Belt and Road Initiative and China's Strategic Culture

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Abstract

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) does not hinge on economy alone but it has strategic underpinnings and implications also. The role of Chinese perceptions and behaviours in designing and executing BRI has either been dismissed or taken as an explanation of last resort. Cultural values, norms, perceptions, self-perception and self-conception are essential to understanding a state's strategies and policies. In this context, while applying the theoretical framework of "Strategic Culture," this paper discusses the salient features of the Chinese strategic culture and explains how it reflects in BRI. This study found out that security and economy are interlinked and complementary to each other in China's Strategic Culture and BRI is a strategic response to the country's internal and external threats, which are linked to its cultural legacy and national obligations. The paper concludes with the assumption that China may not be willing to indulge into an all-out conflict, yet, there is a strong likelihood that it will build its deterrence capabilities by deftly employing a mix of its conventional defensive and the active defence approaches.

Keywords: Chinese Strategic Culture, Active Defence, Belt and Road Initiative, China's Rise.

Introduction

With the slogan of "Hide your strength, Bide your time," China embarked on its development journey but now, when time and the circumstances are different, the era of 'biding time' is coming to an end. Today's '"Rising China"' is showcasing many grand policy initiatives at national and international level. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one of them. It is a gigantic venture, which stretches over a vast territory of about 60 nations[1]

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[1] Gordon Watts, "China's 'Private Army' Prowls the New Silk Road," *Asia Times*, August 20, 2018,

and now even reaching to the Latin American and Caribbean Countries.[2] For a trans-national project of such a grand scale, which passes from the regions of geo-strategic importance, conflicts and internal strife, it is hard to grasp that BRI hinges on economy alone. The multi-dimensional implications of BRI and the significance that Beijing attaches to it is nonetheless striking. Why China is undertaking such a huge project?

The Chinese President, Xi Jinping, expressed his country's desire to jointly build an economic belt with the Central Asian countries along the Silk Road to deepen cooperation and expand development in the Eurasian region while announcing his "Belt" and "Road" initiative in an address to Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan on September 7, 2013. "Belt" refers to an extensive network of overland corridors and the "Road" symbolises the maritime route of shipping lanes. The goal of 'the Belt' is to build an inter-regional network of rail routes and overland road, oil and gas pipelines and power grids, which will connect Xingjian, Xian, Central Asia, Rotterdam, Moscow and Venice. A month later, in his address to the Indonesian Parliament, he urged the Southeast Asian nations to work with Beijing in furthering the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The goal of 'Road' is to connect China with South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Africa and Mediterranean with a chain of seaports.[3] With the help of BRI, China aspires to knit together a web of institutions and nations to integrate South Asia, Central Asia, Middle East, Europe and Asia Pacific into a "community of shared destiny and responsibility."[4] It is a huge opportunity for these countries to engage in cooperation in trade, technology and economics while offering them a chance to enhance their self-reliance and sustain their independent development trajectory.

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http://www.atimes.com/article/chinas-private-army-prowls-the-new-silk-road/

[2] Fabian Cambero and Dave Sherwood, "China Invites Latin America to Take Part in One Belt, One Road," *Reuters*, January 22, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-chile-china/china-invites-latin-america-to-take-part-in-one-belt-one-road-idUSKBN1FB2CN

[3] Michael Clarke, "Beijing's March West: Opportunities and Challenges for China's Eurasian Pivot," *Orbis* 60, no.2 (2016), https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438716000028

[4] William A Callahan, "China's Asia Dream," *Asia Journal of Comparative Politics* 1, no. 3 (2016): 226-243, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2057891116647806

BRI is generally considered as an economic enterprise, which is meant to sustain China's economic growth after the 2007 financial crisis, reduce disparity between its rural and urban areas and address its excessive overproduction issues. This perspective, floated by the officials and non-officials Chinese sources, magnifies mostly the exclusive economic gains and tends to overlook the geo-political and geo-strategic underpinnings of BRI.[5] In many ways, BRI appears as Beijing's endeavour to break free from the US "encirclement" (the US Pivot to Asia) and resolve the Malacca Dilemma without any confrontation.[6] This is a two-fold strategy: to deftly avoid the US confrontation and increase the Chinese influence. President Xi himself subtly alluded to the strategic undertones of this initiative, many times, by referring to the 'deteriorating security environment' in which BRI is unfolding.[7]

BRI entails a broad-range of strategic, economic and political implications, therefore, it has become one of the most discussed themes in the recent discourse of international relations, particularly in foreign policy analyses and security studies. Giovanni B Andornino explains how Xi Jinping's administration is pursuing a grand strategy of trans-regional connectivity through BRI.[8] Emphasising the causes and implications of Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Jean-Marc Blanchard and Colin Flint, succinctly captured the geopolitical dynamics of BRI. By applying Arrghi's twin logics of territorial and economic power, they elucidated the aspects of peaceful collaboration and global reconfiguration in executing the Maritime

[5] Peter Cai, "Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, March 22, 2017, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/documents/Understanding%20China%E2%80%99s%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative_WEB_1.pdf

[6] Ashley J Tellis, "Protecting American Primacy in the Indo-Pacific," Testimony before the US Senate Armed Services Committee, April 25, 2017 and Jayant Parsad, "One Belt and Many Roads: China's Initiative and India's Response," *Delhi Policy Group*, September 2015.

[7] Chris Buckley and Olivia, "Environment, Security, Power: What China's Changing Vocabulary Reveals about its Future?" *New York Times*, October 19, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/19/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-language.html

[8] Giovanni B Andornino, "The Belt and Road Initiative in China's Emerging Grand Strategy of Connective Leadership," *China and World Economy* 25, no. 5 (2017): 4-22, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cwe.12211

Silk Road.[9] Nadáege Rolland's *China's Eurasia Century*[10] and Rafaello Pantucci and Sarah Lain's *China's Eurasian Pivot*[11] examined the strategic dimensions of BRI in a broader theme of trans-national cooperation and restructuring of the US-led world order.

While analysing this issue, the role of perceptions, behaviour and cultural norms is largely ignored despite the fact that culture influences the decision-making process to a great extent. Strategists and foreign-policy making elites do not formulate policies and strategies in a static environment. In fact, their thinking and perceptions deeply impact this process. It is especially true in case of China, which is endowed with a rich legacy of an ancient civilisation. Its strategic thinking is centuries old and evolved in a somewhat peculiar manner.[12] The realists and liberals fall short of behavioural predictions, which gave birth to Strategic Culture theory in international relations. Its central argument is that decision-making is not an abstract concept rather it is highly enmeshed in the collective values and ideas, beliefs and biases of a nation's civil and military elites.[13] These beliefs and perceptions, according to the strategic culture theorists, are considered as the constitutive elements in designing as well as executing a nation's security policies.[14] With this background, this paper answers two questions:

What are the salient features of the Chinese strategic culture and how does it reflect in BRI?

[9] Jean Marc F Blanchard and Colin Flint, "The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative," *Geopolitics* 22, no. 2 (2017): 223-245, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14650045.2017.1291503

[10] Nadaege Rolland, *China's Eurasia Century* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 195.

[11] Rafaello Pantucci and Sarah Lain, *China's Eurasian Pivot* (Royal United Services Institute, May 31, 2017), https://www.amazon.com/Chinas-Eurasian-Pivot-Economic-Whitehall/dp/1138079650

[12] Andrew Scobell, "China and Strategic Culture," Global Security, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2002/ssi_scobell.pdf

[13] Colin Grey, *National Strategy and National Style* (Lanham MD: Hamilton Press, 1986).

[14] Andrew Scobell, "China's Real Strategic Culture: A Great Wall of Imagination," *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 2 (2014): 211-226, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13523260.2014.927677

This paper debates the 'use of force' with a special reference to the Chinese culture and analyses whether it is peaceful or hostile. It tries to establish a link between strategic origins of BRI and the Chinese thinking while exploring what shapes the Chinese thought and behaviour towards economic and strategic imperatives.

Strategic Culture: An Overview

The term "Strategic Culture" has its origin in the 1940s and 1950s when "national character studies" were conducted by the US Office of War's Foreign Morale Analysis Division.[15] However, the academic debate began in the 1977, with the Jack Snyder's work, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options*.[16] The debate on cultural origins of a strategy and a state's strategic interests incited rethinking on the relevance of culture in analysing international events. In 1995, Lain Johnson pioneered the term, "Strategic Culture" in his book, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*[17] and since then, it has been in vogue.

Based on their understanding of constitutive elements of a state's culture, the scholars have defined Strategic Culture differently. Snyder terms it as, "the sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of habitual behaviour of strategic community of a country with regards to nuclear security."[18] Johnston ranked it as "grand strategic preferences derived from central paradigmatic assumptions about the nature of conflict and the enemy and collectively shared by decision makers."[19] Andrew Scobell describes it as "the set of fundamental and enduring assumptions about the role of collective violence in human affairs and the efficacy of applying force interpreted by a country's political and military elites."[20]

[15] Michael C Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Ideas," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998): 141-170, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539266?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

[16] Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Cooperation, 1977).

[17] Alastair I Johnson, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[18] Jack Snyder, "The Concept of Strategic Culture: Caveat Emptor," in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*. Jacobsen C G, eds., (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 33.

[19] Johnson, *Cultural Realism.*

[20] Ibid.

According to Johnson, identity, values, norms and perceptive lens are the main variables of Strategic Culture. Identity plays an important role in Strategic Culture and in the perception of culture, nation and self. He emphasises a nation-state's view of itself, comprising the traits of its national character, its intended regional and global roles and its perceptions of its eventual destiny.[21] Every nation values different attributes differently: for example, for some cultures the human rights are above security and some prefer equality and justice. The norms are accepted and expected modes of behaviour. An evaluation of norms may illuminate why some rational means toward an end goal are rejected as unacceptable, even though they would be perfectly efficient to some others.[22]

The perceptions of the histories, nation's image abroad, the capabilities of the leadership and of national resources, encompass the security-related ideas and all these factors play an essential role in strategic decision-making.[23] Strategic Culture is an important analytical tool, which provides a better view to the continuities of International Relations and the motivations behind a state's actions. This theory is particularly important for assessing a state's historical tendency to preserve its perceived spheres of influence. This is relevant to the case of China.

Chinese Strategic Culture: An Exposition

The Chinese strategic culture has been influenced during its long historical development by many factors such as culture, history, religion and philosophy. The Chinese history and the lessons of the Western interference, in the 19th century had a substantial impact on the Chinese foreign policy, which is visible even in the contemporary era. The identity influences the country's self-conception and self-perception. Cultural values of the Chinese society have been shaped by Confucian philosophy which influences the behaviour, thinking and actions. As a result of these factors, the Chinese strategic culture evolved in a peculiar manner giving it a unique identity. Overall, it has been influenced by three factors: traditional culture,

[21] Jeannie L Johnson, "Conclusion: Toward a Standard Methodological Approach," in *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights into Comparative National Security Policymaking*, ed., Jeannie L Johnson, Kerry M Kartchner and Jeffrey A Larsen (New York, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 243-58.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Scobell, "China's Real Strategic Culture."

communist ideology and modern Western values.[24] The conventional views are based on Confucianism which prefers non-violent solutions to the statecraft problems and interstate disputes. Confucianism was exemplified by the two famous Chinese intellectual, Confucius and Sun Zi. They favoured a defensive approach, sturdy fortification and peace over war. Generally, it is argued that the Chinese seek non-violent means to deal with their opponents and use force only when it becomes unavoidable as a defensive or controlled use of force.[25]

However, the recent Western studies contend this notion. Alastair Ian Johnston describes two notable characteristics in the Chinese strategic culture: Confucian-Mencian ─ named after Confucius and Mencius ─ and *Parabellum* ─ a Latin word which is translated as "prepare for war." He maintains that Confucian-Mencian elements are symbolic or idealised set of assumptions and categorised preferences. These notions assert that conflicts can be dealt with or averted through good-governance and co-opting with the external threats. This perspective advocates the use of force only when it becomes absolutely necessary and when it is substantiated with moral justification. These elements, hence, lay out grand strategic preferences that categorise accommodation first, then defensive and moral use of force, which leads to the last option i.e., offensive strategies.[26]

The ancient Chinese strategists strongly favoured the 'just war' and conducted offensive strategies, many times, under this pretext. With the sweeping wave of globalisation the Western liberal values also became a part of its strategic culture. The liberal world order architected by the US primarily influenced and shaped the China's strategic thinking. This is the premise on which Johnston asserts that the real operative strand of the Chinese strategic culture is *Parabellum* (taking coercive actions against the adversaries). This, he believes, is in vein with the Western traditions. It has its roots in the philosophies and actions of Mao Zedong and Lenin. During

[24] Colonel Kenneth D Johnson, "China's Strategic Culture: A Perspective for the United States," Strategic Studies Institute, June 2009, 3, http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub924.pdf

[25] Tiewa Liu, "Chinese Strategic Culture and the Use of Force: Moral and Political Perspectives," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 87 (2013): 556-574, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.843944

[26] Johnston, "Cultural Realism," 173.

Mao's period, the traditions of *realpolitik* dominated over the 'idealised discourse.'[27]

Scobell argued that both the strands, *Parabellum* and Confucian-Mencian, are operative in the Chinese strategic culture. He termed it as a unique "Chinese Cult of Defence." Therefore, according to him, the use of force virtually becomes defensive in nature and more probable in the face of a politico-military crisis.[28] The Chinese, on the other hand, maintain that their strategic culture rooted in the five principles of peaceful coexistence: mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference, equality and cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. Hence, according to the Chinese perspective the use of force only becomes necessary when self-defence is inevitable. However, the concept of 'active defence' in the Chinese strategists suggests a different evolving trend.

On May 26, 2015, China's Defence Minister, Yang Yujun, introduced China's military strategy at a press conference in Beijing.[29] *Xinhua News Agency* reported that it was the first white paper on military strategy that delved into the concept of 'Active Defence.' In this white paper, China's military strategy, strategic defence, tactic and operational offence were all combined. Moreover, the principles of "defence, self-defence and post-emptive strike" were underlined as key drivers of China's use of force while categorically adding that "China will not attack unless we are attacked but we will surely counterattack if attacked."[30] Zhang Yuguo, Senior Colonel with the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) stated that "this paper focuses on the core and sensitive issues of concern to China's military and security policy. China's socialist nature, fundamental national interests and the peaceful development all adhere to the doctrine of 'Active Defence."[31] This statement reveals that from the Chinese perspective, security, economy, socialist values and national development are highly interconnected and mutually complimentary to one another.

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[27] Ibid.
[28] Scobell, "China's Use of Military Force," 26-39.
[29] "White Paper Outlines China's 'Active Defence Strategy,'" *Xinhua Net*, May 26, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/26/c_134272293.htm Full text of the white paper is available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c_134271001.htm
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

The Chinese strategic culture has never been static both in terms of discourse and behaviour. It has been evolving with the changes in the international security environment and adapting to the tectonic and operational shifts in the international system. Although China, in principle and action, adheres to its ancient traditions of co-opting with external threats, non-violent and defensive approach to conflicts, however, it is evident that China has been adopting the concept of open and active defence. This implies that China may not indulge into an open conflict as an aggressive gesture only but it will not hesitate to participate in the multilateral operations which fall under the scope of the UN.[32] This also points towards less emphasis on co-opting with external threats in preferences with mitigating the threats by building a strong ability of deterring the adversaries.

BRI and China's Strategic Culture

According to the official and non-official Chinese resources, there is a range of strategic goals that Beijing wants to pursue through BRI. Most important among them are, improving regional security environment, increasing China's energy security, expanding the strategic clout in Eurasia while avoiding a direct confrontation with the US. In fact, BRI has been drafted as a response to the challenges that China faced at home and abroad. This strategy reveals that from a Chinese perspective security and economy are inextricably linked to each other. President Xi often described BRI as a visionary project which will reinforce economic development and security by creating a "community of common destiny" and "community of shared interests."[33] The 2017 white paper on Asia-Pacific security explained this logic in a bit more detail:

> Security and development are inter-connected and complimentary to each other. The security and economic framework, which are the main components of the entire regional structure, should be given equal consideration. One the one hand, the improvement of security framework will help ensure a peaceful environment for development

[32] Liu, "Chinese Strategic Culture and the Use of Force," 570.

[33] "Xi Jinping: Let the Sense of Community of Common Destiny Take deep Root in Neighbouring Countries," *Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, October 25, 2013, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1093870.shtml

> and, on the other, faster pace of regional economic integration will bolster the security framework.[34]

A careful analysis of the strategic challenges and the country's responses to them indicate a strong link between security, economy and the Chinese culture. The strategic drivers of BRI are enmeshed in the elements of the Chinese strategic culture which are identified by Scobell as the primacy of national unification, heightened threat perception, the concept of active defence, just war theory, domestic chaos phobia and the welfare of community over an individual.[35]

Heightened Threat Perceptions

On October 11, 2011, the US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton outlined the major features of "Asia Pivot," in a rather assertive manner, explaining that it is a comprehensive strategy that includes "bolstering traditional alliances, forging new partnerships, engaging regional institutions, diversifying military forces, defending democratic values, embracing economic statecraft and developing a truly multifaceted and comprehensive approach to an increasingly assertive and capable China."[36] President Obama's Asia Pivot heightened China's threat perception. China's regional environment also became very hostile after Washington initiated its Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) which brought the US allies against China under the ambit of economy. China is already surrounded by its hostile neighbours, which include an old foe like Japan and a rising India. In this milieu, TPP heightened the Chinese threat perception to a great extent. Coupled with this was Malacca Dilemma which exists from the times of Hu Jintao.[37] These geo-strategic realities motivated China to break itself free from the encirclement of the US and its allies in Asia-Pacific. Rober R Ross, in his article titled "The Problem with the Pivot" in *Foreign Affairs*, described the

[34] "China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation," *State Council of the People's Republic of China*, January 11, 2017, http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2017/01/11/content_281475539078636.htm
[35]Scobell, "China's Real Strategic Culture."
[36] Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/
[37] Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and 'Malacca Dilemma,'" *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (2008): 143-161, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14799850802006555?journalCode=fasi20

strategic shortcomings of the US Asia Pivot and predicted that it will generate a balancing strategy from Beijing's side.[38]

In 2012, Chinese scholar, Wang Jisi's article in the *Global Times* not only reflected this evolving pattern of thinking but also presented a smart solution to the US containment. He argued that "China should march West to expand its economic and security sphere of influence in its western periphery instead of boxing with the US in Asia-Pacific."[39] He stressed the strategic importance of expanding its clout westward to pursue the economic and political interests. At the same time, he emphasised the need to foster 'strategic trust' with the US and address the problems of economic development in China's interior.[40] Although the influence of Wang's analyses on the Chinese strategic thinking is debatable, many a Chinese source seems to follow the same logic. Sun Xianpu argued that "prioritising western development would reduce the external pressure while avoiding confrontation with the US in East Asia which emerged due to China's increasing strategic position in the region."[41] Major General Qiao Liang, a professor at National Defence University (NDU) of PLA, called BRI a "very clever and non-confrontational-hedging strategy" and Li Yonghui, a Russian specialist at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), writes that China-Russia-Mongolia Corridor (a part of BRI) can reduce the US influence in Mongolia and safeguard China's "geostrategic security interests."[42]

Wang Yiwie underlines the importance of Gwadar and Hambantota ports and calls them as "new route options" for China to reduce transport pressure on Malacca whereas the analysts at PLA Transport Academy believe that the Chinese port projects will benefit China in "strategic

[38] Robert S Ross, "The Problem with the Pivot," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, 2012, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2012-11-01/problem-pivot

[39] Wang Jisi, *Xijin: Zhongguodiyuanzhanlue de Zaipingheng* (Marching West: Rebalancing China's Geopolitical Strategy) in Huanqiushibao, October 17, 2012.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Joel Wuthnow, "Chinese Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Rationales, Risks and Implications," Institute of National Strategic Studies, July 2012, http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-12.pdf

[42] Ibid.

transport" especially in the energy sector.[43] China believes that this mega-project can secure its geo-strategic and geo-economic interest in a pretty effective manner.

National Development and Chinese Legacy

Economy brought China to the present vantage point. Since Deng Xiaoping's era, it has been undergoing arduous domestic reforms. The Chinese leadership's persistent emphasis on national reforms and development is the key to their country's growth and success. This is also one of the reasons why, for China, economy is an extricable link to their national security. However, from 2007 to 2008, the prospects for the Chinese development and growth declined due to the global financial crisis and the economic slowdown in China.[44]

China backed this ambitious initiative by publishing an official blueprint on BRI, "Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road."[45] The enormity and the significance of BRI is indicative by the fact that the official document on it was jointly issued by the National Development and Reforms Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (PRC) with authorisation from the State Council. China also beefed up this mega-project by providing it the financial support through multilateral institutions: The Asian Development Bank (ADB), The Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF). These policy actions, on the Chinese side, reflect a strong sense of purpose and unwavering commitment towards BRI.

The scope and significance of BRI bears far-reaching implications in terms of national development, progress and domestic stability. It came as no surprise why BRI is integral to Xi Jinping's China Dream, the plan of

[43] Ibid.

[44] Brantly Womack, "International Crises and China's Rise: Comparing the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the 2007 Global Political Crisis," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10, no. 4 (2017): 383-401. https://academic.oup.com/cjip/article/10/4/383/4628145

[45] "Visions and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of the People's Republic of China, Beijing, Marc28, 2015, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html

national rejuvenation. In the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, Xi Jinping stated that the "Chinese people, in their pursuit of the 'Chinese Dream' of great national rejuvenation, stand ready to support and help other peoples in Asia to realise their own great dreams. Let us work together for realising the Asian Dream."[46] It is also true that economy and centuries-old traditions have become an inextricable part of China's *weltanschauung* (the worldview). The economic reforms and sustained development brought China to the present vantage point. The role of economy in strengthening the ideological foundations of a strong nation is clearly evident in Deng Xiaoping policies and, at one point, he also explained its significance as "in a Socialist country, if the rate of growth of the productive forces lags behind the Capitalist countries over an extended historical period, how can we talk about the superiority of the Social system?"[47] Xi Jinping's signature policy initiatives, China Dream and BRI, are a mere echo of this idea.

The question of how to modernise, while staying intact with the Chinese values, is at the core of all the challenges that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faces today. The conundrum alludes to the need of innovation: modernisation and development imbued with the Chinese characteristic. In this milieu, BRI is but one venture.

Domestic Chaos Phobia and Multilateral Engagement

China's diplomatic, economic and military interaction with the Central Asian states has grown over time. Although gaining influence in Central Asia makes Beijing a strong power in the region, territorial integrity and national unity of the PRC are the major constitutes of its policies towards the region. Unrest in Uighur-dominated Xingjiang, likelihood of spill-over effects of separatism and extremism in this province and economic incentives in Central Asia are the driving factors of this strategy. For long,

[46] "New Security Concept for New Progress in Security Cooperation," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, May 21, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1159951.shtml

[47] "Hold High the Banner of Mao Zedong Thought and Adhere to the Principle of Seeking Truth from the Facts," X-Deng – Deng XP, Selected Works of Deng Xiapoing, 1978, https://scholar.google.com.pk/scholar?hl=en&q=Hold%20High%20the%20Banner%20of%20Mao%20Zedong%20Thought%20and%20Adhere%20to%20the%20Principle%20of%20Seeking%20Truth%20from%20Facts

Central Asia has been facing challenges of separatism extremism and terrorism. It has been the Chinese tradition not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries unless the threat reaches its doorsteps. The threat of militancy has far-reaching implications for its western province and has the potential to stir a domestic chaos there. Yet Beijing has been engaging with the countries peacefully and economically. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the region gained special importance in the strategic calculus of China.

China's military aid to Central Asia has also increased over the time. In 2014, Beijing promised Kyrgyzstan to provide military assistance of US$6.5 million.[48] It promised the hundreds of millions of dollars to Tajikistan for providing uniform and military training.[49] Since 2002, it participated in bilateral and multilateral military exercises and hosted 65 Kazakh in addition to 30 Kyrgyz and Tajik officers between 2003 to 2009.[50] Compared with the American and Russian role in the New Great Game in Central Asia, these engagements are, however, of little importance.

Along with economy, China's active mechanism of countering the US influence and increasing its own clout of power in Central Asia is Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The SCO enhanced China's status of a great power. It is the first multilateral organisation founded by China. The organisation is playing a leading role in paving Beijing's path to the regional influence without tempering with the Russian influence in the Central Asian Republics. It has deftly used economy, military and multilateral diplomacy to respond to the daunting challenges it faces in western China and Central Asia. It has grown its economic clout and successfully projected the image of a powerful and benevolent player in the region. The SCO provides the umbrella to Beijing for the activities with regards to security cooperation, economic assistance in such a way that "China Threat" does not loom large in Astana, Dushanbe, Moscow, Bishkek, Tashkent and other capitals.

[48] Roman Muzalvesky, "China's Long March in Central Asia," *Stratfor*, April 26, 2016, https://www.stratfor.com/article/chinas-long-march-central-asia
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

Maritime Silk Road and the Use of Force

It has been a hot topic of debate among the scholars whether BRI is a subtle pretext under which China's military ambitions are hidden. Perceived from the lens of "String of Pearls" it is believed that the aim of Maritime Silk Road is to provide maritime access to PLA. It is a term used for a series of seaports, which stretch from the South China Sea to Africa's East Coast: Gwadar in Pakistan, Colombo in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Maday Island in Myanmar and Port Victoria in Seychelles. However, the question here is of 'the use of force' from the Chinese perspective. BRI is a strategy of internal-external-balancing as a response to the US Pivot to 'China,' slowing down of the Chinese economy and its consequences for the national development and integration. It is the symbol of a more proactive approach, which manifest China's desire to reposition itself in the global arena. Given the fact that Chinese progress hinges on economy. The official sources have been highlighting the link between security and economy, unilateral actions would only prove counter-productive. The streak of Economic Liberalism in the Chinese strategic culture, reflective in BRI as well, indicates that China will be more prone to defensive rather than offensive approach. This logic can be applied to the Maritime Silk Road also because the seaports are meant to secure the strategic sea-lanes for the Chinese maritime trade.

Time and again, China reiterated that BRI has no military dimension, but the Chinese invitation to Djibouti for participating in the Maritime Silk Road portrays a different picture. Located on the Horn of Africa, Djibouti is a Chinese naval base. Negotiations on this base began in 2015 and concluded in 2016.[51] In July 2017, PLA dispatched its South Sea Fleet and the first live fire exercises were conducted in August 2017.[52] If Djibouti is included to the Maritime Silk Road, it will be very hard for China to negate that it is not building naval bases along the Silk Road. This development also contended another notion that in building the Silk Road, economy is the

[51] Bill Chappell, "China Reaches Deal to Build Military Outpost in Djibouti," *National Public Radio*, January 21, 2016, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/01/21/463829799/china-reaches-deal-to-build-military-outpost-in-djibouti

[52] Charlotte Gao, "China Officially Sets Up its First Overseas Base in Djibouti," *Diplomat*, July 12, 2017. https://web.archive.org/web/20170712013933/http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-officially-sets-up-its-first-overseas-base-in-djibouti/

first priority of China. With the emerging trend of active defence and post-emptive strike, it has become important to undertake further research on the Chinese perceptions and behaviours on the use of force.

Conclusion

The analysis, presented in this study, contends the prevailing notion that BRI has economic dimensions only. This paper discussed the role of economy and security in the Chinese thinking towards formulating and executing BRI. It found out that BRI is a strategic response to the internal and external threats. Since America's Asia Pivot, the country has been confronting daunting challenges internally and externally. Asia Pivot not only hedged China but it also emerged as a potential threat to its sustained development. BRI has its foundations deep in China's desire to gain the status of a major international player in the regional and global arena.

This paper also maintains that BRI mirrors the Chinese strategic culture and can help predict the future behaviour of the country, especially in the realm of security. The study of Chinese strategic culture offered a unique perspective on the perceptions, behaviour and actions of the Chinese. It is neither Confucian nor *Parabellum* rather it is an intricate blend of both strands. Mainstream scholars of Strategic Culture tend to think that China believes in using force and with its adoption of Active Defence approach, the difference between defence and offense has gone thin. However, they fail to take the factor of economy fully into account when they try to find out China's strategic preferences. Beijing's military engagements, as of now, are of narrow scale due to many reasons. First, China's economic preferences have become opportunity and constraint as well when it comes to the offensive and unilateral use of force. Secondly, China is not the only dominant player in the world. True, there is a drift towards multipolarity but the international system is still in a transition. Thirdly, it faces pressure from the US dominance, how dwindling it might be. China cannot afford to spark the Sino-Russian rivalry by interfering in the Russian sphere of influence. Beijing has crafted a smart strategy of 'playing big' amidst the New Great Game i.e., using SCO and other multilateral institutions as an active component of expanding its sphere of influence.

China's ambitions are different than those of the US. The US asserted its power as a hegemon and acted like one. On the other hand, China, so far,

has not pursued any such neo-imperialistic designs. Up till now, the bargaining field is fair and free; therefore, ball is in the hands of other countries also. At this point, China's strategic thinking is on a cautious path: "walking the river by groping the stones." It is that the handy strategic tool in China's hand is bilateral relations, regional multilateral fora and economic incentives. China's future strategic course relies on its investments and this very dependence bounds Beijing to amicably resolve the issues be it geo-strategic or geo-economic.

At present, it seems that China is not willing to indulge into any conflict, yet, there is a strong likelihood that the country will build its deterrence capabilities under the pretext of post-emptive measures. The BRI countries are likely to become a theatre where China will deftly employ a mix of its conventional defensive and the recent active defence approach. Having said that, with the Chinese readiness to include Djibouti in the Silk Road, the military aspects of BRI has once again sparked the debate that whether China will emerge as a defensive or an offensive power. For this to predict accurately, more studies are needed to conduct on the Chinese perceptions and behaviours from the perspective of their centuries-old cultural legacy of strategic thinking.