

Belt and Road Initiative

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In News

The Belt and Road Initiative, reminiscent of the Silk Road, is a **massive infrastructure project that would stretch from East Asia to Europe**. China's colossal infrastructure investments may usher in a new era of trade and growth for economies in Asia and beyond. But skeptics worry that China is laying a debt trap for borrowing governments.

Features of Belt and Road Initiative

- Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the vast collection of development and investment initiatives would stretch from East Asia to Europe, significantly **expanding China's economic and political influence**.
- The **original Silk Road arose during the westward expansion of China's Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)**, which forged trade networks throughout what are today the Central Asian countries of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as modern-day India and Pakistan to the south. Those routes extended more than four thousand miles to Europe.
- The plan is two-pronged: the **overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road**.
- Xi's vision included creating a **vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, both westward—through the mountainous former Soviet republics—and southward, to Pakistan, India, and the rest of Southeast Asia**.
- In addition to physical infrastructure, China plans to **build fifty special economic zones**, modeled after the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone.
- To accommodate expanding maritime trade traffic, China

would **invest in port development along the Indian Ocean**, from Southeast Asia all the way to East Africa and parts of Europe.

- China has both geopolitical and economic motivations behind the initiative.
- Xi has promoted a vision of a **more assertive China**, while slowing growth and rocky trade relations with the United States have pressured the country's leadership to open new markets for its goods.
- Promoting **economic development in the western province of Xinjiang**, where separatist violence has been on the upswing, is a major priority, as is **securing long-term energy supplies** from Central Asia and the Middle East, especially via routes the U.S. military cannot disrupt.

Backlash Against China

- The Belt and Road Initiative has also stoked opposition. For some countries that take on large amounts of debt to fund infrastructure upgrades, **BRI money is seen as a potential poisoned chalice**.
- BRI projects are built using **low-interest loans as opposed to aid grants**. Some BRI investments have involved **opaque bidding processes and required the use of Chinese firms**. As a result, contractors have **inflated costs, leading to canceled projects and political backlash**.
- Some governments, in places such as Kenya and Zambia, are carefully studying BRI investments before they sign up, and candidates in Malaysia have run—and won—campaigns on anti-BRI platforms.
- India has tried to convince countries that the BRI is a plan to dominate Asia, warning of what some analysts have called a **'String of Pearls' geoeconomic strategy** whereby China creates unsustainable debt burdens for its Indian Ocean neighbors in order to seize control of regional choke points.

- In particular, New Delhi has long been unsettled by China's decades-long embrace of its traditional rival, Pakistan. Meanwhile, India has provided its own development assistance to neighbors.

Land and Sea Corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative

--- Silk Road Economic Belt --- 21st Century Maritime Silk Road

