burgeoning body of literature. Extant studies on the BRI generally fall in four related but distinct categories. The first and probably most dominant category considers the BRI as a grand strategy, discussing China's geopolitical and geoeconomic motivations and potential implications for the international and regional order (Blanchard and Flint 2017; Cai 2018; Clarke 2018; Leverett and Wu 2017; Kamel 2018; Li 2020; Rolland 2017; Yu 2017; Wang 2016). The second variant nevertheless questions the intention and capability of the BRI as a coherent grand strategy. It notes the amorphous design of the BRI and the involvement of many actors with diverging interests and preferences (e.g., ministries, provincial governments, state-run companies, policy banks), resulting in contestations or even outright contradictions with reference to the scope and objectives of the BRI (Jones and Zeng 2019; Ye 2019; Yu 2018; Zeng 2019). A third strand turns to the impacts of the BRI loans on recipient countries and the mix of benefits and risks attendant on large infrastructure building. In this regard, the question as to whether the BRI is 'debt trap diplomacy' has engendered considerable debate (Bräutigam 2020; Carmody 2020; Hurley et al 2018; Jones and Hameiri 2020; Singh 2021). Lastly, a growing number of case studies have been done on prominent BRI projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), East Coast Rail Link and Kuantan Industrial Park in Malaysia, Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, Letpadaung Copper Mine in Myanmar, and Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya, to name just a few. What emerges from these studies is equally inconclusive. With some confirming geopolitical motivations as the primary consideration of China (Garlick 2018), others note the involvement of multiple Chinese actors at different levels and the dominance of market forces (Lim et al 2021); some asserting positive implications for host countries (Ahmed 2019), others strategic risks (Behuria 2018) or a mix of both (Githaiga and Bing 2019). Still, these studies do agree on the multiple challenges and constraints that the BRI faces, due to factors like geopolitical complexity, financial unsustainability, and social and political-institutional dynamics in host countries.

Broadly, considerable differences can be identified among scholarly views on the primary motivations of China and implications of the BRI, with both sides having ample evidence to support their arguments and often to the exclusion of other perspectives. Such dynamic discussion was partly mirrored in the political realm and magnified by elite media, giving rise to an even wider range of contrasting interpretations. Some can be found in academic literature, but others are systematically disregarded due to their purported lack of credibility (e.g., Chinese official narratives) or overlooked because of their

apparent irrelevance to analyses that are focused on geopolitics and geoeconomics.

This study is different from the existing academic research in three aspects. First, its objective is not to invalidate or privilege certain interpretations, but to unpack the contentious debate on the BRI and provide a holistic understanding of it by identifying, reconstructing, and juxtaposing all the different perspectives, irrespective of their validity. This explains why a framing approach was chosen, rather than alternative text analysis approaches such as critical discourse analysis, which is more evaluative in nature. Second, the analysis is theoretically grounded in cultural framing, which enables us to identify the different interpretations in the form of frames and ferret out the entire chain of reasoning from problem definition and causal interpretation to moral evaluation and treatment recommendation (Entman 1993). In this way, the analysis provides an overview of the underlying rationale for competing interpretations and lets readers judge for themselves the validity of varying arguments. Third, the set of frames identified in this study are used to dissect the communications of political and media actors of countries that figured large in the debate, with a view to comparing across countries and longitudinally framing practices of foreign governments and elite media. This constitutes a systematic and empirically grounded effort to survey the external perceptions of the BRI.

Analytical framework: framing and culturally embedded frame

The conception of cultural framing is introduced to identify and analyse the diverging interpretations present in the contentious discussion regarding the BRI. Originated in social psychology, framing has over time become a prominent theoretical perspective in media and communication research. As a research strand applied across disciplines in social sciences, framing is known for its diverse conceptualisations. Goffman (1974, 21) introduces the notion of frame as a 'schemata of interpretation' that helps individuals to 'locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences.' Gitlin (1980, 6) defines frames as 'principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters.' The idea of selection and emphasis is later included in a widely quoted definition by Entman (1993, 52), who posits 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context.'

The power of framing is related to the fact that an issue can be interpreted from different angles by different actors, resulting in a set of distinct and often competing frames. As Edelman (1993, 232) aptly puts it, 'the social world ... is a kaleidoscope of potential realities, any of which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized.' This holds for topics that are ambiguous, controversial, and constantly evolving. Examples include climate action, immigration, military intervention, and more pertinent to this study, China-backed alternative structures exemplified by the BRI.

To make framing more operational in empirical research, Van Gorp proposes a cultural approach. Drawing upon elements from social constructionism, he conceptualises frame as 'a meta-communicative message' that is

embedded in culture and directed from framing actors to audiences (Van Gorp 2005, 486). Cultural frames tap into a rich repertoire of widely recognised and shared cultural elements to reconstruct meaning categories. This gives culturally embedded frames a natural defining capacity as they offer cognitive shortcuts in the form of ready-made interpretations.

Further, Van Gorp (2007, 64) argues that a cultural frame is to be represented by an interpretative package with a core cultural element, framing devices, and reasoning devices. The frame is the central organising idea that summarises framing devices and reasoning devices. It is generally represented by a condensed cultural code, including an archetype, myth, narrative, norm, value, or symbol. Framing devices constitute the manifest elements of a communicating text, taking a variety of forms such as catchphrases, keywords, metaphors, images, figures, and tables (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 3). Reasoning devices correspond to the four core functions of framing: define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (Entman 1993, 52). Taken together, they form a logical chain of reasoning and justify a particular course of action. The conceptualisation of a cultural frame, understood and operationalised as an interpretive package with a central organising idea substantiated by framing and reasoning devices, is used to analyse the corpus.

Case selection, data, and method

Case selection

As stated earlier, the aim of this research is to identify all the frames present in the BRI debate and analyse the use of frames by different key actors. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to that end. Case selection was based on the standards of variance and prominence, although the ability to measure up was discounted by pragmatic considerations such as access, expertise, and language. Useful variance was ensured to increase the likelihood of finding all the frames, and cases of salient regional and international actors were chosen to accentuate the relevance of the analysis.

Substantively, the research focused on six countries: China, India, the US, Japan, the UK, and Australia. These countries not only figured as prominent actors in the BRI debate but showcased useful variance that brought to light different aspects of and considerations about the initiative. China was the initiator and principal driver behind the BRI, seeking to assert legitimacy and marshal broad international support for this signature foreign policy under Xi. Its official rhetoric characteristically contained all the claims on the positive aspects of the BRI. With all the positive frames ensured, no other countries with overwhelmingly favourable attitudes to the BRI were included.

For the sake of more variance in framing, the study focused on five prominent countries that opted out of the BRI and contested to varying degrees China's official discourse. While all of them aired concerns about the BRI and did not ink a Memorandum of Understanding with China, there is useful variance in their official position and national context (for details, see 'framing by foreign political elites'). First, at the risk of oversimplification on the temporal dimension, two contrasting positions can be identified, with that of India and

the US verged on categorical dismissal by focusing almost exclusively on the BRI's negative impacts and showing no interest in cooperation, and that of Japan, the UK and Australia close to conditional engagement by evincing willingness to support or cooperate under conditions. Second, the context in which the BRI was discussed in these five countries was markedly different. For example, the traversal of CPEC through Kashmir was a frequently invoked grievance for India, and for Australia it was the BRI deal between the state of Victoria and China that created fissure at federal and state level. These country-specific differences are reflected in the frame use of political and media elites.

Coverage of elite media in these five countries was also included, for three reasons. First, elite media had sustained and extensive BRI coverage, as evidenced by the number of news articles. They brought to light issues that were largely absent from official discourse but often discussed by political actors unofficially and by policy pundits and academics (e.g., geopolitical rivalry, mission creep). This enriched the debate and increased frame variance. Second, many media included such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, and *Nikkei Asian Review*, are global media outlets. This makes up to some degree the inability to include more countries in the case selection, as these internationally influential media covered BRI-related key events worldwide. Third, elite media coverage, as an integral part of external reception and proven to influence public opinion, merits to be studied in its own right.

Data

The starting point for data collection was September 2013, when the Silk Road Economic Belt was unveiled (and the 21st-Century Maritime Road was announced one month later). December 2019 was chosen as the end point to include the political discourse and media coverage generated by the participation of Italy in the BRI and the second BRF. Since 2020, the BRI has received much less attention as political and media attention shifted to the coronavirus pandemic.

For China, all the texts with the keyword *yidaiyilu* (Chinese equivalent of OBOR/BRI) on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs³ website were reviewed, but only those with a primary focus on the BRI were retained. This resulted in 644 texts. Three quasi-official media sources (*People's Daily*, *Xinhua*, *China Daily*) were considered initially but excluded later after a preliminary content analysis found their BRI coverage was strictly in line with official discourse and showed little variance.

For the other five countries, all the official texts referring to the BRI/OBOR published by relevant government bodies (e.g., Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance) were collected. In addition,

³ While competing visions, interests and preferences existed in the Chinese officialdom as noted in Jones and Zeng (2019), inter-ministerial disagreement did not really translate into notable differences in the major talking points of the BRI (e.g., benefits, progress, guiding principles) at the level of *official* rhetoric. As such, MFA communications on the BRI are treated as representative of Chinese official rhetoric on the initiative.

three quality newspapers, taking into account their coverage intensity and political affiliation, were identified for each (for the US two more were added due to the relatively low number of texts collected from the first three). For news articles, only those with substantial coverage of the BRI were retained. Finally, 77 official texts and 1,116 news articles were collected. A detailed breakdown of the corpus and of the sources are shown in Appendix A.

Content analysis

The method for analysing the collected textual data is content analysis. For the sake of clarity, it is important to draw a distinction between discourse analysis and content analysis. Whereas the former straddles three levels: text, discourse, and social practice, the latter focuses on the first two. Substantively, the study performed a two-phase content analysis. First, an inductive analysis was conducted to identify the frames embedded in the BRI debate. During this phase, all the texts in the corpus were closely read and coded in *NVivo*. The coding followed a systematic methodology based on grounded theory and was done iteratively in three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. As the first step, open coding parses all the texts and strategically gathers excerpts with framing and reasoning devices. In this research, all elements, barring factual statements, touching, or expounding on the BRI's various aspects were coded. The second step is axial coding, which disaggregates the codes to identify recurrent themes before clustering them around overarching meaning categories. During this step, fragments coded during the first step were grouped around five key questions: what are China's motivations? What are the implications of the BRI for others? Will the Chinese initiative abide by international standards? What does the BRI mean exactly? How has the BRI fared to date? The final step is selective coding. It sorts out remaining codes by linking framing and reasoning devices to the central organising idea and drawing out an integrated frame package. Take as an example the interpretation that the BRI is harmful, the final step entailed putting together a coherent storyline about how the BRI has damaging implications by identifying typical framing devices, articulating the route of reasoning, and finding a cultural concept most aptly evoking such a story. The result from this three-step coding process is a comprehensive frame table (Appendix B).

After the inductive analysis, a deductive phase is desirable since it lends credence to the subjectively reconstructed frames and enables an in-depth analysis of frame use by different actors. To evaluate the operational definition of each frame, a pilot reliability test was conducted with two researchers coding independently 10 per cent of texts randomly chosen from the corpus. Differences were resolved through discussion. A high level of intercoder reliability was secured for all the 14 frames before the remainder of the coding was carried out.

Findings (1): 14 frames

Grounded in the inductive frame analysis, 14 frames were identified and constructed on five dimensions of the BRI (Table 1). In what follows, each frame

Table 1. An overview of frames on BRI

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Problematising frames</i>	<i>Non-problematising frames</i>
<i>China's motivations</i>	<i>Ploy; Zero-sum game</i>	<i>Equality</i>
<i>Implications</i>	<i>Bane; Lopsided</i>	<i>Boon</i>
<i>Standards</i>	<i>Below par; Qualified yes</i>	<i>Up to par</i>
<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Bumpy ride; Catchall</i>	<i>Off with a bang</i>
<i>Linkage to the past</i>	<i>Old wine in new bottles</i>	<i>Historical legacy</i>

is articulated and substantiated with emblematic framing and reasoning devices.

Ploy

This frame portrays the BRI as a 'delivery vehicle' for China's interests. Apart from stressing the predominant position of Beijing in bilateral BRI cooperation, it points to the self-interested calculations behind the initiative. First, the BRI is seen as a tool to advance China's geopolitical and strategic interests, including expanding military presence, ensuring energy supplies, and increasing soft power. Second, the BRI is believed to serve primarily China's narrow economic ends, such as offloading industrial overcapacity, creating overseas markets for Chinese companies and furthering internationalisation of RMB. Third, the BRI is viewed as President Xi's personal project and is connected to another legacy of the leader – the 'Chinese Dream'; the first BRI was timed to bolster his authority and legitimacy within the Communist Party before the 19th Party Congress (Kelly 2017). In addition, the BRI is said to play a role in reckoning with regional disparities in China and strengthening security in the restive regions of Xinjiang and Tibet.

Zero-sum game

This frame characterises the BRI as part of the intensifying power struggles between China and other actors. Specifically, China vs the European Union (EU) in Central and Eastern Europe, China vs Russia in Central Asia, China vs India in South Asia, China vs the US, Japan, and Australia in the Asia-Pacific. It plays up the strategic concerns of major players over the ever-sprawling ambition of Beijing, and more importantly, their counterstrategy to curb the 'creeping influence' of China. Following this reasoning, alternatives to the BRI, exemplified by the Infrastructure Investment Fund and Blue Dot Network launched by the US, Japan and Australia, and the EU Connectivity Strategy, are considered as countermoves to take on China's growing presence and primacy in infrastructure. Countries caught in between face a binary choice between developing physical infrastructure with China or maintaining 'political infrastructure' with the US (Isaac 2019). In particular, the participation of Italy, a G7 member, in the BRI was held up as a symbolic event that 'signaled waning American influence, a rising China and tensions among the founding partners of the European Union' (Horowitz 2019).

Equality

The frame highlights the principle of equality, with three main prongs. First, China is presented as an actor committed to forging equal partnerships rather than foisting the BRI on other countries (Cui 2017). Second, the BRI is said to extend welcome to countries perceived as rivals of China or having conflicting interests with Beijing, and to nations and regions beyond the ancient Silk Road. It is 'not an exclusive club but an open space for friends' (Wang 2018). Third, BRI cooperation is to be guided by the 'golden rules' of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits. It is 'a real chorus comprising all countries along the routes, not a solo for China itself' (Xi 2015).

Bane

This frame cautions against the downsides and often underappreciated strategic risks of BRI investments (*Financial Times* 2019). First, the BRI is seen as Chinese 'debt trap diplomacy'. As stated here, 'China encourages dependency using opaque contracts, predatory loan practices and corrupt deals that mire nations in debt and undercut their sovereignty' (Dorsey 2018). The Hambantota port⁴ in Sri Lanka was widely cited as a cautionary tale of how Beijing leveraged debts to take over key infrastructure. Second, as a BRI flagship initiative, the CPEC crosses territories disputed by India and Pakistan. Because of this, India has been slamming China for being insensitive to its sovereignty concerns. Third, constructing large infrastructure projects can cause social disruption and environmental damage due to the expropriation of lands, influx of Chinese workers, building of Chinese cities overseas, and export of Chinese polluting industries. Moreover, the BRI is said to harm local businesses by opening the floodgate to cheap Chinese commodities, encouraging corruption by doling out loans with few conditions, and jeopardising the prospects of host countries by stalling necessary reforms.

Lopsided

This frame, while acknowledging the BRI's benefits, underlines the lopsided gains accrued to China and the elites of host countries. First, there are claims that most BRI projects and contracts are awarded to Chinese state enterprises that borrow money from Chinese banks and use machinery, raw materials and workers imported from China (Horobin 2018). This leads to the exclusion of local people and companies. Second, planned rail links between China and Europe are marred by 'one-way traffic', a contributing factor to a situation in which it remains frustratingly difficult for foreign investors to do business in China owing to access restrictions (Wuttke 2017). Third, BRI projects mostly benefit national and local elites – negotiators preferred by China – and have minimum trickle-down effect on the wider population (Sharma 2017). In some cases, project priority is based on fealty, leading to white elephant projects that

⁴ Sri Lanka accepted a debt-for-equity swap and gave China Merchants (a Chinese state-owned company) a majority stake in the Hambantota port for 99 years.

are designed to prop up authoritarian leaders but are of little use to local people.

Boon

This frame makes the case for the substantial benefits and ‘win-win’ nature of the BRI. First, the BRI is touted as a ‘project of the century’. By funding infrastructure building and improving connectivity, it generates a wide array of benefits, such as accelerating growth, advancing trade liberalisation and recharging globalisation against Trumpian protectionism, and promoting peace and stability (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). Second, infrastructure construction opens business opportunities, especially for companies in financing, consulting, construction, and logistics (UK Treasury 2019). Third, the BRI is extolled as a useful complement to existing institutional arrangements at international level and national policy initiatives, such as the UK’s Northern Powerhouse and Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (Xi 2017).

Below par

This frame stresses the dubious standards of the BRI. The bulk of BRI projects are financed and executed by Chinese policy and commercial banks and state-run companies. These are actors with a poor record in compliance. It follows that the BRI will disregard international standards in transparency, open bidding, corruption, social and environmental safeguards, and human rights. Some criticisms include ‘tied financing, little due diligence, outsized projects, weak project oversight, and fraudulent and corrupt practices’ (Doherty 2019). In this light, the reluctance of major economies to join is attributed to their concern over standards and countries that joined have been lambasted for ‘lend[ing] legitimacy to China’s predatory approach to investment’ (Isaac 2019). Alternatives including the Blue Dot Network and EU Connectivity Strategy are presented as better options that deliver high-quality and sustainable infrastructure.

Qualified yes

This frame contends that it is possible or even desirable to cooperate under the BRI if certain conditions are met. While still voicing concerns about lending standards, the frame does not dismiss the BRI altogether but sets conditions for cooperation. This approach is manifest in the position adopted by the Japanese government. As the outgoing Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said, Tokyo would stand ready to cooperate with China under the BRI, provided that the Chinese initiative is ‘economically viable’ and ‘open to use by all, and to be developed through procurement that is transparent and fair’ (Japanese Prime Minister’s Office 2017). In so doing, countries can push China and the BRI to institute high standards of cooperation.

Up to par

This frame argues that the BRI and China espouse international standards. It refers primarily to rhetorical reassurances made by Chinese officials. It is stated that the BRI ‘follows market rules and internationally accepted practice, seeking to harmonize economic, social, financial and environmental objectives’ (Liu 2018). In response to increasing pushbacks and criticisms, President Xi (2019) stressed during the second BRF the commitment of the BRI and China to international standards: ‘we will adopt widely accepted rules and standards and encourage participating companies to follow general international rules and standards in project development, operation, procurement and tendering and bidding.’

Bumpy ride

This frame draws attention to the BRI’s problems and challenges. First, problems have emerged inside China. It is said that there was a lack of coordination as local governments competed for resources (Yu 2018). More recently, China has tightened capital outflows and started curtailing BRI investments amid falling foreign currency reserves (Pei 2019). Second, the BRI met setbacks in countries where Chinese investments were embraced initially. Often cited cases are Malaysia, Myanmar, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, where BRI projects were suspended or scaled back due to rising debts and popular protests. Third, the BRI struggled to win over most established powers, as evidenced by the absence of heads of state or government at the two BRFs from the G7 (except Italy). In addition, it is envisaged that the BRI needs to grapple with a multiplicity of risks and challenges, such as China’s own economic slowdown, geopolitical complexity, and unstable environments with high political-security and default risks (Li and Zeng 2019).

Catchall

This frame portrays the BRI as an amorphous and ever-expanding project. Driven by China’s sprawling ambition, the BRI has expanded far beyond the original conceit and its six corridors have been stretching ‘octopus-like’ into the entire globe (Clark 2016). As for thematic coverage, there has been prevalent ‘mission creep’ because of the loosely defined criteria. The BRI brand has been ‘extended to fashion shows, art exhibits, marathons and domestic flights’ (Hillman 2018). Rampant expansion and ambiguity have given rise to two problems. First, the BRI has become ‘so big and diffuse that it lacks focus’ (Magnus 2017). Second, confusion abounds. ‘Who determines what is a Belt and Road project or a Belt and Road country? Nobody is sure. Everything and nothing is Belt and Road’ (Kuo and Kommenda 2018).

Off with a bang

This frame focuses on the progress of the BRI and the external support it garnered. First, it is said that the BRI gained traction and made substantive progress within a short period of time in the five areas of connectivity. The

amount of investment under the BRI was increasing steadily and more was pledged during the BRFs. Second, increasing international support for the BRI, as evidenced by the turnout at the BRFs and the number of bilateral agreements signed between China and foreign governments and international organisations, was interpreted as proof of progress and external approval (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019). Given the momentum that the BRI has gathered thus far, there is reason to believe that the BRI will have promising prospects.

Old wine in new bottles

This frame brings to light that a fair number of projects included under the BRI predated the initiative. It is stated that certain BRI projects in the Western provinces of China were part of the 'Western Development' plan that started in 2000. Some overseas Chinese investments co-opted into the BRI were merely a continuation of the 'Going Out' strategy that had already commenced in 1999. To jostle for 'economic and political spoils' (Hillman 2018), bureaucrats and businessmen inside and outside of China were quick to rebrand old projects as relating to the BRI. As such, the alleged trillion-dollar initiative is nothing but 'a repackaging of existing projects than new money on the table' (Denyer 2017), and many activities incorporated in the BRI 'would have happened even if the words had never been uttered' (Parton 2018).

Historical legacy

This frame presents the BRI as a modern incarnation of the ancient Silk Road – a network of trade routes that once linked East and West. The BRI's purported historical roots are manifested in two main aspects. First, the BRI is depicted as a proposal that revitalises the ancient Silk Road and resembles it in respect of aims, guiding principles, and implications. It carries on the spirit of the ancient Silk Road: peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit (Xi 2017). Second, it is said that the BRI's original conceit is in broad agreement with its historical counterpart. As the initiative branches out, nations and regions beyond the Eurasian landmass are branded as a 'natural extension' or included because of their 'historical silk connections'.

Findings (2): frame use

After identifying the frames, a deductive analysis was conducted to study the frame use by different actors over time. The key findings presented here are based on the result of a deductive coding process whereby each of the texts was coded along the lines of the 14 frames and their respective framing and reasoning devices as described above.

Table 2. Framing by Chinese officials

	Total N = 644	2013 n = 4	2014 n = 31	2015 n = 87	2016 n = 46	2017 n = 222	2018 n = 107	2019 n = 147
<i>Historical legacy</i>	0.45	1.00	0.90	0.80	0.39	0.48	0.34	0.16
<i>Boon</i>	0.98	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.93	0.98	0.99	0.96
<i>Equality</i>	0.76	0.25	0.58	0.78	0.59	0.81	0.80	0.74
<i>Up to par</i>	0.26	0.00	0.03	0.18	0.09	0.10	0.49	0.48
<i>Off with a bang</i>	0.88	0.50	0.48	0.75	0.89	0.92	0.98	0.93

Framing by Chinese officials

China initiated the BRI in late 2013. Since then, it has sought to secure broad support from the international community and establish legitimacy for the initiative. To that end, all the problematising frames were left out or rejected in Chinese official rhetoric. Overall, among the diverse claims, Chinese officials were keen to stress, as shown in the distribution of claims at the aggregate level (Table 2), benefits and business opportunities the BRI generates (*Boon*), progress the initiative had made and international support it had secured (*Off with a bang*), equality in respect of membership and participation in decision-making (*Equality*), and to a lesser extent, linkage to ancient Silk Road (*Historical legacy*). Surprisingly though, these claims were much less communicative about complying with international high standards (*Up to par*), as demonstrated by the considerably lower numerical representation. Still, a closer look at the frame evolution reveals growing attention to lending standards since 2018. This can be attributed in large measure to the increasingly frequent efforts by China to counter external criticisms and pushbacks against the BRI, which culminated in the speech made by Xi during the second BRF. Moreover, there was a notable shift from reference to Silk Road history (*Historical legacy*) to the actual implementation of the BRI and external support for it (*Off with a bang*) as projects were rolled out and the initiative started to bear fruit.

Framing by foreign political elites

This section is based on a deductive analysis of the official discourse and news coverage of five countries: India, UK, US, Japan, and Australia.

Among the five countries, India was arguably the most vehement sceptic. Its two-pronged position on the BRI crystallised after its high-profile boycott of the first BRF and has remained consistent since then. New Delhi lashed out against China's insensitivity to India's concerns about sovereignty and territorial integrity and rising debts of some host countries (*Bane*) and stressed the need for the BRI to comply with high standards, implying it did not (*Below par*). As said here,

Government is of the firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms. They must follow principles of openness, transparency and financial responsibility and must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty, equality and territorial integrity of nations (Indian Ministry of External Affairs 2019).

The US government repeatedly pointed to the opaqueness of BRI projects and associated 'predatory lending practice' (*Below par*), which it claimed might

carry strategic risks for small and weak economies and ensnare them into a ‘debt trap’ (*Bane*) (US State Department 2019). The newly established International Development Finance Corporation and the Blue Dot Network were presented as better alternatives that guarantee the quality of infrastructure projects. Also, US officials did not shy away from characterising the BRI as a strategic tool for China to strengthen political and economic influence (*Ploy*).

The Japanese government did not have a clear position on the BRI until 2017. During a summit meeting between Xi and Abe in 2015, the latter only said he was ‘paying attention to how that concept [BRI] will be materialized’ (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). Japan’s position, which was unveiled before the first BRF and remained largely unchanged since then, was different from that of India and the US. It indicated the government would engage with China on the BRI if projects meet high standards (*Qualified yes*). As stated here,

Japan could consider cooperation case-by-case for projects that firmly match the standards that are being established internationally, namely taking into consideration international standards and transparency, openness, the soundness of the project and the fiscal soundness of the country accepting the financing, and environmental and social factors (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018).

The UK government was keen to emphasise from the beginning the role of the BRI in delivering infrastructure and the commercial opportunities for UK businesses and the city of London, and the status of UK as ‘a natural partner’ (*Boon*), often invoked within the context of the imperative to secure new trade agreements after Brexit. While recognising the BRI’s benefits, London never indicated willingness to formally sign up, in contrast to its prompt decision to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The UK’s position went through a notable change in early 2018 after the BRI suffered a series of setbacks, with the government starting to increasingly stress the need for the BRI to meet high standards. This change of position is evident by comparing the two speeches delivered by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond during the first and second BRF. The second speech, albeit echoing the rhetoric in the first speech about benefits and the UK as ‘a natural partner’, aired a list of conditions for the BRI to succeed, including: ‘operate to the highest international standards’, ‘create genuine win-win outcomes’, ‘sensitivity to local concerns and traditions’ and ‘full transparency around projects and around the sustainability of the debt’ (HM Treasury 2019).

The official position of Australia, at least at the federal level, was similar to that of Japan and the UK. Canberra recognised the BRI’s potential contribution to regional development and opportunities for Australian businesses (*Boon*) but declined to back the BRI as a whole and would only support ‘investments with commercial merit that meet genuine market need and international standards, including on transparency and debt sustainability’ (*Qualified yes*) (Australian Prime Minister’s Office 2019a). That said, there was a fissure between the federal government and the state of Victoria. The latter inked a Memorandum of Understanding with China in October 2018, pointing to the commercial benefits by signing onto the BRI (*Boon*). This pushed the federal

Table 3. Framing by foreign political-media elites

Country Frame	Official discourse					Media coverage				
	IN n = 17	US n = 17	JP n = 13	UK n = 21	AU n = 9	IN n = 222	US n = 230	JP n = 262	UK n = 203	AU n = 199
<i>Ploy</i>	0.12	0.47	0.00	0.00	0.11	0.43	0.72	0.59	0.66	0.66
<i>Zero-sum game</i>	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.11	0.38	0.43	0.41	0.32	0.38
<i>Equality</i>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.03	0.02	0.07	0.05
<i>Bane</i>	0.76	0.59	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.74	0.60	0.52	0.47	0.53
<i>Lopsided</i>	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.10	0.06	0.04	0.06
<i>Boon</i>	0.00	0.00	0.08	0.95	0.33	0.26	0.43	0.33	0.51	0.54
<i>Bumpy ride</i>	0.00	0.12	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.31	0.50	0.40	0.41	0.33
<i>Off with a Bang</i>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.07	0.11	0.08	0.09	0.15
<i>Below par</i>	0.65	0.82	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.25	0.31	0.19	0.17	0.19
<i>Qualified yes</i>	0.00	0.00	0.64	0.24	0.56	0.01	0.02	0.07	0.01	0.06
<i>Up to par</i>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.08	0.05	0.06	0.06
<i>Catchall</i>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.12	0.07	0.16	0.08
<i>Old wine in new bottles</i>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.06
<i>Historical legacy</i>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.11	0.05

government, as it sought to reprimand the state of Victoria and cancel the BRI deal, to underline the BRI's potential risks to the national interests of Australia (*Bane*) (Australian Prime Minister's Office 2019b).

One thing worth noting at this point is that while tensions and disagreements might have existed between ministries of the three countries adopting the position of conditional engagement (between those in charge of finance, trade, and investment, and those of foreign affairs, security, and defence), as reported in media and discussed by some analysts, no notable difference was observed at the level of official discourse.

Framing by foreign media elites

Elite media of the five countries, as presented in Table 3 (right), focused on the problematising frames *Ploy*, *Zero-sum game*, *Bane*, *Below par* and *Bumpy ride*, foregrounding the ulterior motivations of China, intensifying power struggles between China and other actors, negative consequences associated with the BRI and Chinese loans that are deemed not in compliance with best practices, and various problems and challenges facing the BRI. Media coverage clearly represented concerns raised by foreign political elites, but it equally attested to the aspiration of the media to set the parameters for the BRI discussion by mainstreaming frames such as *Ploy* and *Zero-sum game* and bringing in alternative perspectives such as *Lopsided*, *Catchall* and *Old wine in new bottles*. This enriched the debate and made it more dynamic. Overwhelmingly negative reporting notwithstanding, there was some degree of agreement among elite media regarding the claim about the BRI's potential usefulness, as seen in the frequency of the *Boon* frame.

Table 4. Evolution of frame use by foreign elite media (2017–2019)

Frame \ Year	IN			US			JP			UK			AU		
	'17	'18	'19	'17	'18	'19	'17	'18	'19	'17	'18	'19	'17	'18	'19
<i>Ploy</i>	0.43	0.40	0.42	0.81	0.68	0.59	0.75	0.42	0.48	0.69	0.58	0.54	0.73	0.67	0.48
<i>Zero-sum game</i>	0.38	0.30	0.53	0.38	0.40	0.53	0.34	0.31	0.51	0.31	0.19	0.52	0.29	0.45	0.38
<i>Bane</i>	0.77	0.75	0.80	0.36	0.85	0.59	0.36	0.62	0.63	0.29	0.64	0.66	0.31	0.62	0.70
<i>Lopsided</i>	0.01	0.05	0.07	0.00	0.16	0.43	0.04	0.08	0.31	0.02	0.04	0.26	0.00	0.07	0.48
<i>Boon</i>	0.34	0.21	0.09	0.59	0.33	0.14	0.40	0.33	0.07	0.65	0.52	0.10	0.69	0.44	0.13
<i>Bumpy Ride</i>	0.20	0.34	0.42	0.48	0.61	0.47	0.42	0.41	0.41	0.35	0.51	0.36	0.33	0.28	0.25
<i>Below par</i>	0.22	0.23	0.36	0.36	0.29	0.39	0.17	0.21	0.25	0.04	0.22	0.34	0.13	0.21	0.28

Differences between the selected elite media are rather minor and their frame use tends to converge. That said, some nuanced differences, reflecting varying national context, can be observed. US media were more prone to applying the *Ploy* frame to describe the BRI as a crude Chinese foreign policy tool and *Zero-sum game* frame to portray the BRI as a prime example of heightened US-China strategic rivalry. Indian media, echoing the Indian government, were more active in invoking the *Bane* frame to attack the traversal of the BRI/CPEC across the disputed Kashmir and warn neighbouring states traditionally under the influence of India against the hidden risks of BRI loans. UK and Australian media, while sharing concerns about the motives of China and downsides of the BRI, were noticeably more sanguine about its benefits, especially in terms of business opportunities (*Boon*).

To canvass frame use by foreign media over time, the study gathered a national subsample for each of the five countries with all the news articles collected from 2017 to 2019. The reason for focusing on this period is that most foreign media only started to cover the BRI regularly in the wake of the first BRF, although China began to promote it since late 2013. Table 4 presents the evolution of frames that were invoked more frequently, as seen in Table 3. It is clear that media coverage of the BRI in the five countries became increasingly critical, as demonstrated by the observable decrease in the use of such frames as *Boon* and the almost across-the-board increase in the use of frames such as *Bane*, *Lopsided*, and *Below par*. The evolution of other problematising frames such as *Ploy*, *Zero-sum game* and *Bumpy ride* was mixed, but their frequency remained high.

Conclusions

This research sought to unpack the contentious debate on the BRI and present a holistic understanding of it from the vantage point of cultural framing. Through an inductive content analysis of the purpose-built corpus, it identified 14 frames, which organised the BRI debate along five dimensions: China's intentions (*Ploy*, *Zero-sum game*, *Equality*), the BRI's implications for other countries (*Bane*, *Lopsided*, *Boon*), compliance with international high standards (*Below par*, *Qualified yes*, *Up to par*), outcomes (*Bumpy ride*, *Catchall*, *Off with a bang*), and linkage to the past (*Old wine in new bottles*, *Historical legacy*). A subsequent deductive analysis, along the lines of the 14 frames, uncovered the

patterns of frame use in the communications of Chinese officials and political-media elites of five countries featuring large in the BRI debate. In so doing, this study has revealed the core claims constituting China's discursive legitimization of the BRI, the continuity or change in the position on the BRI taken by foreign governments and their justifications, and the increasing critical coverage by foreign elite media.

This study makes four arguments based on the empirical findings. First, there was an array of diagonally opposite perspectives on the BRI, identified as frames and counter-frames, that turned the debate into a full-blown and increasingly politicised framing contest. In addition to the all-important question on whether the BRI is a well-conceived grand project or loosely defined fragmented rubric, the debate was structured around related issues such as concerns about lending standards (*Below par, Qualified yes*), uneven benefit distribution (*Lopsided*), mission creep (*Catchall*) and questionable value added of the BRI (*Old wine in new bottles*). These perspectives, often overlooked in the existing literature fixated on geopolitics and geoeconomics, are just as interesting and useful for our understanding of the BRI.

Second, analysis of Chinese official discourse revealed the government's sustained emphasis on the benefits and progress of the BRI (*Boon, Off with a bang*) and on the strategic narrative 'extensive consultation, joint contribution, shared benefits' (*Equality*). Nevertheless, scant reference to lending standards, especially before the emergence of setbacks and the second BRF, was surprising given the persistent criticisms of the scheme. Only after the high-profile intervention of Xi during the second BRF that committed the BRI and China to high standards (*Up to par*) was there increased and sustained attention to this issue. It remains to be seen how effective such reactive framing is in countering distrust.

Third, analysis of the official discourse of the five foreign governments brought to light common concerns over the lending standards of BRI projects and Chinese investments at large. More interestingly, it reflected the tension between geopolitical-strategic calculations (*Ploy, Zero-sum game*) and commercial interests (*Boon*), leading to the recourse to the issue of lending standards as normative justifications (*Below par, Qualified yes*). Driven primarily by geopolitical considerations, the US and India camped on a position of categorical dismissal, at least at the official level. The UK and Australia, eyeing business opportunities, opted for a position to cooperate under certain conditions. Japan, often in lockstep with the US on strategic issues relating to China, adopted a position similar to the UK and Australia and agreed to cooperate on a case-by-case basis, a decision seemingly surprising but understandable given the decision of the Trump administration to pull the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and retreat from the Asia-Pacific.

Fourth, analysis of foreign media coverage showed their prevalent use of problematising frames (*Ploy, Zero-sum game, Bane, Bumpy ride, Below par*), which became more pronounced as the BRI met setbacks. While they were somewhat sympathetic towards the huge demand for infrastructure financing and potential benefits of the BRI (*Boon*), a core claim of China echoed by some foreign officials, foreign media were systematically prone to portraying the initiative as a crude tool to advance China's narrow interests (*Ploy*), a paradigmatic example of intensifying power rivalries between China and the US or their own country (*Zero-sum game*), and an insidious debt trap to subjugate small

and weak economies (*Bane*). This sustains and heightens the increasingly negative perception of the BRI among foreign media elites, a problem that needs to be reckoned with by China and countries considering lending support to the initiative.

In a broader context, the set of frames and counter-frames identified here can be equally relevant for the ongoing debate on China's efforts to launch and spearhead structures alternative to the incumbents in the international system. Chinese official discourse on the BRI reflects the government's discursive practices to legitimate China-backed alternatives. Prevalent reference to the BRI's utility and benefits (*Boon*), open membership and collective decision-making (*Equality*), actual progress and external support (*Off with a bang*), brings to light some core claims constituting China's rhetorical legitimization. At the same time, frame use by foreign political-media elites on the BRI is symptomatic of the ambivalence in foreign policy and epistemic communities with reference to structures and initiatives favoured by China. Substantively, the BRI, much analogous to the AIIB, was regarded as both an opportunity to fill the gap in infrastructure finance and reap benefits from more Chinese investments and market access (*Boon*), and a challenge that can upend incumbent powers and institutions (*Zero-sum game*). Most established powers have shunned the BRI thus far, often citing reservations about standards (*Below par*) or signalling willingness to cooperate under conditions (*Qualified yes*). Some have already rolled out alternatives that are regarded as countermoves (*Zero-sum game*) or framed as a welcome change to Chinese lending practices (*Below par*). For countries in need of development financing, the dilemma is more acute. Some rely heavily on Chinese investment to finance underdeveloped infrastructure (*Boon*), but they remain wary about the hidden agenda of China (*Ploy*) and rising debt levels (*Bane*).

Conceivably, this study has its limitations. Due to pragmatic considerations such as language skills, expertise and data access, the analysis focuses exclusively on Chinese official rhetoric and political-media discourse of five countries that featured prominently in the debate. It is thus by no means exhaustive in terms of empirical data. Also, this research does not examine the issue of frame sponsoring in media, namely, who succeeds in communicating their views in the news – a contested site in and of itself. This can be a fruitful avenue for future research.

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Supplementary material

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Appendix A. Description of the sample

Country	Name	Type	Source	Number of official texts
China	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Official source	www.fmprc.gov.cn	Total: 644
Country	Name	Type	Source	Number of official texts/new articles
India	Ministry of External Relations	Official source	www.mea.gov.in	17
	<i>The Hindu</i>	Daily broadsheet	ProQuest	54
	<i>Times of India</i>	Daily broadsheet	LexisNexis	62
	<i>Economic Times</i>	Financial newspaper	LexisNexis	116
UK	Prime Minister's Office Treasury, Foreign Office	Official source	www.gov.uk	21
	<i>The Guardian</i>	Daily broadsheet	www.theguardian.com/uk	32
	<i>The Telegraph</i>	Daily broadsheet	ProQuest	31
	<i>Financial Times</i>	Financial newspaper	LexisNexis	140
US	Department of State	Official source	www.state.gov	17
	Department of Defense		dod.defense.gov	
	<i>New York Times</i>	Daily broadsheet	LexisNexis	44
	<i>Washington Post</i>	Daily broadsheet	LexisNexis	36
	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	Financial newspaper	ProQuest	62
	<i>Bloomberg News</i>	Financial newspaper	ProQuest	36
	<i>Associated Press</i>	News agency	LexisNexis	52
Japan	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Official source	www.mofa.go.jp/www.mod.go.jp	13
	Ministry of Defense			
	<i>Japan News</i>	Daily broadsheet	ProQuest	22
	<i>Japan Times</i>	Daily broadsheet	www.asahi.com/ajw/japan	61
	<i>Nikkei Asian Review</i>	Financial newspaper	www.japantimes.co.jp/asia.nikkei.com/	179
Australia	Prime Minister's Office, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	Office source	www.pm.gov.au/www.dfat.gov.au	9
	<i>The Australian</i>	Daily broadsheet	LexisNexis	77
	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	Daily broadsheet	ProQuest	69
	<i>Australian Financial Review</i>	Financial newspaper	ProQuest	53

Appendix B. Frame table

China vis-à-vis BRI Frame (dimensions)	Description
<i>Ploy</i> Geopolitical and strategic interests	BRI is a delivery vehicle for Chinese interests
Economic and commercial interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China-dictated • Expand military footprint • Acquire resources, energy & technology • Extend soft power and influence • Export authoritarian model • Encourage cyber surveillance & espionage • Offload industrial overcapacity, create new markets for Chinese companies • Boost Chinese exports • Upgrade industry & spread Chinese industrial standards • Internationalize RMB • Diversify foreign currency reserve
Regional disparities	Address widening regional disparities, particularly the under-developed inland provinces
Security in Xinjiang and Tibet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain stability and enhance security through infrastructure development • BRI is part of the move to strengthen control over the restive regions
Legitimacy of Chinese Communist Party and President Xi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BRI is a pet project of President Xi and features largely in the realization of Chinese Dream • Belt and Road Forum was well-timed to boost Xi's image before the 19th party Congress
Zero-sum game	BRI is part of a strategic game between China and (...) competing for sphere of influence
<i>Equality</i>	BRI is an initiative wherein every country is welcome and every participant has an equal say
Decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China will not dominate • Collective decision-making in planning and implementing • Extensive consultation & joint contribution (共商共建)
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BRI opens to all countries/regions across the globe
BRI's implications for others Frame (dimensions) <i>Bane</i>	Description BRI is a trojan horse with hidden dangers and risks
Debt trap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build expensive white elephants • Increase debt levels and risks • Undermine financial sustainability

(Continued)

China vis-à-vis BRI Frame (dimensions)	Description
Disregard of sovereignty and territorial integrity Social-cultural disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create over-dependence, vassal states, a new form of colonialism • Cross disputed Kashmir & violate India's sovereignty and territorial integrity • Worsen existing tensions between different groups • Threaten national-ethnic identity (influx of Chinese workers)
Environmental damage & pollution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land grabs & overseas Chinese cities • Large-scale projects exert major strains on local ecological system • China exports polluting industries such as coal-fired power plants
Other harmful consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flood local markets & hurt local businesses-industries • Lead to corruption • Undermine regional or state (e.g. federal and state level in Australia) unity • Threat to national and cyber security • Export surveillance state apparatus
Lopsided	<p>BRI has little (to no) trickle-down effects on the local populations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most projects go to Chinese companies that hire Chinese workers • BRI rail links are characterized by 'one-way traffic' • Projects were built to curry favor with (corrupt) political figures – based on political fealty
Boon	<p>BRI is a force for good and brings benefits for everyone</p>
Infrastructure & development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructure construction and connectivity • Trade liberalization, investment facilitation, globalization 2.0, multilateralism
Business opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic growth, competitiveness, jobs • Bring opportunities for sectors such as mining, construction, logistics, engineering
Complement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dovetails with development plans and policy initiatives of other countries • Reinforce the incumbent international architecture
Standards & safeguards Frame (dimensions) <i>Below par</i>	<p>Description</p> <p>BRI projects does (or will) not align with international high standards and best practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese bilateral lending is non-transparent and disregards social-environmental risks • Opaque lending practices increase the risk of over-pricing and corruption • Problematic BRI projects attest to failure to follow common practices
<i>Qualified yes</i>	<p>BRI should be welcomed or accepted provided certain conditions were met</p>

(Continued)

China vis-à-vis BRI Frame (dimensions)	Description
<i>Up to par</i>	<p>BRI upholds international high standards and adopts best practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BRI follows internationally accepted rules (e.g. financial sustainability, transparency, social-environmental protocol, labor protection) • BRI projects are thoroughly assessed and meet high standards
Actual outcomes & future prospects <i>Bumpy ride</i>	<p>BRI has encountered major setbacks and will face daunting challenges moving forward</p>
Problems & setbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several countries dependent on Chinese investment decided to cancel or scale back projects due to overpricing, corruption, and/or local protests • Sustained opposition by the Indian government • Rising international and domestic criticism about the BRI's sustainability • A number of major economies refuse to attend the BRFs • Lack of coordination inside China leads to confusion and fragmentation • China has tightened capital controls amid falling foreign currency reserves, thus slowing down BRI investments • BRI can be a trap for China itself • Chinese grandiose investment pledges have failed to materialize
Challenges & risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geopolitical & security risks • Financial viability & loan defaults
<i>Catchall</i>	<p>BRI is amorphous, expansive, and open-ended</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no clear criteria as to what counts as BRI • Sweeping geographical coverage: BRI expands across the globe • 'Mission creep': BRI brand extended to areas of little relevance • Misuse of the BRI label
<i>Off with a bang</i>	<p>BRI has made rapid progress and received extensive support</p>
Rapid progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BRI has swiftly transformed from a vision to reality • BRI has made headway in the five connectivities, particularly in infrastructure
External support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A growing number of foreign states and international organizations have inked agreements with China to support BRI.
BRI in relation to the past <i>Old wine in new bottles</i>	<p>BRI is a repackaging of existing projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many so-called BRI projects predated the proposition of the initiative

(Continued)

China vis-à-vis BRI Frame (dimensions)	Description
<i>Historical legacy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chinese bureaucrats and businessmen rebrand old projects as supporting BRI to compete for money and attention <p>BRI a modern incarnation of the ancient silk routes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The history of Silk Road and how it brought different nations and civilizations together• BRI carries on the Silk Road tradition• Countries situated outside the Eurasian landmass are natural extensions owing to their historical links to ancient Silk routes
