

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Weaponization of the Belt and Road Initiative

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. **Subject.** Weaponizing of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
2. **Purpose.** The aim of this paper is to present the results of the CSAG's analysis of the dual-use concept (i.e., civilian-military) of China, focusing on the BRI and its implications for USCENTCOM.
3. **Significant Statements.**
 - a. China wants to become the world's superpower by 2049 (the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party). However, intermediate objectives are also identified on the timeline until an end state is reached.
 - b. China wants to legitimize the use of military force to defend the PRC's economic interests abroad.
 - c. Dual-use is a leitmotif of Chinese economic expansion, including the BRI.
 - d. The problem presented by China's "weaponization" of the BRI is not primarily a military one, and its solution cannot be primarily military either.
 - e. Every single Chinese citizen abroad is considered by Chinese law to be an intelligence sensor.

Legal Arrangements

In the 2016 National Defense Transportation Law, Chinese state authority was further expanded by placing "obligations on Chinese transportation enterprises located abroad or engaged in international shipping" to "provide logistical support for PLA forces operating overseas" as "strategic support forces". Also, this law has tightened construction standards for ships and aircraft to meet military specifications in line with the dual-use concept. The 2017 National Defense Transportation Law specifies its purpose as "strengthening the construction of national defense transportation, promoting the development of military and civilian integration in the transportation field, and guaranteeing smooth progress of national defense activities." It also declares that, to further civil-military integration, the state will promote the allocation and sharing of military and local resources, as well as the coordinated development of economic and national defense construction. The PRC has increasingly determined that its armed forces should be more active in advancing their foreign policy objectives. In 2020, a revision to the National Defense Law tasked the PLA with defending "overseas development interests," further cementing the PLA's involvement in the PRC's global economic and diplomatic activities. All Chinese citizens and companies, including those involved in overseas BRI projects, are obligated to cooperate with Chinese intelligence agencies under the National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic of China.

The three-phase strategic projection of the PLA, shared by senior Chinese officials, is as follows.

In the short term, the military must be ready to fight and win a limited war in the maritime direction. To this end, the PLA will focus on greater development of strategic sea and airlift forces. Efforts will include implementing technological advancements in self-loading trucks, fast passenger roll-on/roll-off (RO-RO) ships, large strategic transport aircraft, unmanned platforms, and precision projection systems. China could use 63 RO-RO civilian ships that are also suitable for

military use - containerized shipping brings advantages in speed and regularity in the forms of shipping. China COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited alone operates 497 container ships. Some reports on one of the new tankers built to national defense standards indicate faster speeds, military communications capabilities, the ability to conduct astern fueling for naval ships and special coatings allowing tankers to transport diesel and aviation fuels. Some tankers are capable of both astern and alongside underway replenishment. This capability was demonstrated in October 2014 when a China Shipping Group (中国海运集团) tanker Huachuan refueled the East Sea Fleet's Putian guided missile frigate (523) in the East China Sea. The exercise was hailed as a major breakthrough in the use of strategic projection support forces for replenishment at sea.

In the medium-term, the PLA will focus on developing the ability to project power (ABO) to "countries and regions along the 'Belt and Road' and in areas crucially related to key interests around the globe." To this end, the PLA will develop unmanned projection systems on land, at sea, and in the air, with a significant focus on precision air projection capabilities.

In the long-term, the PLA will focus primarily on "global projection." It will rely on China's overseas bases and multi-dimensional aerospace projection systems to meet the rapid reaction requirements of transportation projection capabilities in the event of war anywhere around the globe.

Military – Civil Fusion (MCF)

China's MCF aims to reduce China's dependence on foreign technology, align the economy for rapid mobilization and support of the military, and build strong cyber and information warfare capabilities. In other words, the PRC follows the MCF Development Strategy to combine economic, social and security development strategies to create an integrated national strategic system and capabilities to support PRC's national rejuvenation goals.

The Dual-Use Maritime Ports Concept

According to the China's 2019 Defense White Paper – "the flag follows commerce." This is not unusual – the investor protects its investment. Dual-purpose is thus a philosophy that is reflected in individual BRI projects, such as how overseas ports are designed. Therefore, a dual-use port network is planned along the maritime Silk Road, named as the "strategic strongpoints" (e.g., Pakistani Port of Gwadar). In the technology used, Chinese equipment and installations are manufactured according to the concept of compatibility with military systems. This is also reflected mentally and/or in a culture of labor. According to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) programmatic premise, dual-use should be the leitmotif of Chinese manufacturing, business, engineering, and Chinese citizenship, as well as the functioning of the entire Chinese society – from a simple worker, through a skilled professional, up to the executives.

4. Conclusion/Assessments.

- a. As China's national interests become more global, BRI may be expanded to involve more defensive military support.
- b. An identified challenge will be to cooperate with China to share common interests, like securing SLOCs while competing in other areas.
- c. The naval base in Djibouti provides an opportunity for China to execute the naval doctrine of far seas protection. It is an important logistical hub for the PLA Navy, but also creates an opportunity for regional security cooperation with regional countries.
- d. Overseas naval logistics and bases would better position the PLA Navy to execute "near sea defence, far sea protection" operations and enable expansion of the military presence.
- e. China may select overseas commercial ports (strong points) for dual use to project power.

5. Recommendations for USCENTCOM.

- a. Establish a database for merchant vessels used by PLA Navy and share it with allies and partners to create movement patterns worldwide. This initiative can also be used in pursuit of new partners.
- b. During key leader engagements in Israel, stress the inherent risks and long-term consequences of China's expansion, including within the BRI.
- c. Attempt to persuade Israeli leaders of the inherent risks of placing critical infrastructure in Chinese control.
- d. Provide stakeholders with a threat assessment of China's dual-use doctrine at the military level.

- e. Invite parties (e.g., India, Israel, and Indo-Pacific stakeholders) to contingency planning against Chinese expansion, including organizing Tabletop Exercises (the parties as above) to play out scenarios of Chinese misdeeds and to validate response options.
- f. To counter BRI – identify military projects and push them through PGII (i.e., engagement in port of Gwadar). Also, the US, as well as the other Western countries involved in the PGII, could be the partners of choice for some of the AOR states while using PGII investments, as a “safer than Chinese” option.

References

1. Strategy Paper – “Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative”

ANNEX A

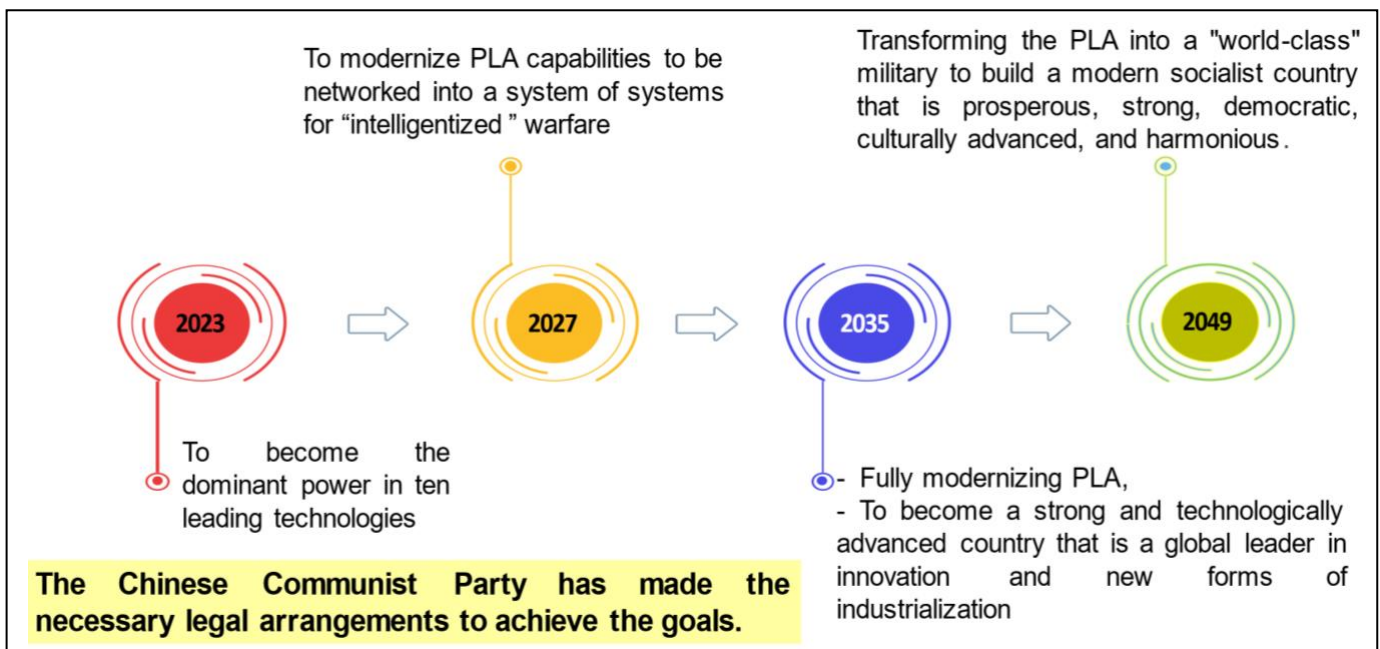


Figure 1. China’s expansion timeline.

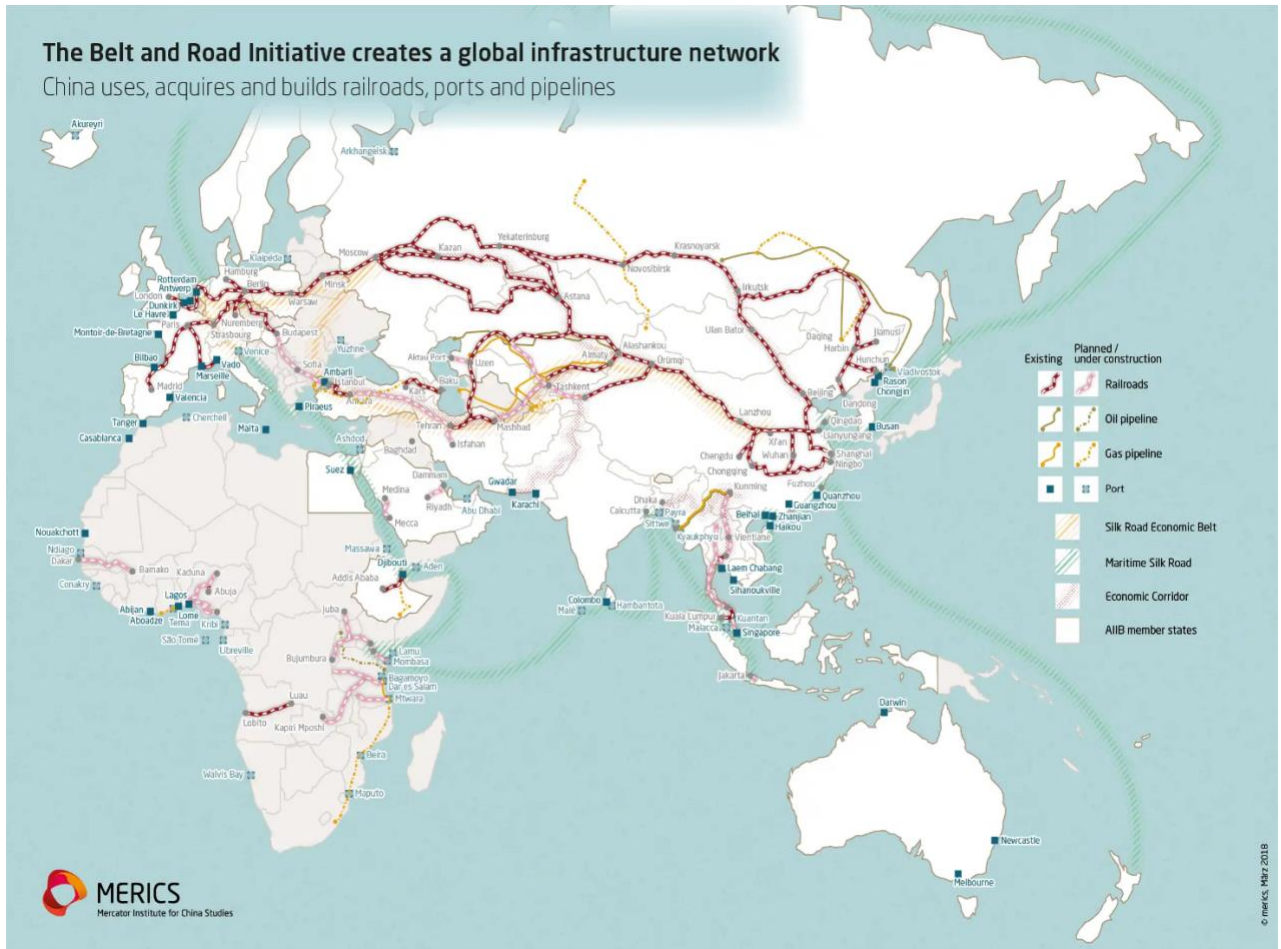


Figure 2. The Belt and Road Initiative Creates A Global Infrastructure Network.