

China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Sino-US strategic rivalry: Implications and the main US response

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Abstract. The Sino-US relations have faced an unprecedented challenge and deteriorated to the lowest point in 4 decades during the Trump presidency. The ongoing Sino-US strategic rivalry led to the speculation that the two giants would head into the "New Cold War". China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also becomes a main target of this strategic rivalry. This article offers the strategic analysis of China's BRI from the US perspective at different levels, focusing on the changing role of BRI and its implications among US think tanks during the Trump presidency. It also provides the policy recommendations from the US think tanks in responding the BRI challenge, emphasizing the Indo-Pacific strategy as the main counter-strategy towards the BRI, and finally reviewed both the Trump Administration's and the Biden Administration's main efforts in countering the BRI.

The Biden Administration focuses on countering China as its foreign policy priority, particularly countering China's BRI through variety of means as diplomatic coordination, democratic values, and the global infrastructure alternative made by the US-led Collective West. Thus, China's BRI will be the major target in the US China policy-making in the long run.

Keywords: Sino-US relations, strategic rivalry, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Indo-Pacific strategy, the Trump Administration, the Biden Administration

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Китайская инициатива «Один пояс, один путь» в китайско-американском стратегическом соперничестве: последствия и реакция США

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Резюме. Китайско-американские отношения столкнулись с беспрецедентным вызовом и ухудшились до самой низкой точки за четыре десятилетия во время президентства Д.Трампа. В значительной степени «стратегическое соперничество» стало основным тоном нового раунда стратегических корректировок США в отношении Китая. Китайская инициатива «Один пояс, один путь» (ОПОП), которую многие американские ученые интерпретируют как продукт большой стратегии Китая, также становится главной целью этого «стратегического соперничества».

Ключевые слова: китайско-американские отношения; стратегическое соперничество; инициатива «Пояс и путь»; Индо-Тихоокеанская стратегия; администрация Трампа, администрация Байдена

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the US have been very proud of its huge alliance system around the world, while China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), initiated in 2013, has played the role as the symbol of China's global policy of "partnership" rather than "alliance", by establishing various multilateral forms and levels of partnership worldwide, aiming to boost the economic development among countries along the route through multilateral cooperation.

The BRI's core component, the infrastructure connectivity, plays the role as the key and fundamental element to reinforce the economic integration at both national and regional levels and strengthen the people-to-people ex-

change in a global context. Since China's implementation of its BRI in Africa, Latin America and the Eurasian continent, the US stance has been very complicated.

On the one hand, BRI plays the role as China's global grand strategy from the US perspective, poses a strategic threat for the US global strategy; on the other hand, despite the BRI challenge, Washington also observed the benefit from the possible US cooperation with BRI in order to maximize the US economic interests.

The Trump presidency has transformed the traditional US policy towards China from the "conengagement" to "comprehensive confrontation". It also dramatically changed the basic parameter of the course of Sino-US relations from a "competitive stability" to the "strategic rivalry".

Since 2017, BRI has been focused more attention among the US strategic circle. Since 2018, US domestic think tank's research and policy debates around BRI had heated up significantly. Meanwhile the US executive and legislative branches had achieved greater consensus in counterbalancing the BRI.

Washington believes that BRI could not only change the geostrategic structure of Eurasian continent, but also challenge the US core interests on a wide range of issues such as technical standards, military security and international development. In addition, the Trump Administration has begun to enrich and refine the "Indo-Pacific" strategy, enlarge China's negative global image and its BRI such as the "economic coercion and debt trap", meanwhile reforming its international financing mechanism to compete with BRI constantly.

In general, the big game around the BRI significantly reflects the increasingly intensified Sino-US rivalry in the long run.

THE MAIN EVOLUTION OF THE US RESPONSE TOWARDS THE BRI

It should be noted that the overall, cross-regional and linkage characteristics of the strategic rivalry are particularly significant in the US efforts towards the BRI. After China initiated BRI back in 2013, the US did not respond clearly and coherently. Although it refused China's invitation to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), senior Obama Administration officials have rarely spoken about or explicitly criticized the BRI [1, pp. 12-13].

President Obama even ultimately dialed back his rhetoric on the AIIB, mentioning that AIIB "could be a positive thing" [2]. Over the past 9 years, the BRI has gradually become an important pillar of China's foreign policy. However, with the continuous achievements of BRI, the US perception towards it has become increasingly negative. Washington clearly believe that BRI is an integral part of China's grand strategy and key geopolitical instrument to control the Eurasian continent, which would challenge the US global interests and the US-dominated world order. Thus, the BRI has become an important driving factor for the phenomenon of "threat inflation" from the US perception.

Washington have effectively promoted a series of negative propaganda toward the BRI globally such as so-called "debt trap theory" and "security risk theory" [3]. At the same time, on the issue of counterbalancing the BRI, the US think tanks also proposed variety of systematic and operational recommendations.

SENIOR D.TRUMP ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL'S STANCE TOWARDS THE BRI

The Administration's overall attitude towards BRI can be characterized as "negative inflation" according to its statements. Its main accusation towards BRI can be concluded as the BRI reflects that China pursues a "predatory economy" globally by creating an "economic coercion" which damages the sovereign and interests of relevant countries and undermines the US global leadership.

The starting point of the Trump Administration's explicit countermeasures against the BRI can be tracked back in June 2017, when President Trump and the Indian PM Modi's joint address accusing China's BRI creating the "debt trap" [4]. Then Secretary of Defense J. Mattis pointed out that there are many belts and roads in a globalized world, and no nation should dictate the "One Belt, One Road" [5]. Secretary of State R. Tillerson accused BRI has put related countries on the back of huge debts and furthermore creates its own rules and norms [6]. His successor M. Pompeo not only criticized BRI on multiple occasions, but also pressured relevant countries to be wary of the Chinese investment. The most famous attacks on BRI comes from Vice President M. Pence, claiming that the US would not "offer a constricting belt or a one-way road," in a clear swipe at the BRI [7].

SENIOR MILITARY COMMANDERS' STANCE

It is worth noting that during Trump era, several senior US military commanders have publicly criticized the BRI from the security perspective, which reflects BRI's increasingly strategic roles in the Washington policy-making. Some claimed that BRI enables China to influence global shipping lanes, is China's coordinated and strate-

gic effort to marginalize the US influence, which would lead the global chokepoints to be under pressure [8]. Some other accused that China aimed to shape a world in line with its "authoritarian model" and undermine international norms through BRI, such as the free flow of commerce and information [9].

US CONGRESSIONAL MEMBERS' STANCE

A variety of US congressional members have also made negative comments on the BRI, demanding the counter-efforts. For example, in January 2018 Democratic Senator Gary Peters claimed the BRI as "China's strategy to ensure control of maritime and continental interests and, ultimately, to dominate Eurasia and exploit natural resources", which creates unprecedented challenge to the US key interests [10]. In June 2019, the Senate Committee on finance held a hearing entitled "China's Belt and Road Initiative", which is the first-ever congressional hearing focusing on BRI, thus the bipartisan consensus of "BRI threat" has been rapidly formulated [11].

US THINK TANKS' CHANGING STANCE TOWARDS BRI

Comparing with the evaluation and analysis towards BRI during 2013-2017, since 2018, the research focus and main stance of the American think tanks on BRI have indicated the following changes:

First, at the economic level, the changing stance among the US experts is to hype China enhances its global influence of its "authoritarian" system through BRI, increase its control over countries along the route by creating "debt traps" and continuously strengthening its "economic coercion" towards relevant countries in order to serve its geostrategic goal of so called "neo-imperialism" or "neo-colonialism" [12].

The **second** change is the focus among the US experts on the study of BRI's security impact at the military level. Many US experts believe that BRI is "enduring China's military ambitions through economic means", focusing on the main regions of BRI destination as the Horn of Africa, the coasts of the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the South Pacific. The main security issues covers wide range, such as security impact of BRI's 5G infrastructure building, the dual use of port facilities under BRI, and the impact of China's Beidou navigation system on the security system of relevant countries [13, pp. 13-18; pp. 19-23].

The **third** change is the highly focus among the US experts on the Digital Silk Road (DSR) at the technological level, concerning that China would use DSR to increase the collection of key big data from BRI countries and export its information monitoring system to the relevant developing countries through related projects undertaken by its tech giants, mainly Huawei and ZTE [14, pp. 282-285].

The **fourth** change is the increasing accusation among the US experts of the "non-compliant operation" and "corrupt behavior" of Chinese enterprises and financial institutions in the BRI countries, and China's "low environmental and social standards" for loans, which has undermined the rules and standards in the field of international development and created a "race to the bottom" problem [15, pp. 360-365].

The **fifth** change is to explore more in-depth specific measures to jointly counter the BRI with the US allies within the mechanism such as G7 and Quad, including intelligence sharing, infrastructure co-financing, and soft infrastructure assistance [16].

THE COURSE OF THE BRI CHALLENGE: THE US PERSPECTIVE

BRI has become an important factor that influences the US in redefining the "China threat". US think tanks experts generally believe that the BRI will have a significant impact on both the US national and global interests. At the theoretical level, the BRI could create and promote a new type of Sinocentric world order and a Chinese system of globalization. Furthermore, China's continental offensive under its BRI throughout the "Eurasian heartland" and African continent would shake the foundations of the US hegemony during post-WWII period [17].

The actual and potential challenges of the BRI on the US national interests among the experts mainly include the following aspects:

In terms of trade and economy:

First, from the micro-economic aspect, BRI affects global supply chains and the international trade and financial system, thereby undermining the centrality of the US in the global economic system.

Second, from the commercial aspect, it challenges the commercial interests of American companies as BRI has strengthened the competitive advantage of Chinese companies in the countries along the route.

Third, from the aspect of the currency fluctuation, the BRI will significantly promote the internationalization of the Chinese Renminbi (RMB) and gradually erode the primacy of the US dollar in the international monetary and global trading system.

In terms of technological development:

First, it will lead to the internationalization of China's technology standards, especially the cutting-edge technology such as 5G and AI, which inevitably undermines the US global technological leadership.

Second, BRI allows China to meet the needs from majority of developing countries on technologies as data centers, cloud services, and 5G infrastructure more cheaply and in a more coordinated way than the US [14, pp. 279-282]. By building next-generation digital networks across the world, China could gain access to vast amounts of data, which could help it build artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and which it could exploit to gain sensitive data from other countries.

Third, China's efforts to develop its next-generation digital networks could also lock other states into China's technological ecosystems incompatible with products made by non-Chinese firms, which could close off many markets in developing countries to non-Chinese firms.

In terms of security:

It will make relevant countries re-examine their diplomatic, economic and military relations with the US, especially the dual-use infrastructure and related privileges that China supports in the BRI projects around the world, which will affect the US military deployment and damage the US military projection capability globally.

MAIN US THINK TANKS' POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNTER-STRATEGY AGAINST BRI

Focusing on how US can effectively respond to the BRI challenge, the main policy recommendations offered by the US think tanks can be summarized into the following points:

Firstly, at the international level,

1. The US need to formulate principles and standards, and use multilateral mechanisms such as the G20, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank to strengthen the international support for American-style principles and standards as an alternative against China's BRI and use multilateral mechanisms to increase constraints on China's so called "debt trap diplomacy".

2. In the field of international development, the US should enhance the attractiveness of the American model, and enhance its actual support capability for the development financing of relevant countries and regions. On the one hand, the US needs to maintain its tactics to expose and criticize China's "predatory economy"; on the other hand, it also needs to use "real money" to increase support for relevant countries and provide "American alternatives".

Secondly, at the domestic level, it is necessary to strengthen cross-agency coordination and deepen the strategic research on BRI. Due to BRI's large scale, long process, and its wide range of influence, it involves the work of variety of US government agencies, which has reinforced the Trump Administration's efforts towards a Whole-of-government approach.

At the global level, among the strategic dialogue and diplomatic consultation between the US and Japan, EU and other US allies, issues toward the BRI can be added or relevant working groups can be established. In the US embassies and consulates abroad, it is necessary to arrange officials who specialize in the BRI issue.

In the field of international development, the US government needs to retool its foreign economic policy and development aid, while the Congress needs to increase its funding accordingly and vigorously promote private sector investment in infrastructure construction, meanwhile guiding global institutional investors to support infrastructure projects in relevant countries and regions.

Finally, in terms of the specific projects, the US should urgently implement its version of the connectivity initiative, by using the "comparative advantages" of traditional allies and partners, while generating their synergy in counterbalancing BRI. US need to urgently cooperate with Japan, Australia, India, to define and advocate so-called high-quality infrastructure, while monitoring China-supported infrastructure projects from a process and an outcome perspective, to focus on the key aspects such as project bidding, government procurement, environmental and social standards, debt sustainability, etc., meanwhile continuing promoting the propaganda of "full life cycle cost" of Chinese infrastructure construction.

THE INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY AS COUNTER-STRATEGY TO BRI

President Trump firstly proposed a "free and open Indo-Pacific strategy" in November 2017, using the "Indo-Pacific" as a geopolitical and geostrategic framework for advancing diplomatic strategies, proclaiming a "new partnership" between the US and the region.

This strategy aims to renew and replace the Obama Administration's "pivot to Asia" strategy. According to the Trump Administration's National Security Strategy, "Indo-Pacific" has a broader definition of "the vast area from

the west coast of the Indian Ocean to the east coast of the US" [18], which is the most populous and most economically active region in the world.

The US Indo-Pacific strategy can finally take shape and be continuously enriched during the Trump era, is indeed closely related to the BRI. Comparing with the Obama Administration, the term "Asia-Pacific" involves economic and cooperative connotations, while the term "Indo-Pacific" is directly associated with geopolitical competition and alliance confrontation.

From Washington's point of view, China's BRI is actually an "Indo-Pacific" strategy with Chinese characteristics [19]. The "Indo-Pacific" Strategy has a distinctive feature for China, which aims to ensure the US regional allies and partners be aware of the risks of China's BRI. Obviously, there is a strong linkage and resonance between the "Indo-Pacific" strategy of the Trump Administration and the "Indo-Pacific" strategy of India, Japan, and Australia, all of which are trying to achieve a closer relationship between economic and security policies [20, pp.146]. The convergence reflects the US attempt to control the geopolitical impact of the infrastructure connectivity, which is also the key element of China's BRI.

In the security field, the "Indo-Pacific" strategy focuses on the four major agendas as maritime security; humanitarian assistance and disaster reduction; peacekeeping capacity enhancement; and combating transnational crime. The Bay of Bengal is located at the junction of the Indian Ocean and East Asia, and its geo-strategic position is increasingly prominent. In addition, Sri Lanka and other countries are important partners of China's BRI. The Trump Administration has paid more attention to the region. In addition, it aims to further urge the QUAD members and other countries to assume more responsibilities in regional affairs, enhancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

Table shows the Trump Administration's main global initiatives to counter BRI.

Table. Trump Administration's main global initiatives to counter BRI

	2018	2019	2020
Indo-Pacific Region	Infrastructure Transaction and Assistance Network (ITAN): high-quality infrastructure; Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership (DCCP): promote Internet private sector network investments; Asia EDGE: energy projects;	Blue Dot Network (BDN): technical standards and certification systems of infrastructure development projects;	Clean Network Initiative (counter the Digital Silk Road)
Africa	Prosper Africa: doubling bilateral trade and investment between the US and Africa; Connect Africa Initiative: infrastructure, technology, and value chains; 2X Women's Initiative: mobilize \$1 bln capital to invest in women in African countries;		
Latin America	América Crece initiative: establish maritime trade and invest in infrastructure projects		

Compiled by the author based on: Initiatives. Trump White House Archives. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/search/?s=initiatives> (accessed 31.07.2022)

Thus the Trump Administration has established multiple networks towards the Global South to counter the BRI and offer American alternatives through its initiatives in a wide range of domains, such as trade and investments, infrastructure quality, digital network, and technical standards.

THE MAIN US FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS' CONTRIBUTION

In 2018, the former Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) invested over \$640 mln into projects in the region, which is a vast increase from the \$503 mln investment in 2017, and investments continue to increase under the newly formed International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC). Meanwhile, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) signed compacts in the region worth \$830 mln, and is currently expanding compacts with Indonesia and Timor-Leste.

From 2018-2019, the US Trade and Development Agency (USDTA) spent over \$24 mln to support infrastructure development projects in the Indo-Pacific. Particularly, the USAID and OPIC play key role in expanding partnerships with governments, civil society, and the private sector in the region: since 2019, USAID has dedicated an ad-

ditional \$250 mln to support economic growth, including in energy, infrastructure, digital connectivity, and trade [21].

TRILATERAL PARTNERSHIP WITHIN THE QUAD

The US has cooperated with Japan, India and Australia, as QUAD members, to jointly pursue coordination on infrastructure investment to counter the BRI.

At the national level, the 2018 US-India-Japan Trilateral partnership agreed to continue to collaborate to promote increased connectivity in the Indo-Pacific, as an overt alternative to the BRI; in May 2018, the Indo-Pacific trilateral infrastructure forum has been launched to fill the massive gap in infrastructure and connectivity in the region; the 2018 US-Australia-Japan trilateral partnership has signed an agreement on development finance supports a five-country electrification partnership in Papua New Guinea and scopes prospective projects in the energy, digital and transportation sectors of Southeast Asia and Pacific Island.

In 2019, the US, Japan and Australia jointly initiated the Blue Dot Network (BDN). At the private sector level, in February 2018, Washington held a successful Trilateral Infrastructure Working Group meeting, by signing the agreement to provide grants, loans and insurance to help local companies tackle various infrastructure projects linking South Asia and Southeast Asia. US, India and Japan private sectors agreed to share information on their current Indo-Pacific projects with their trilateral counterparts, with joint loans and ventures [22, pp. 24-26].

BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S MAIN EFFORTS TO COUNTER BRI

Since taking office, the Biden Administration not only continued the Trump Administration's comprehensive confrontational China policy, but also undertook a more collaborative, multilateral approach to China by establishing and coordinating the anti-China coalition, to maximize leverage on countering China's rising global influence, represented by the BRI. At the policy level, domestically, the Strategic Competition Act of 2021 was amended to provide more US aid to Africa and Latin America to counter BRI's financial aid [23]. The US Innovation and Competition Act of 2021 authorizing \$110 bln for basic and advanced technology research over a five-year period, in order to compete with China's BRI particularly in the high-tech sector [24]. In February 2022, the US House of Representatives passed the America Competes Act, an extensive piece of legislation that aims to strengthen the US competitive edge over China, mainly focusing on countering China's BRI [25].

At the international level, during the G7 Summit in June 2021, President Biden urged the G7 allies to offer loans to developing nations, which led the creation of the US global infrastructure alternative, the Build Back Better World Partnership (B3W). B3W is the first-ever US-led initiative to counter China's BRI [26]. B3W is to work with the US partners to finance and develop infrastructure in a manner so-called "transparent, sustainable, adheres to high standards" seeks address the \$40 trln worth of infrastructure needed by developing countries by 2035. During the G7 Summit in June 2022, the US and its G7 allies launched the Partnership for Global Infrastructure (PGII), the repackaged version of the Build Back Better World initiative, to invest \$600 bln on infrastructure among the developing countries in next 5 years through private sector.

In general, the Biden Administration has taken real money and more effective measures to specifically compete with China's BRI through its global allies network and its "democratic values" strategy. The Biden Administration is intended to attract the attention of the majority of the democracies among the Global South in terms of democracy and human rights, while demonizing Chinese system as "authoritarianism", in order to counter China and BRI through ideological means. On December 9-10, 2021, President Biden hosted the first of two Summits for Democracy, a global gathering of leaders from 100 countries, with majority from Africa and Latin America [27].

In particular, the Biden Administration's tactical change from "countering BRI by US" into "countering BRI by US-led coalition" will have the serious and long-term impact on the implementation of BRI. China will have to face the challenges from the US and the other G7 members in multiple fronts.

CONCLUSION

During the 9-year implementation of BRI, China has signed cooperation memorandums with more than 140 countries and international organizations to jointly build the global "Belt and Road". A large number of major cooperation projects have been undertaken, and majority of countries along the route have achieved economic development and progress through cooperation.

However, several countries are forced to take sides, or fluctuated between China and the US due to Washington's comprehensive pressure. Based on the basic need to develop the domestic economy, these relevant countries

finally overcame this dilemma, re-examined their foreign policy in the context of the Sino-US strategic rivalry and actively carried out economic cooperation with China.

As China's first global cooperation initiative, BRI embodies a connectivity-oriented diplomatic strategy and helps China to explore and develop facilitating international leadership. In fact, the BRI itself has also been transformed during the recent years: in response to the rising concerns of the international community towards BRI, China has begun to gradually adjust the BRI structure in accordance with the requirements of utilization, by emphasizing the BRI development towards quality development, including improving the actual effectiveness and risk control of cooperative projects, strengthening the financing sustainability, and enhancing the openness and transparency of international cooperation.

Among the international cooperation cases, a number of American companies such as General Electric are also actively participating in the BRI and reaped considerable benefits. A report released by the Atlantic Council, also pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative could provide a "new platform for cooperation" between China and the US.

The nature of the US Sino-American rivalry under Biden in the field of the China's Belt and Road Initiative will be discussed in more detail context in the next material of our magazine.

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