

# Will the Belt and Road be complete by 2050?

## What is the BRI?

The 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) is the most visible manifestation of China's stupendous economic resurgence, its overwhelming geopolitical ambition and its sense of purpose. The multi-trillion-dollar initiative and its supercharged timeline is the Chinese government's long-term vision for the future. The BRI, also referred to as 'One Belt One Road', covers global engagement, international infrastructure, investment, technology, connectivity and trade routes from China to Europe, comprehensively integrated together in strategic, geopolitical and economic terms. The multi-civilizational and vast scope of the BRI covers over fifty countries, touches about a third of the global economy and over sixty percent of humanity. The Chinese President Xi Jinping officially launched the BRI in Beijing in May 2017 with the stated desire of creating peace and prosperity for participating nations through economic corridors and cultural cooperation.

The 'Belt' section of the BRI is the modern incarnation of the historical overland 'Silk Road', the 'Silk Road Economic Belt'. It extends from China to Europe, via Russia, Central Asia and West Asia. The evolution of the Belt and the development of a new balance of power in the heart of the Eurasian landmass will be of key interest over the coming decades. The 'Road' section of the BRI refers to the maritime 'Silk Road' which has been inspired by medieval Chinese voyages. It links routes, navies and ports into a 'String of Pearls'. Its Western arm extends from the South China Sea, through the Indian Ocean to Africa and thence to Europe via the Suez Canal and its Eastern arm extends to the resources provided by Australia and New Zealand. These 'roads' are vital because the vast majority of global trade is seaborne. In addition to these, the BRI has strategically located cross-border 'corridor' extensions, including oil and gas pipelines; it also has the potential for an 'Arctic Silk Road' to take advantage of climate change and to avoid existing maritime chokepoints. A 'Digital Silk Road' comprising the latest cable and wireless network trunk connections and technology standards, a BRI currency 'Road' and a 'Space Silk Road', could also be considered to be under the aegis of the BRI.

The significance of the BRI cannot be overestimated. It has become China's overriding national strategy in a similar manner to the significant moves by the USA, UK, and other Western nations post WW2, in setting up the UNO, the World Bank and the IMF. This is the premier Chinese global cooperation initiative and tremendous effort is being expended into its success by both government and non-government concerns, supported by a colossal diplomatic effort. Given the immense demand for international infrastructure and China's huge production capacity and purposeful commitment, the BRI is bound to leave a significant and lasting mark in the international arena where it has been both welcomed and met with suspicion. It brings to

the forefront the need for indispensable partnerships, the need to prepare for strategic shocks, and the ability to address overstretch.

The rapid growth of China's megalopolises and their existing mesh of connections with the wider world has provided the foundation for the BRI. Building on this milieu of people, capabilities, strategic ambition and commercial interest makes China a key player in the post Vasco da Gama era version of the Great Game, albeit with a much larger game board. The other players, big and small, could end up using this new version of the 'game' as their opportunity for addressing inequality and unlocking the potential of their dynamic populations, thus advancing their own interests. The new 'game' is reshaping alliances, redefining the internal structure of nations, reformulating worldviews and heightening security tensions. With all of this in mind, it is essential for us to examine what underpins the edifice of the BRI in order to foresee how Pax-Sinica could play out in the arena.

## **What underpins the BRI?**

The desire for 'silk' provided the impetus for the Silk Road in the millennia past. Without 'silk' to be traded there would be no merchants and no customers and therefore there would be no silk road. In our generation 'silk' could be considered as the manifestation of highly desired trade goods as well as trade secrets. The underpinning 'silk' is also about the people who create it and provide it to others along roads, routes and journeys to distant places.

The BRI is further underpinned by China's enviable position on the far-eastern edge of the Eurasian landmass, where the bulk of its people and economic might is situated. This position provides the starting point of the BRI, which ends in Europe on the far-western edge of Eurasia. China's advantageous location enables it to be both a land power and a sea power. Its geographical location provides it with the potential to dominate the pivot point in Eurasia while having access to warm water ports, a position not available to Russia until the advent of viable Arctic shipping routes. This geographical advantage that enables the BRI is often overshadowed by the focus on China's economic power. China's immense geographical size also means that one has to take into account the impact of geography within itself. There is a balance that the Chinese government needs to maintain between its coastal eastern heartland, with its huge markets and wealth, and the orbitals of its far-western inland 'buffer' regions which insulate it from the rest of the Eurasian landmass. The coastal areas and central plain have been governed for millennia by strong unified central authority. Ensuring this continuity is a core Chinese geo-political imperative, coupled with ensuring the unity of the entire geographical entity.

The goal to reinstate China's place in the world as a 'Great State' after centuries of relative displacement also underpins the BRI. This desire has been accompanied by exercising hard and soft power. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been ploughed into the initiative of becoming the world's premier military power by 2050. This hard power initiative is accompanied by the

establishment of foreign military bases as part of the BRI as well as by soft power initiatives in culture, the arts, science and scholarship. At the same time, China's economic power in general and its growing domestic market have acted as a major engine for growth in East Asia, making it the most important trade partner for most of Central, East and Southeast Asia. A Sino-centric regional economic integration model is now the reality in most of these areas. All this can be considered to have prompted a converged approach to refabricating and recreating the geopolitical world system covering the entire gamut from physical security, to the global economy and to the global monetary system. To this end it can be observed that China has sown the seeds for a multilateral framework over the last twenty years, challenging the accepted wisdom of the historical Westphalian model, with a thirty-year plan to bring the seeds of a 'Tianxia' Chinese model to fruition.

In a broader context, the BRI itself provides an underpinning narrative with which China can hold a mirror up to itself as well as explain its image of itself to others. This narrative could be viewed as being as significant as the BRI itself as it provides inherent meaning to China's approach to its international relations. To this end the Chinese leadership has invoked the 'Silk Road' spirit and emphasised historical, cultural, educational and scientific cooperation and so the narrative of the BRI is clearly understood to be about more than mere economics. This underpinning narrative is crucial to the success of the BRI. In its absence, all the BRI would appear to be is a vast conglomeration of state and market geo-strategic profit-driven enterprises.

## **How does the BRI fit into history?**

The ancient version of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the 'Silk Road', would not have existed were it not for the domestication of silk-moths in China as well as the domestication of horses and Bactrian camels in Central Asia. From a historical perspective, China is a country which has the longest continuous history of any of the great ancient civilizations. It has preserved its culture and writing system over three millennia and continues to evolve energetically. The 'Silk Road' provided China with connections with other civilisations and for centuries there were periods of being open and being closed to the influence of Central Asia, as demonstrated by the existence of the 'Great Wall'.

Some of the earliest recorded accounts of the 'Silk Road' relate to armed expeditions from China to adjoining areas during the Han dynasty period. Later accounts from the Jin dynasty era were recorded by the monk Faxian, who travelled on foot and by ship between China and India. Faxian's writings show that the 'Silk Road' provided major trade, cultural and religious connections between states all along the routes. Subsequent accounts of travel by the scholar, Xuanzang, during the Tang dynasty era show how important the 'Silk Road' was in the heart of Asia, though its importance subsequently declined for economic and political reasons. Trade focus then slowly shifted to maritime routes during the Song and Yuan dynasty eras when control of Central Asian regions became weaker in comparison with previous eras.

The advent of the Mongol empire was like a whirlwind which disrupted not only the ‘Silk Road’ but the heart of Asia and China itself. The disruption created a free flow of people, ideas and goods which stemmed from the flexible Mongol cultural, political and economic model and this integrated the heart of Asia as never before. The Mongols forcefully unified diverse people groups and integrated them into a new global power system centered on the Asian heartland instead of the coasts. The Yuan dynasty which followed on from this then changed China profoundly and spurred global innovations in monetary systems. Marco Polo’s accounts date from this time and these provide personal insights into the era. The subsequent Ming dynasty era saw a relative decline in the importance of the ‘Silk Road’ proper with more emphasis on naval expansion and maritime trade routes. These eventually extended to the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea with Admiral Zheng-He making a number of armed voyages with large fleets. Chinese trade and exploration reached its peak during this period.

During the subsequent Qing dynasty period less energy was expended on trade routes and ‘ownership’ of the routes between East and West was absorbed into the nascent European colonial systems during the ‘Vasco da Gama era’, which only ended with the return of sovereign control of Hong Kong to China. Russian dominance in Central Asia caused a decline in the use of traditional land routes and the state of affairs continued until that dominance diminished.

Till relatively recently China was a dominant entity not only economically but culturally. Interaction with foreign powers continued to be based on the Chinese way of strategic thinking founded on unilateral historical concepts such as ‘Guanxi’ and ‘Tianxia’ which could be traced through the Yuan era and then back to the time of Confucius. China only fully integrated into the world system when it joined the WTO at the turn of the last century, at which point the ‘Silk Road’ was reborn as the BRI, on the back of the growth of Chinese power resulting from its cultural, economic and political resurgence.

## **What is the institutional base of the BRI?**

The primary institutional base underpinning the BRI is provided by the three interlocking branches of political power in China, the Communist Party of China (CPC), the State Council and the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA). The CPC continues the long tradition of a unified Confucian ruling entity, which seeks to represent the interests of the whole of society, in contrast to a Western-style political party approach. Chinese governments are expected to cope with the challenges posed by a huge population and vast territory, ostensibly shaping a political culture characterized by valuing a longer-term vision, a more holistic perception of politics which places high value on the country’s overall stability and prosperity. This single-party approach, embodied by the CPC, is often contrasted with the impact of change of central government every few years in multi-party democratic systems as well as the national chaos following China’s 1911 revolution which sought a Western political model. The CPC exercises oversight of the BRI through the Central Foreign Affairs Commission.

The State Council on the other hand is the chief administrative authority in China and it exercises authority over the BRI through cabinet-level bodies such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, which is responsible for foreign trade policy and agreements and foreign direct investment. These bodies and their predecessors were instrumental in China's entry into the World Trade Organisation.

Chief among the financial institutes which underpin BRI activities is the government-owned China Development Bank (CDB). It is one of the most powerful banks in the world and has been crucial in transforming China's economy and competitiveness. Even though other national development banks have financed political projects and favoured industries that private investors would eschew; never has such an institution existed with so much capital and financial capability with control delivered into the hands of one body, the CPC. The rise of Chinese capital availability overseas is an ever-increasing trend facilitated by the CDB, which specializes in financing infrastructure, energy and transportation. In this it is complimented by the Exim Bank of China which specializes in financing trade, investment and economic cooperation; and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, whose starting capital and credit ratings have made it a rival to the World Bank, ADB and the IMF. In addition to these banks, the government-owned Silk Road Fund fosters increased investment in countries participating in the BRI.

Any understanding of the institutional base of the BRI would be incomplete without considering the role of the Chinese PLA, which is the largest military force in the world. The recent growth of the PLA's global power projection capabilities and strategic nuclear missile capabilities has been noteworthy. Local conditions in many BRI areas are highly unstable, and scenarios where China may require the PLA to protect its interests beyond its borders are not unrealistic. As China's growth has moved it along the path to becoming a true maritime power, so also has the PLA navy expanded its global reach with the acquisition of aircraft carriers, carrier-killer missiles and overseas bases. The perception of the PLA as being the armed wing of the CPC means the PLA's deployment abroad is extremely sensitive in nature.

There is concern regarding the rise of a global player with an institutional base such as China's. The justifiable unease in many parts of the world arises from the links between its national mission, power projection capabilities and political system. If this unease is not alleviated, the BRI could be perceived as a neo-colonial form of tributary diplomacy even as China works to reinstate its rightful civilisational place in the world order.

## **Does technology impact the BRI?**

The term technology covers the development and utilization of technical capabilities in relation to people and the environment. Technologies are material and non-material or digital inventions that have enabled human beings to survive, thrive and advance. They ought not to be considered in isolation from the era or the societies in which they exist. For instance, some experts consider

that were it not for the development of the chariot, China itself as a unified entity would not exist. Such is the impact of technology on society. Continuing on this note, if one considers the very concept of the state as a ‘technology’ in its own right, one can define a state as the sum of human endeavour in the production of economic, military, social or artistic outcomes. Extending this train of thought, one can consider the state or the BRI to be a ‘network’, and one which acts within a global network.

The evolution of the BRI must be considered in the context of political technologies such as states and intra-state activities. It should be acknowledged how these technologies interact with other cutting-edge technologies and the resulting evolution of governance. In this macro-context, national or civilizational interactions are part of a complex technological network. When insights from complexity theory and network theory are incorporated into one’s perspective, the evolution of the BRI and its vision can be viewed in a new light. This provides a viewpoint which could be useful when considering how technology impacts the intentions driving an initiative such as the BRI. The economic future of China is technology dependent and effective utilization and transfer of technology will be at the heart of the BRI. Further to this, as BRI members develop, there will be greater demand for advanced technologies, wherever they come from.

For China, technology and success are almost synonymous and the ‘Made in China 2025’ strategic plan is the blueprint for China’s intent for seizing leadership in advanced technology. It is a world leader in digital payment systems and the intent is to surge forward in ICT, artificial intelligence, robotics, high-speed railways, biotech and medical technology, pharmaceuticals, space technology, renewables, energy efficiency, electric vehicles, nuclear energy and military technology. To fuel this surge China needs access, one way or another, to commodities from developing countries or cutting-edge technology from developed countries. The BRI presents China with opportunities to use its accumulated capital to increase its ability to control and optimise global value chains on favourable terms for developing and exporting its technology.

The danger from the current global crisis has showcased China’s strategic biotech capabilities. Chinese leadership in other key technology sectors can be noted from its young, large and ambitious technology workforce, its recent accounting for a third of a space-launches, its pushing ahead with ambitious plans for cleaner and safer next-generation nuclear power, and its acknowledged strength in 5G telecom networks and digital platforms. With this in mind, we can see that China’s ‘Technological Tianxia’ will be one of fast, technologically driven economic and social change with a centrally managed approach, including the use of technology for military and power-projection. The speed of this change is considerable. China took just over a decade for over a billion people to double industrial output per person. In comparison, the UK took well over a century and the US took about half a century. The technology driven vision of the future will be a distinctive factor for an imagined community such as the BRI and this vision will be driven by Chinese technology prophets, entrepreneurs, influencers and venture capitalists.

## Could the BRI lead to conflict?

Conflict creates conditions that cause people to act in unaccustomed ways, as noted by Thucydides. It is essential, therefore, to accustom oneself to divergent thinking about approaches to conflict resolution. Chinese strategists base their fundamental thinking on Sun Tzu's classic, 'The Art of War' as well as on the ancient game of Weiqi, known as 'Go' in the West. These core cultural artefacts have a remarkable association with each other, not only in the context of conflict but also in a cultural, political and philosophical sense. Weiqi can be contrasted with Chess, which has a somewhat comparable status in Western culture. The two games have different approaches, with one presenting a decisive clash of forces between players using prepositioned elements and the other presenting a relative accumulation of advantage with elements introduced after the start. Bearing this in mind, it may well be that the most effective grand strategy for dealing with 'black-swan' conflict events, is contingent adaptability rather than a friend-enemy approach.

The relationship between the US and China will be the key factor in managing international conflict. China has become an increasingly potent military rival to the US, though overall the US will remain regnant with its significant power advantages. The BRI's evolution has already caused powers such as Australia, India and Japan to create counter-initiatives for the Indo-Pacific region to emphasize the need for power balance. At the same time, fear of containment will underpin Chinese-Russian relationships, with Russia continuing to address its own concerns about China's agenda. Elevated levels of military spending show the potential for conflicts in flashpoints within the vast geographical space which covers oil and rare-earth regions, the Indian Ocean, the South-China Sea, and East, Southeast and Central Asia.

Rapid technological innovation has blurred the boundaries separating war and peace resulting in the growth of 'hybrid' conflict. This coupled with the potential for 'sub-threshold' conflict and increasing involvement by non-state actors means that hybrid conflict could be a pervasive part of the future, occurring without the limits of geography. This is especially notable in cyberspace which has become a volatile zone with military, business and non-state capabilities becoming increasingly based on critical real-time systems. Power in cyberspace can provide decisive advantage but cyberpower needs mature conceptual, technological and operational foundations. Cyberpower in combination with grand strategy provides the ability to orchestrate military resources to advance the national interest in a business or military sense. Rapid technological improvements suggest that more fighting may take place between human-controlled or autonomous machines, and this coupled with growing artificial intelligence could alter not just the approach to war but the very nature of war itself. Increased use of artificial intelligence in all spheres could inadvertently trigger conflicts if there is not enough joint governance available.

The risk of both state and non-state conflict could be worsened by forceful use of soft power, social fragmentation, inequality, and the negative impact of social media as people's identities and norms become more nuanced. Conflict accelerators such as violent extremist organisations

and weapons of mass-destruction will continue to exist although their future impact will not be easily quantifiable. Other macro-accelerators include the force of Easternization, the driving logic of Eurasian integration, obsession with sea-power, the cloak of uncertainty, the new embodiment of Mao's Red Guards and the din of Indian neo-nationalism.

The evolving BRI could lead to hegemonic conflict, but possibilities for conflict could be reduced by increasing economic interdependency and efforts towards all parties becoming further accustomed with each other. Additionally, global institutions will have to adapt to dampen volatility caused by changes in the evolving balance of power, where relative differences are greatest and where power is most contested.

## **What alternative futures face the BRI?**

The future of the BRI will be shaped by factors both inside and outside China. China's future geopolitical, economic and social conditions will have a significant impact on the rest of the world. Before one considers whether the BRI will be complete by 2050 or not, one must consider what alternative futures are plausible and probable, and the factors which influence those alternative futures. Some factors which impact the future will not change very much. Among these are the rate of technology change, China's geographic position, the inherent logic of Eurasian integration and China's demographic destiny. Its aging society and decreased birth-rates will have a major impact on the potential of workforces in China and the world, with consequent impacts on economic competitiveness.

Environmental stress and changing climate will impact not just China and Asia but the Arctic and the wider world. Currently unviable areas could open to further economic exploitation and some current areas may no longer be economically viable. Environmental stress in turn will trigger population movements within and between nations which could be accelerated by growing economic inequality. In China and in other nations a significant percentage of the current rural population would have migrated to cities, transforming both China and those nations into predominantly urban states with megalopolises poised to change internal political dynamics. The interaction of contributing factors such as these will impact the future of the BRI directly as well as indirectly. The Eurasian littoral has become increasingly crowded as the visible face of the hegemonic ambitions surfaced by the advent of the BRI narrative. Consequently, the concept of the Indo-Pacific has been adopted as a balancing mechanism and narrative in both economic and geopolitical space. The fault lines between the two narratives is where conflict has the greatest ability to impact the future of the BRI.

In addition to horizon scanning, the following sections will consider alternative futures for the multifaceted BRI at the macro level using a two-axes scenario technique. The axes are based on two key factors selected as having the most impact on the future, which is considered in terms of interaction between the two factors. The first of the factors used will be 'Globalisation vs. Nationalism'. Globalization refers to the trajectory of the international economy and global



geopolitics. ‘Nationalism’ refers to the ways that countries other than China promote their own long-term future interests. The second factor will be ‘BRI facilitates vs. BRI impedes’. The combination of factors is presented as two axes encompassing four plausible positive future scenarios. These are used as lenses with which to view possible futures unfolding during the period to 2050. The four future scenarios that will be covered in the next sections are: ‘The BRI facilitates globalisation – A Converging World Order’, ‘The BRI impedes globalisation – A Continuing World Order’, ‘The BRI facilitates nationalism – A Conflicting World Order’, and ‘The BRI impedes nationalism – A Constraining World Order’. It should be noted that these scenarios are objective and plausible caricatures and it is quite probable that components of one may be fused together with another.

The hope is for a BRI which ennobles mankind in the broadest possible sense and the fear is that the drive to ‘complete’ the BRI could end up sowing loss and division. The evolution of the BRI and any effective response to it will require radical geopolitical changes. The goal of presenting the scenarios which follow will have been achieved if they are seen to be plausible, and address the fundamental fears of all concerned yet leave room for hope in the image of the future.

## **How would the BRI impact a Converging World Order?**

The theme of this scenario is: ‘The BRI Facilitates Globalisation – A Converging World Order’. The key drivers are increasing support for globalisation, coupled with the BRI working to support the evolving new global order in a manner which is perceived as positive and useful. This is a scenario where the dominant themes are convergence, multilateralism and transformation, and where the universal aspect of specific political or civilisational doctrines becomes weakened.

In this scenario, states retain their independent perspectives and at the same time, cooperate in order to address global issues. The US and China have escaped the Thucydides trap. Clarification of interests and sustained growth provides no incentive to allow conflict to disturb the status quo. When conflict does occur, it does so at a regional level and even then the international treaty system adapts to ensure an ongoing balance of power and provision of a quick resolution of grievances and mitigation of root causes.

By 2050 the Chinese economy is considerably larger than that of the US. Economic growth is maximised through globalisation, considered cooperation, free-markets, prudent regulations and relatively stable financial markets. The economies of Africa, ASEAN, India and China continue to grow but with an internal prosperity divide. This divide is not only economic, but also urban/rural and digital/manual and is the cause for potential unrest.

From a social perspective, citizens in most advanced regions are politically and socially empowered and regulated migration to these regions is normalised, although illegal migration remains a challenge, being driven by inequality and environmental stress. There are tensions

between ethnic and national identities. Values, beliefs and lifestyles remain stable in some areas and change rapidly in others, leading to a degree of turmoil in states which are less ‘disciplined’ than others. Developed countries experience a collective decline in population and corruption increases in many countries where centralised control is too strong or too weak.

Technology is a key driver of economic growth, and digital technologies are at the heart of the innovation which drives growth. Most people have access to the information they need. The information environment is fairly well-regulated, but the rate of change makes this hard to control. At the same time technological changes make the many national government systems redundant.

Governance is characterised by the increase in enhanced global initiatives to address global structural and environmental challenges as well as international disputes. Multilateral treaties are positioned within strong institutions that have the capability to address any of a spectrum of challenges, including the transformation to a digital economy and dealing with international crime.

In the larger context of protecting and managing natural environments with long-term sustainability in mind, there are broad collaborative international initiatives to provide mitigation for environmental stress due to the changing climate and to increase social resilience. Access to water, energy, mineral and food resources is regulated in order to manage both short-term shocks as well as long-term good.

In this scenario, in 2050, the BRI has helped to cement the smooth transition to a converging world order in areas such as trade, finance, industry, resource-management, infrastructure, cultural interchange, and environment management. The BRI has addressed inequality by helping to raise living standards, and productivity outside of China, which has helped to address the impact of declining Chinese demographics. Since the BRI is multilateral and geo-economic by its very nature, though a China led initiative, it has provided most of the benefits and little of the geopolitical hegemonistic challenges feared by other nations. China’s soft power has increased through interaction and culturalization along the sections of the BRI, and the logic of Eurasian integration has been made manifest.

## **How would the BRI impact a Continuing World Order?**

The theme of this scenario is: ‘The BRI Impedes Globalisation – A Continuing World Order’. The key drivers are continuing support for globalisation, coupled with the BRI working as an impediment in the global order, which is how it is viewed by the international community. In this scenario the dominant themes are continuity, multipolarity, business-as-usual, and a weakening of a universal approach to the international order.

In this scenario, states form blocs with those in geographical proximity or with similar civilisational foundations. They coordinate within blocs, though blocs compete with each other. The US and China as the leaders of the largest blocs, have not quite escaped the Thucydides trap; with conflict addressed through ‘a long peace’ approach. Disconnection, distrust and antagonism are rife. The heightened potential for conflict raises military expenditure although actual conflict remains limited.

By 2050 the Chinese economy is the largest but that of the US is dominant. Intra-bloc trade is limited by barriers and actual international institutions are given little attention. The economies of Africa, ASEAN, India and China continue to grow but with an internal prosperity divide. Economic growth is strongly viewed through a resilience lens and long-term planning is viewed as crucial.

From a social perspective, cohesion is emphasized in most advanced regions and the provision of welfare and social services is controlled. Values and lifestyles are less given to trends because of an emphasis on ‘discipline’. Developed countries experience a collective decline in population but migration is highly controlled, leading to economic and social pressures being alleviated through growing levels of personal augmentation.

Technology and information remain a critical driver of growth, but the drivers for technological innovation are the military and security. Technology availability is constrained by a lack of international cooperation and is poorly regulated in social and ethical terms. Most states or blocs prioritise locking-down and securing their information environments in order to defend them, but this has an inadvertent effect on the free flow of people, knowledge and material.

Governance is characterised by the lack of global initiatives to address global problems because of a lack of respected multilateral institutions. This leads to stronger intra-bloc frameworks further undermining global institutions. Low-intensity hybrid conflict is commonplace, which strengthens the hands of bloc leaders as they manage their states, the governance of which is strongly impacted by technological advancements. The megacity dominates with high levels of intra-urban connectivity within blocs but not between them.

In the context of protecting and managing the global natural environment, there are few international initiatives to provide mitigation for environmental stress arising from the changing climate. Access to water, energy, mineral and food resources is regulated at the bloc level, in order to manage both short-term shocks as well as long-term resilience structures. There is strong global competition for key mineral resources. The result is inconsistency, disconnection, and a lack of coordination for environmental management.

In this scenario, in 2050, the BRI has hindered globalisation and instead upheld the continuing of the current world order. Despite the BRI being designed to be multilateral and geo-economic, its perception as an instrument of hegemony enhanced polarisation, and the challenges it created engendered distrust among many powerful nations. As a result, China did not increase its soft-power, and this added to the perception that it was different from the rest of the world.

Taiwan, the South China Sea and North Korea will continue to be flashpoints, but a pre-emptive strike remains unlikely. The emphasis will be on deterrence and ambiguity rather than overt provocation, since all parties know that any counterproductive moves would upset the ongoing balance of the prevailing multipolar world order.

## **How would the BRI impact a Conflicting World Order?**

The theme of this scenario is: ‘The BRI Facilitates Nationalism – A Conflicting World Order’. The key drivers are decreasing support for globalisation, coupled with the BRI working as a facilitator even though it engendered greater divergence. This is a scenario where the dominant themes are antagonism, fragmentation and the collapse of globalisation, and where a universal approach to cooperation is perceived as irrelevant. This and the following scenario differ from the previous ones which portrayed the future as ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same’.

From a political perspective, states and sub-states compete with each other incessantly, with cooperation and coalitions being transient and used as mechanisms for self-interest. There are few effective multilateral ‘referee’ institutions. Chaos and conflict are rampant, and military and security spending are high. However, because of strong military deterrence, conflicts are regionally contained.

Economic imbalances grow because of unregulated global trade, and increasing inequality cause greater dysfunction in the international system, in which there are few long-term multilateral agreements. The rate of development remains high and is not constrained by consideration for the long-term good of society.

From a social perspective, the impact of environmental stress increases migration to more liveable and prosperous regions. Since the migration is driven by economics, societies become less socially cohesive and numbers of stateless persons continually grows.

Technological advances are fuelled by weapons development and security and are largely driven by regional powers and large corporations. Technological and digital global governance is weak which exacerbates corruption and inequality. The information environment is open and is a key driver of innovation, yet remains vulnerable to increasing manipulation, theft and exploitation.

From a legal and governance perspective, international institutions such as the UN and WTO are undermined and weak. Megalopolises act in concert with large corporations to provide services, enforce laws and raise taxes. This weakens some states and increases the prominence of relatively unaccountable non-state actors, thus providing fertile ground for an increase in corruption.

From an environmental perspective, the background of conflict reduces the ability to mitigate the impact of environmental stress resulting in a focus on resilience and adaptation. Resource

constraints increase tensions. Responses to natural disasters are inefficiently addressed leading to an increase in the power of private enterprises and the depletion of the global commons.

In this scenario, in 2050, the BRI has hindered globalisation and contributed to conflict and the fragmentation of the current world order. Despite the multilateral and geo-economic nature of the BRI, as a China led initiative it has provided a platform which enhanced polarisation, and because of the hegemonistic challenges it exposed, the BRI became distrusted and feared by other nations. China's soft power did not grow, it did not dominate, nor did it stagnate. China continued to be the dominant economy in Asia and managed its neighbours' apprehensions triggered by its authoritarian and mercantile approach. Since the growing automation of production and digitalisation reduced inherent manufacturing advantage, China asserted its authority by creating the occasional geopolitical crisis to deflect domestic discontent with its slowing economy.

China retained the BRI at the centre of its strategic intent. For those nations that were not partners, apprehension and the potential for conflict was less about military conflict and more about the weaponization of the free-movement of networked elements of globalisation such as ideas, data and people which underpinned prosperity and security. Throughout this, the driving logic of trans-continental integration remained undiminished thereby strengthening the role of the Belt in the BRI. Despite the background of constant information warfare, the Thucydides trap was eluded, though conflict was approached by the major parties with mindsets reflecting the games, Chess and Go.

## **How would the BRI impact a Constraining World Order?**

The theme of this scenario is: 'The BRI Impedes Nationalism – A Constraining World Order'. The key drivers are decreasing support for globalisation, coupled with the BRI working as an impeding element in a constrained world order and an environment where the goal is just to use current circumstances to the best advantage. This is a scenario where the dominant themes are 'a new normal', globally networked societies, environmental constraints and a new global equilibrium, and where universalism is overcome by the expedient.

In this scenario, from a political perspective, states share power with non-state actors such as cities and corporations to enable global governance to meet universal challenges. Shared approaches to defence and security increase peace. Conflict occurs but is arbitrated by international institutions which prevent escalation and avoid disruption. Alliances between entities morph in response to power dynamics, but the universal goal is security and stability.

Economic balance is maintained by state and corporate institutions in conjunction with markets, which are managed in the context of the complex digital economy and characterised by evolving institutions, multiple ownership and dispersed decision structures. Managing the interests of authoritarian state corporations remains a challenge.

From a social perspective, migration is controlled and enabled for people with specific capabilities. This causes diverse societies based on economic priorities. Social identities are nuanced, with people having multiple allegiances to states as well as non-state entities. Self-identity is impacted by the role of multinationals and megacities. The growing levels of automation and the market forces driving this cause rising inequality within societies.

Technological progress is rapid, driven by economic interests, corporations and non-state actors, and triggers advances in weapons development. This necessitates changes in global institutions and corporations to enable appropriate governance, even if it is retrospective. Information access is nearly ubiquitous, but control is mostly in the hands of non-state actors.

From a legal and governance perspective, international institutions such as the UN and WTO adapt to include the plethora of non-state actors and situations, especially where functional and geographical considerations are at the forefront of the fast-paced digital economy. States seek to mitigate the impacts of the digital transition by providing cost-effective services working alongside corporations, though this leads to potential affordability issues, exacerbating inequality.

From an environmental perspective, all parties accept the imperative to cooperate to mitigate the impact of urgent global challenges such as resource management, environmental stress, pollution, and biodiversity loss. The collective approach incorporates multiple cultures, as well as political and economic motivations.

In this scenario, in 2050, the BRI has impeded nationalism and enabled global integration by triggering considerable change in the world order because of the BRI's inherent nature. State capitalism, as exemplified by the BRI, pursues economic value but recognises that markets require state support in crises as well as the necessary actions to ensure the balance between short-term wins and long-term goals. Focusing just on immediate economic value leaves endeavours vulnerable to those vagaries of the market which have the potential to trigger global-level collapses and consequent periods of correction.

The danger emanating from state capitalism endeavours such as the BRI is an authoritarian approach, although recent global events highlight the need for an ethic which prioritises not just economic value but long-term viability. In a constrained 'new normal', the central motivation will ultimately be organised around those values which relate to a long-term, viable and resilient future which can be attained incrementally. This is essential to effectively address the mounting resource depletion and environmental stress of the new-normal. The BRI provides a pathway to support this quest, but in doing so, it ought not to engender deference but sustain mutuality and trust.

## **What will the BRI look like ten thousand days from now?**

The first seven sections in this series used an inductive foresight process to build future constructs using a multiple horizons and timeline approach. In the last four sections however, four future scenarios were presented using a deductive futures approach based on two axes of uncertainty. As we know from experience the dynamics driving future scenarios are far more complex than that. Therefore, the aim of this section is to zoom out to the bigger, arguably more profound long-term image of the future in relation to the BRI as we consider the turbulence of the present and its interplay with short-term future realities.

As a prominent global initiative, the BRI has a highly visible structure, this makes its future state open to a great deal of conjecture. With a ten-thousand-day perspective, the details are yet to be discerned, including how much China will maintain its centrality and how much genuine value it will provide to other nations in the long term. This relates to the image of the future that is driving the BRI, the extent to which it does so, and how much of that image of the future will prevail in 2050 in order to sustain the BRI for the remainder of the 21st Century. To a great extent, the BRI reflects the collective striving of society toward valued future objectives, driven by a particular image of the future. Like all images of the future, this can change over time through a capacity for self-correction, re-architecture and renewal. If that capacity is inadequate, the necessary constructive and idealistic images for the desired future may not materialise and this has the potential to destroy trust and instead propel fears about the BRI.

At the heart of the BRI is the historical 'Belt' and at the heart of the 'Belt' is a driving image of the future comprising the grand logic of Eurasian integration, the place of a resurgent China in the world order, unceasing technological innovation and an ever expanding technocracy. As the world's largest developing country, China believes it can provide other developing countries with an alternative model for development which is manifested in the BRI. Whether the BRI continues as a viable geo-economic image of the future for the world or becomes a geopolitical hegemony of China over the participating countries is uncertain. Despite current circumstances, it is still too early to draw any firm conclusion.

Hindsight suggests that major transformations in the global system occur due to hegemonic conflict. The durability of the central institutions of the current global political economy has been disrupted by the distributive global model of the BRI, which incorporates an incentivising approach that is non-judgemental about member nations' political systems. The BRI has been used by China to reframe its relationships with other nations and to provide historical legitimacy for a China-centric Pan-Asian narrative, which accepts no pushback, especially from those who possess equally strong civilisational and historical narratives. Over the next ten-thousand days the BRI has the opportunity to enhance people-to-people connectivity, mitigate the risks from environmental stress, as well as promote cultural and material value exchange in an era of revolutionary technological advances.

We need to remain vigilant about the actual long-term impact of the BRI on both participating and non-participating nations. For now, the central task of the BRI is to organise itself to

address truly universal values and strive for an enduring global balance– through wisdom, ‘contingent adaptation’ and foresight; for as has been said, a balanced world is a world which is free.

**Carl Michael**