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Between ambition and ambiguity

Strategic ambiguity and China's Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

Whether the rise of China poses a threat or opportunity to international stability continues to spark debate between IR scholars. The ‘China threat’ school, often offensive realists, claims that China cannot rise peacefully because it seeks to replace the US as a hegemon. The Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) is Xi’s flagship foreign policy project and aims to connect China with Eurasia via land and sea routes. While the BRI is a highly ambitious project, it is also a highly ambiguous one – puzzling to offensive realists and other schools who expect rational, optimized foreign policies. This study argues that the BRI’s ambiguity is strategic and helps the CCP to enhance the BRI’s flexibility and ultimately to sustain the CCP’s performance legitimacy. Strategic ambiguity helps the CCP to deliver the BRI as a success to its domestic audiences on who the CCP relies for its legitimacy to power. A case study of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the BRI’s flagship project, reveals the existence of strategic ambiguity as a rational foreign policy tool and sheds new light on the nature of the BRI and China’s foreign policy.

Keywords: China; Belt & Road Initiative; strategic ambiguity; CCP; performance legitimacy; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

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I. Introduction

There is a new superpower in town. If the international system can be categorized as unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar, as the concentration of great powers lies with one state, two states, or multiple states, respectively (Waltz, 1979: 163), then the days of American unipolarity appear to be over. Since the end of the Cold War, the US emerged as the world's hegemon and dominated international politics. The current century, however, has been described as the 'Chinese Century' (The Economist, 2018b). This is for a good reason: China is rapidly closing the capabilities gap with the US while broadening its gap with other states (Tunsjø, 2021: 23). The international system is thus shifting from unipolarity to bipolarity.

The rise of China is the result of its spectacular growth following Deng Xiaoping's 'opening up' policies since 1978. China is now the world's second-largest economy and holds the second-largest military in the world (Bajpai, 2020; SIPRI, 2020). Not only its capabilities, but China's foreign policy has also changed after Mao's rule. Leaders as Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao embraced the principle of 'hiding one's capabilities and biding one's time', preferring growth and political stability over confrontational foreign policies (Chang-Liao, 2016a). China actively included itself in the capitalist world economy by becoming the world's primary manufacturer (Flint & Xiaotong, 2019). Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China pursues a more assertive foreign policy and appears to have abandoned the principles of Xi's predecessors (Friedberg & Boustany, 2020; Ferdinand, 2016; Callahan, 2016; Chiang-Liao, 2016b). This growing assertiveness is reflected in Xi's 'China Dream' vision: a rejuvenation of the Chinese people from its 'century of humiliation' to a major superpower (Chang-Liao, 2016a). Following this vision, China has taken a more proactive role in the South China Sea disputes (Kaplan, 2011) and climate change (Engels, 2018).

Whether China's rise is an opportunity or a threat to the international system depends on who you ask. According to Friedberg (2005), there is a distinction between optimists and pessimists alongside the leading International Relations (IR) theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. The optimists tend to see China's rise as an opportunity for international cooperation or find its threat to be exaggerated. The pessimists tend to perceive China's rise as a threat to the US-led international system or as a threat to global stability as a whole. Of these pessimists – or 'China threat' thinkers – the realist pessimists possibly offer the most compelling argument that reflects current events. The Biden administration claims to take a tough stance on China and Secretary of State Blinken stated that president Trump was right to be harsh on China (Sevastopolu, 2021). Meanwhile, disapproving views of China internationally reached historical highs, most notably in Australia, Great Britain, and the US, although the COVID-19 pandemic might have affected this trend (Huang, 2020). The 'China threat' thinkers often stem from offensive realism. Its intellectual founder, John Mearsheimer (2006a; 2006b: 83; 2010; 2014), has repeatedly stated that China cannot rise peacefully: for states to survive, offense is the best defense and so China will seek to maximize its relative power. China is thus expected to seek regional hegemony in Asia by widening the power gap with regional major powers and to displace the US out of Asia. In the same fashion, Graham Allison (2017: xv; 2020: 391) argued that China's rise vis-à-vis US hegemony presents us with the Thucydides Trap: as a rising power challenges the status quo, war is not inevitable but still a likely outcome, parallel to the classical Athens-Sparta rivalry and the following Peloponnesian War.

The Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), also known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR) or unofficially the New Silk Road, is Xi's flagship foreign policy. The BRI is a combination of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), announced by Xi in Kazakhstan in September 2013, and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) which was announced a month later by Xi while visiting Indonesia (Blah, 2018; Clarke, 2019). The land route includes three corridors that encompass the whole of Eurasia, while the sea route focuses on the South China Sea, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean. In short, the BRI aims to weave at least 67 states (Miller, 2017: 31) into an enormous economic network via land and sea. The BRI includes both 'hard' infrastructural projects, such as Chinese investments in the Pakistani Gwadar port (Rimmer, 2018) and 'soft' projects such as e-commerce platforms (Guluzian, 2017). The BRI also provides the stage for high-profile international summits, the last in 2020 (Marks, 2020). Unsurprisingly, the BRI has become a major focus of attention when discussing the rise of China.

Interpretations of the BRI vary widely. For some, China's expanding economic influence is a good thing that offers opportunities and welfare for all, whereas others see China's expanding influence as a threat to US hegemony and to the existing economic system (Huang Y., 2016). Some scholars argue that the BRI is the emphasis of Chinese grand strategy to establish its position as a regional hegemon (Rolland, 2017; Beeson, 2018; Aoyama, 2016; Zakarov, 2017). Others argue that the BRI is primarily a domestically oriented economic strategy instead of an expansionist geopolitical strategy. They claim that the BRI is designed to ensure a sustained economic growth (HCIS, 2017: 4; Cai, 2017; Lauridsen, 2019: 226) or to develop China's western regions (Clarke, 2019). In sum, the BRI puzzles many observers as there is no consensus on what the BRI is and what its objectives really are.

Ambiguity is a key element of the BRI. The BRI's name changed from 'strategy' to 'initiative' (Rolland & Carson, 2019); its objectives are fuzzy and dynamic (Yuan, 2020); there is no detailed explanation on the official website (The Economist, 2018a); there is no official BRI map issued by the Chinese government (Narins & Agnew, 2020); and the BRI has expanded itself to include Latin American states, COVID-19 mask diplomacy, and talks of an 'Arctic Silk Road', despite the BRI being originally announced as an Eurasian and African project (Garlick & Havlová, 2020; Garlick, 2020; Jones & Zeng, 2019). The BRI has been described as a flexible, fluid concept for future adaptations and as a loose policy envelope to adapt to changing demands (Narins & Agnew, 2020; Guluzian, 2017; Jones & Zeng, 2019). In temporal sense, it is also unclear when the BRI specifically starts and when it exactly ends (Summers, 2020). Sub-national level BRI designs seem to change with its implementations over time and how the initiative will develop is thus unclear (Nitsche, 2020; He, 2018). The strategic intentions of the BRI are also vague: Chinese foreign policymakers widely differ on this issue, and these constant internal deliberations lead to opaqueness and adjustments in foreign policy over time (Jakobson, 2016). In similar fashion, Xi has repeatedly stated to defend China's core interests internationally, yet it remains open to interpretation what these core interests actually include (Zeng et al., 2015). In short, the BRI is ambiguous and mysterious in many ways.

This ambiguity should puzzle offensive realists who expect China to use offensive foreign policies to increasingly challenge the hegemony of the status quo power. Mearsheimer (2006a; 2006b: 83; 2010; 2014) is perhaps most well-known for this position, asserting that China cannot rise peacefully because of how the international system works and how these structural factors are inherently translated by the rising power in offensive policies vis-à-vis the status quo power. The BRI is a smokescreen in various ways, to which offensive realists would generally respond that unoptimized or

simply poor policies are the result of irrational decision-makers who failed to interpret the systemic international conditions correctly, leading ultimately to punishment (Mearsheimer, 2001: 211). China is thus expected to optimize its foreign policy to adapt itself to the changes in the international system caused by China's rise itself. The BRI's continuous ambiguity presents offensive realists with a puzzle because it seems to reject optimization and remains open-ended, flexible, and loosely defined. That also seems to be at odds with rationalist assumptions of many common IR theories. Offensive realists conclude that the BRI must fit in China's endeavor for power. The BRI's ambiguity leaves it unclear whether the BRI is an offensive bid for regional hegemony or not. This study argues that the BRI's ambiguity is not simply the product of erring policymakers or procedural mistakes. It suggests that this ambiguity is to a considerable part deliberate, indeed strategic, as it responds to specific Chinese domestic considerations.

Like all other leaders, Xi Jinping must take domestic politics into account when designing foreign policy. Putnam (1988) illustrated how the entanglement between international and domestic politics manifests itself as a two-level game. Leaders must also maintain the support from their domestic groups who keep them in power or risk displacement out of office (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 8). In autocracies, leaders who make decisions often put the interests of their party first in order to ensure political survival (Kinne, 2005). All this means that researching the BRI's strategic ambiguity involves research into the domestic considerations, or the CCP's considerations for that matter, of China's foreign policy. The BRI's strategic ambiguity stems from two elements of Chinese foreign policy: China's dual identity and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) performance legitimacy to power. China is both a rising power and a developing state (Breslin, 2013). Under Xi, global aspirations are translated in assertive foreign policy and the 'China Dream' narrative (Friedberg & Boustany, 2020; Chiang-Liao, 2016a). Domestically, China is facing pressing economic issues (slower growth, fewer exports, energy dependency, among others) and security issues (most notably in Xinjiang and Tibet). The BRI aims to fulfill nationalistic geopolitical ambitions (Tekdal, 2017) but also aims to tackle China's economic issues (Passi, 2019: 173; Pavlicevic, 2019: 271; Clarke, 2019). Delivering on economics and nationalism is the foundation of the CCP's performance legitimacy to power and this legitimacy thus lies at the heart of Chinese foreign policy (Zhao, 2009; Tsang, 2019).

This is a puzzle that primarily targets offensive realist theory which predicts offensive behavior on China's part, but specifically targets two of its core assumptions that go beyond offensive realism alone. First, offensive realists and many other IR scholars assume rationality in their actors. This means that foreign policy decision-makers (be it individual or group, this is an individual actor regardless) base their policy decisions on the principle of utility: being rational actors, they are expected to make a thorough cost-benefit analysis and choose the policy with the highest (potential) reward with the least costs (Alden, 2017). This is not only illustrated by Mearsheimer (2001: 210), who claims that bad policies must be the result of bad decision-makers, but is also illustrated by the works of Putnam (1988) and Schelling (1960: 4), who both employ rationalist assumptions in their works and go beyond offensive realism. The deliberate smokescreen that is the BRI must make rationalists at least wonder how rational decision-makers can reach the conclusion that the best (in terms of cost-benefit) option is to remain ambiguous. Although this study does not aim to reject the assumption of rationality altogether, it does aim to shed a new light on how ambiguity can be a rational and even strategic foreign policy tool. Second, offensive realists and many other IR scholars assume structuralism in international politics, meaning that structural or systemic factors are more important than domestic

considerations (Alden, 2017). This is apparent in Mearsheimer's (2001: 10) theory as he stated that structural factors of the international system are most important in explaining and predicting international politics. Structuralism is also prevalent in other IR theories as neoliberalism and social constructivism (Haggard, 1991: 403). This study will show that the use of strategic ambiguity in the BRI is primarily due to domestic considerations, particularly the CCP's domestic legitimacy to power. All in all, offensive realism offers a valuable starting point for this study because of its well-documented predictions and the emergence of the 'China threat' narrative outside of academia. But the BRI's ambiguity puzzle goes beyond offensive realism alone. It raises questions on the possibility of ambiguity as a rational foreign policy and the importance of domestic political factors in using strategic ambiguity.

This study attempts to explain the strategic ambiguity of the BRI, thus following the research question: **Why is the Belt & Road Initiative strategically ambiguous?** The next chapter starts with an overview of the scholarly debate on China's rise. It then introduces the BRI as Xi Jinping's flagship project, followed by an elaboration of the concept of grand strategy and the introduction of the concept of strategic ambiguity. It then presents the study's central argument: the BRI is an example of the CCP employing strategic ambiguity as a rational foreign policy tool to enhance flexibility and ultimately to maintain its legitimacy to power. This is operationalized in a causal mechanism and its validity is assessed through a case study of the BRI's flagship project: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). After this in-depth case study, this study reaches its conclusion and recommendations for further research and discussion.

II. Theoretical framework

This chapter lays the theoretical framework of this study's central argument. It starts with an overview of the scientific debate on the rise of China and whether it can be perceived as a threat or opportunity to international stability. It then presents the Belt and Road Initiative and explains how its ambiguity poses questions for the dominant narrative on China's rise. It then considers the different meanings of grand strategy and introduces the concept of strategic ambiguity. After explaining how domestic politics can influence international politics, it posits the argument of how the BRI is part of Chinese grand strategy, and how grand strategy can be defined in different ways. It introduces the concept of strategic ambiguity and its different meanings and ends with the central argument of this study.

The rise of China: threat or opportunity?

The rise of China has baffled, excited and terrified IR scholars. Overall, a distinction can be made between optimists who see opportunities in China's rise and pessimists who see China's rise as a direct threat to international stability. Optimists and pessimists are prevalent among IR's three most popular theories: realism, liberalism, and constructivism (Friedberg, 2005). Generally, optimists claim that China's rise can enhance international stability and improve millions of lives as China will seek international cooperation and integrates within international institutions. The pessimists, on the other hand, worry about China's revisionist intentions as its economic and military capabilities grow. Pointing to developments in the South China Sea, for example, pessimists assert China's destabilizing effect on international peace and foresee potential conflict with the US. The optimists find that threat to be exaggerated. Nevertheless, it is the pessimist view on China's rise that has become the dominant narrative in recent years.

The pessimist view on China dominates current US-China relations. Both presidents Obama and Trump took a tough stance towards China: Obama (and Secretary of State Clinton) initiated the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy to counter growing Chinese influence in the Southeast Asian region, whereas Trump initiated a US-China trade war (Liu, 2020). Current Secretary of State Blinken claimed that Trump was right to take a tough stance on China (Sevastopolu, 2021) and denounced China as an aggressive power (Pamuk & Shin, 2021). Simultaneously, China has taken a more assertive position as Xi stated in 2014 that Asian security should be upheld by the Asians in contrast to US involvement in Asia (Ng, 2014). These statements are part of the Chinese shift from 'keeping a low profile' to 'striving for achievement' and projecting itself as a natural successor to the US as a leading power (Kristensen & Morgan, 2018). It is thus worth to investigate the claims and predictions of those who are pessimistic on China's rise.

The pessimism regarding China is well explained through the lens of offensive realism, most known by the works of John Mearsheimer (2001: 4), although authors as Robert Gilpin (1981: 7) and Randall Schweller (2010) have contributed significantly to this field alongside Elman (2004), Labs (1997), and Layne (2009). Offensive realism starts from the traditional realist assumptions of anarchy, rationality, and unknown intentions, among others. In a nutshell, offensive realism states that states who grow in economic capabilities will translate this into growing military capabilities. In an anarchic system where one cannot be sure of the other's intentions, increasingly powerful states will try to ensure their survival

by striving for regional hegemony (as projecting global hegemony is practically impossible). This often, but not necessarily, involves war. Since states are rational units, they will rationally calculate how to achieve more power into well-defined and optimized strategies. Other states will find their survival to be threatened and could form a counter-alliance to the newcomer. As conflict becomes the logical result, offensive realism is a rather pessimistic view on international politics itself. In other words, because of the structural settings of the international system, states are driven by fear to ensure their survival by offensive means. Mearsheimer (2001: 41) provides historical attempts at hegemony (e.g., Napoleonic France, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany) but claims that only the US succeeded in achieving regional hegemony as it forced its competitors out of the Americas via the Monroe Doctrine in the 19th century. Failure to achieve hegemony, according to Mearsheimer (ibid: 210) is the result of a flawed interpretation of the international situation or simply bad strategy. Given this view on international relations, it is no surprise that offensive realists are the most notable 'China threat' thinkers.

The 'China threat' thinkers (Mearsheimer, 2006a; 2006b: 83; 2010; 2014; Kagan, 2018, "The Return of History", para. 18; Ross, 2005; Noguchi, 2011) claim that China cannot rise peacefully given the premises of offensive realism. China will be the US's most likely competitor for hegemony given its capabilities (Schweller & Pu, 2011). China is no exception to offensive realist logic: because of the international system's characteristics, China cannot be sure of other states' intentions and will translate its growing economic capabilities into military capabilities. Next, China will seek to achieve regional hegemony in Asia, kicking the US out in a Monroe-esque manner (Mearsheimer, 2006a). This is a logical consequence: China has no reason to stick to the status quo if its relative power increases, so its desire for hegemony increases (Ross, 2005; Kagan, 2018, "The Return of History", para. 19). Concretely, this involves a Chinese effort to (1) increase the power gap with other regional powers and (2) increasingly challenge US presence in Asia (Mearsheimer, 2006a). Although the US-China rivalry will not automatically descent into war, it is also not impossible. This claim refers to the concept of the Thucydides Trap, made popular by Graham Allison (2017: xv). The concept stems from Thucydides' accounts of the Peloponnesian War between ancient Athens and Sparta. Its basic premise is that when a status quo power is challenged by a newcomer for hegemony, war is often (but not always) the result. This is the result of different dynamics: the rising power tends to become more assertive and offensive, whereas the status quo power becomes fearful and more defensive (ibid: xv). Uncertainty and fear over the intentions of a rising power have the capability of sparking a conflict. Allison (2017: xvii; 2020: 393) argues that the rise of China vis-à-vis the status quo US presents us with the Thucydides Trap and that war between the US and China could occur. In sum, the 'China threat' thinkers claim that China will ensure its survival by seeking regional hegemony in Asia through offensive, rationalist, and well-defined strategies.

Belt and Road Initiative

While visiting Kazakhstan in 2013, Xi announced a new Silk Road Economic Belt, followed by the announcement of a Maritime Silk Road one month later in Indonesia (Blah, 2018; Clarke, 2019). Together, these two projects form the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, also coined 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) or 'New Silk Road'). On land, the BRI consists of multiple corridors spanning the Eurasian continent, with end points in Singapore, Pakistan, Italy, and the Netherlands. On sea, the multiple maritime corridors span the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, South China Sea and the Mediterranean. An

unofficial map of the BRI is presented in Figure 1. The BRI aims to weave at least 67 states (Miller, 2017, 31) into an enormous economic network via land and sea. The BRI includes both ‘hard’ infrastructural projects, such as Chinese investments in the Pakistani Gwadar port (Rimmer, 2018) and ‘soft’ projects such as e-commerce platforms (Guluzian, 2017). Given its ambitious scope, the BRI has become a major focus of attention in the context of China’s rise. China emphasizes that the BRI is aimed to achieve “win-win cooperation that promotes common development and prosperity and a road towards peace and friendship by enhancing mutual understanding and trust and strengthening all-round exchanges” (National Development and Reform Council et al., 2015). In other words, according to China, the BRI has the potential to not only benefit China, but every other state involved in the initiative.

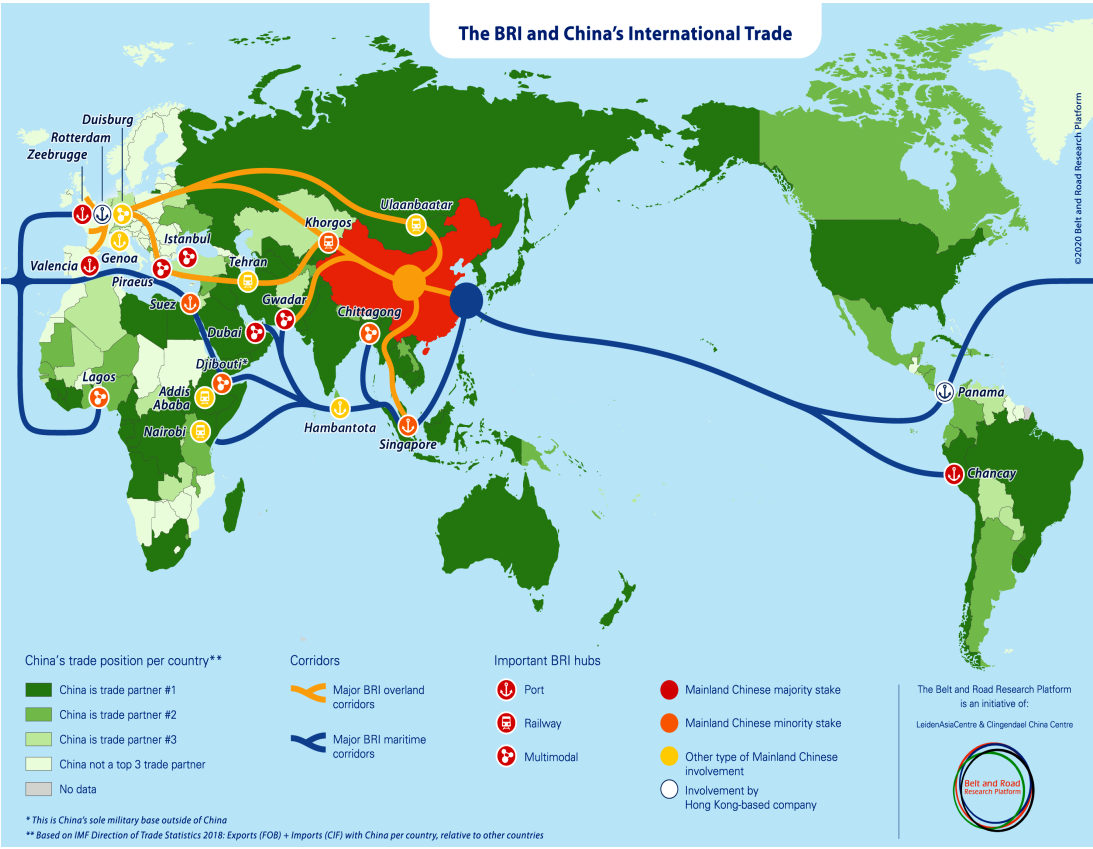


Figure 1: Unofficial map of the BRI (Belt and Road Research Platform, 2021)

In terms of economic development, the BRI can be perceived as a domestic-oriented strategy to sustain economic growth (HCIS, 2017: 4; Cai, 2017; Lauridsen, 2019: 226; Ekman, 2015) and to develop China’s western regions (Clarke, 2019; Ekman, 2015). It has been argued that the numerous massive projects are aimed to combat Chinese economic challenges (Passi, 2019: 173; Pavlicevic, 2019: 271; Ekman, 2017). This includes the challenges of overcapacity, most notably in steel, aluminum, and cement industries (European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, 2016), underdevelopment of western regions and access to resources. A successful BRI implementation could tackle overcapacity, stimulate growth in underdeveloped provinces as Xinjiang and provide access to resources outside of chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca (Ekman, 2015), which processes 80 percent of China’s energy imports (Wolf, 2020: 67; China Power, 2017). While increased international trade would improve

China's economic influence abroad, it certainly helps to tackle pressing domestic economic issues as well.

The BRI is perceived by scholars as both defensive and offensive. In defensive terms, the BRI could be seen as a balancing effort against the US 'Pivot to Asia' strategy and its allies (Clarke, 2019). The BRI could also be viewed in offensive terms as China aims to position itself as the regional hegemon in Asia and to fulfill the 'China Dream' of rejuvenation (Rolland, 2017; Beeson, 2018; Aoyama, 2016; Zakarov, 2017). Concepts such as the 'String of Pearls' theory or 'debt-trap diplomacy' (Hameiri, 2020) are brought into the debate to emphasize China's offensive, revisionist intentions with the BRI. The BRI is said to be a foreign policy tool that facilitates China's transition on the international stage (Stec, 2018), and China's expanding economic influence would constitute a threat to the US-led economic system (Huang Y., 2016). Others claim that this threat is exaggerated as China's material gains from the BRI are rather limited (Kim, 2020). In any case, the global ambitions of the BRI reflect the 'China Dream' narrative in China's foreign policy, which features a strong sense of national pride and a desire for recognition and respect (Ekman, 2017). In this sense, the BRI can not only help to tackle domestic economic issues, but also stimulate nationalist sentiments.

But despite all its grandiose ambitions, a lot about the BRI remains unclear. Its name officially changed from 'One Belt One Road (OBOR) Strategy' to the 'Belt & Road Initiative', due to the possible misinterpretation of the term 'strategy' to the outside world (Rolland & Carson, 2019). Second, there is no official BRI map that indicates its scope (Narins & Agnew, 2020). This geographical ambiguity is exacerbated by the inclusion of Latin American states and talks of an 'Arctic Silk Road', despite the original announcement as a Eurasian and African project (Garlick & Havlová, 2020; Jones & Zeng, 2019). Third, what exactly falls under the BRI also changes over time, as new elements such as China's mask diplomacy in the current COVID-19 pandemic now falls under the umbrella of BRI (Garlick, 2020). Fourth, it remains unclear when the BRI exactly began and when the end goal should be reached (Summers, 2020). In sum, the BRI is riddled with ambiguity in its temporal and geographical scope, its objectives, and its framework. The only constant variable of the BRI is its tendency to change (Stec, 2018).

This ambiguity should at least puzzle offensive realists who expect offensive strategies from rising powers instead of win-win cooperation. Ambiguity, or even unoptimized policies in general, puzzles offensive realists because this could only be the result of flawed interpretations by decision-makers who failed to seize the opportunities presented by the international system. Going beyond offensive realism alone, the BRI's ambiguity should also puzzle scholars who assume rationality and structuralism in a state's foreign policy making. The assumption of rationality, while it is one of Mearsheimer's (2006b: 74) core assumptions, goes beyond offensive realism as it assumes that foreign policy decision-makers base their policies on well-thought cost-benefit analyses: a rational actor thus chooses a foreign policy that has maximum utility with the least involved costs (Alden, 2017). It is hence not only offensive realists who believe states optimize their foreign policy based on utility, but many other IR scholars who assume rationality in their actors. Robert Putnam and Thomas Schelling are claimed to be exemplary of this rationalist approach: Putnam describes international politics as a two-level game by introducing the decision-making matrix, while Schelling became famous for his introduction of game theory to international politics (ibid.). Although the aim here is not to reject rationality altogether, it does raise the question how to reconcile rationality and ambiguity.

This ambiguity should also puzzle those who assume structuralism as a core tenet of foreign policy making. Structuralism is larger than offensive realism alone: it claims that it is the international system that primarily determines a state's foreign policy (ibid.). It was Waltz (1979: 99) who constructed his whole theory of structural realism on, unsurprisingly, structural factors. This emphasis on structural factors can also be observed in other dominant IR theories, such as neoliberalism or social constructivism (Haggard, 1991: 403). Since the BRI has the potential to tackle domestic issues, illustrating the entanglement between international and domestic politics, the involvement of domestic political considerations as a key factor in explaining the BRI's ambiguity challenges structuralist assumptions. All in all, although discussing these assumptions in depth goes beyond this study's scope, it is worth noting that explaining the ambiguous character of the BRI thus goes beyond offensive realist assumptions alone.

The BRI is Xi's flagship policy and connected to China's core interests. China generally takes a fixed, known position when it comes to these core interests, and ambiguity and non-fixed positions are usually the case in non-crucial international issues. But non-Chinese diplomats have stated that Chinese silence or ambiguity on an issue could also be interpreted as a strategic silence: the answer is known, and the position is fixed, but remains hidden for strategic reasons (Ekman, 2012). Given that China's foreign policy is more anticipative and strategic when core interests are involved (Ekman, 2017), as is the case with the BRI, it could be the case that the BRI's ambiguous elements are in fact deliberately and strategically brought in. It has been argued that the BRI's geographical ambiguity makes it a flexible concept ready for future adaptations (Narins & Agnew, 2020) and that the BRI is designed a loose 'policy envelope' that could flexibly adapt to changing demands (Jones & Zeng, 2019). Given these considerations, the ambiguity that surrounds the BRI is not the product of flawed policymakers who failed to seize the opportunities of the international system, nor is it a trivial element of China's foreign policy. This ambiguity is deliberate and strategic based on a number of domestic political considerations. The BRI's ambiguity is, in fact, strategic ambiguity at play.

Strategic ambiguity

The concept of strategic ambiguity originally stems from organizational theory and is defined as a strategic action that "enables the mobilization of collective action and change, even where organizational constituents hold different interests" (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009: 221). In other words, by remaining strategically ambiguous about your objectives, others might join your cause because their different interpretations complement their different interests, and this leads to collective action. Strategic ambiguity in politics is often found in the field of electoral studies. US presidential candidates, for example, are known to use strategic ambiguity as a winning tactic for elections (Tomz & Van Houweling, 2009). Deliberate ambiguity can be strategic as it allows leaders to avoid taking clear positions on policy issues and shield themselves from possible political consequences of unambiguous positions and promises (Milita et al., 2017). Furthermore, candidates who use ambiguous positions during elections enjoy greater freedom in implementing these promises without sacrificing credibility (Aragonès & Neeman, 2000). In other words, candidates who are ambiguous on their promises have greater flexibility in fulfilling them. Strategic ambiguity is also featured in international politics but not as well documented or theorized. Nevertheless, leaders can be strategically ambiguous in international politics. Leaders can deliberately project uncertainty or unpredictability to convince actors that they are capable of anything. They can hide their state's capabilities from other actors. Leaders can also be deliberately ambiguous about their objectives and

positions as to achieve a higher degree of flexibility in their scope of actions, or to hedge against superpowers. Strategic ambiguity can thus be part of a state's grand strategy.

Strategy in strategic ambiguity

What exactly constitutes a state's grand strategy is rather fuzzy. The subject of grand strategy has become increasingly popular in IR literature, yet there is no consensus on a clear definition. There is consensus, however, that grand strategy refers to a long-term policy that is related to a state's highest priorities and something that is related to all spheres of statecraft (Silove, 2018). Silove (ibid.) builds on this consensus and introduces three distinct definitions of grand strategy. First, 'grand plans' are strategies designed by commanders to win an ongoing conflict, but also extends to future peacetime involving all of a state's resources. In this sense, grand strategy is a well-organized, detailed plan like military strategy, only that it goes beyond warfare and permeates all spheres of the state. Second, 'grand principles' are less detailed and more of a guide that directs foreign policy. Guiding principles do not go as far as a detailed plan. Third, 'grand behavior' is nor a detailed plan, nor an organizing principle, but rather a state's behavioral pattern. Within this school of thought, there remains discussion whether intentionality (whether a pattern constitutes evidence of a plan) matters here. The core idea here, however, is that all states have a grand strategy, even if they are not aware of it.

How to define China's BRI strategy leads to different interpretations. Goldstein (2005) states that China's post-Cold War strategy is focused on a basic foreign policy consensus instead of a detailed plan. This would indicate that China's BRI strategy is not detailed plan, but rather an organizing principle or foreign policy framework. Nevertheless, given its importance and inclusion in China's constitution, one could also make the argument that the BRI must be a well-organized plan. Chinese diplomats sometimes remain secretive about China's positions, especially when its core interests are involved (Ekman, 2012). A state can be deliberately ambiguous about its intentions and objectives for a number of reasons.

Strategic ambiguity as uncertainty

Strategic ambiguity in international politics as uncertainty reflects the idea that one cannot be sure of another's intentions and capabilities. This follows Silove's (2018) notion of strategy as a plan or principle, depending on the level of detail. Richard Nixon's foreign policy was heavily influenced by the 'Madman Theory'. In brief, the 'Madman Theory' does not reflect the madness of a state's leader, but creates its implication, thus convincing another state's leaders that all options are on the table, including the worst-case scenarios (Boys, 2020). As such, the 'Madman Theory' creates the impression of unpredictability. This is illustrated by Nixon's remarks in 1968 regarding the possible end of the Vietnam War: he stated that he wanted the North Vietnamese to believe he was capable of doing anything to stop the war, including mentioning of nuclear weapons in order to force the North Vietnamese to negotiate (Haldeman & DiMona, 1978: 83). Nixon wanted to come across as a dangerous leader not to be underestimated.

In more recent history, Donald Trump's foreign policy was also characterized by a large degree of unpredictability and uncertainty. Although the comparison to Nixon's 'Madman Theory' is easily drawn, it is also faulty as Trump's embrace of the theory lacks the consistency and sophistication displayed by Nixon (Boys, 2020). It has been argued, however, that Trump's unpredictable foreign

policy, most notably in US-China relations, was a clear reflection of his psychology. Based on psychological analysis and discourse/content analysis, Turner & Kaarbo (2021) found that Trump's impulsive, emotional, and provocative rhetoric towards China resembled his personality traits, making his unpredictability ironically predictable. Trump's rhetoric towards China was also in a sense ambiguous: he was highly critical of China sometimes even aggressive, but simultaneously admired Xi's leadership.

Strategic ambiguity as uncertainty can go beyond presidents' preferences and sometimes function as a policy guideline. US-Taiwan relations are illustrative of this. During the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the US put military pressure on China to decrease the threat of an invasion. A decade later, as China-Taiwan tensions rose again, the US this time pressured Taiwan to decrease the threat. These oppositional stances are exemplary of US strategic ambiguity: if the US remains ambiguous about whose side it takes in an eventual China-Taiwan conflict, both China and Taiwan cannot be sure what the US will and will not do (Hsu, 2010). This is not the same as remaining neutral since the US does put pressure on either China or Taiwan. The key here is that the US strategically does not commit to one of them and establishes uncertainty about its role in a conflict. Israel's nuclear program is another case of strategic ambiguity as uncertainty. Many nuclear analysts assume that Israel can develop a nuclear program if it has not done so already. Despite its clear capabilities, Israel chooses to keep its nuclear ambitions hidden but repeatedly states that it is capable of developing nuclear weapons (Cochran, 1996). Israel has never acceded the Non-Proliferation Treaty and admitting to its possession of nuclear weapons could become diplomatically problematic. The illusion that they are capable of developing these weapons, however, constitutes a deterrent for its enemies. For Israel, it is thus advantageous to create uncertainty around its military capabilities.

Strategic ambiguity as flexibility, hedging

Strategic ambiguity can also be conceived as being flexible towards future developments. This follows Silove's (2018) notion of strategy of actual state behavioral pattern. Some international institutions illustrate this behavior, as negotiators often want to avoid broad rules that allow for different interpretations. As a result, those rules are more clearly defined during the implementation and legalization process, because it is very difficult to work out all the fine details beforehand (Raustiala & Victor, 2004). This flexibility as hedging against future developments is also used in international treaties to make them more attractive for potential partners (Helfer, 2012: 175). This flexibility not only helps international institutions or treaties to find partners, but states as well. Documented examples of states employing flexible and pragmatic foreign policies include Thailand (Kislenko, 2002), Libya (Stottlemire, 2012) and Australia (Woodard, 2017). And as mentioned earlier, China usually takes a flexible position in issue areas where its core interests are not at stake (Ekman, 2012).

Strategic ambiguity can also be considered a form of hedging. Through hedging, a state (mostly secondary states, hence no superpowers) can seek economic cooperation while preparing for military conflict. This means that a state can simultaneously increase its military capabilities against a potentially adversarial state while seeking deeper economic ties with the same state (Koga, 2018). In other words, by hedging, a state can fluidly shift between bandwagoning and balancing. This fluidity is a form of strategic ambiguity to avoid the risks and negative consequences from committing to bandwagoning or balancing alone (ibid.). It is argued that this strategy is chosen by many of the ASEAN states vis-à-vis China (Kuik, 2016). Because hedging is mainly used by secondary states against

a greater, potentially adversarial state, China is unlikely to use a hedging strategy since it is a greater power itself.

In sum, states can be strategically ambitious about their objectives, capabilities, and positions and for different reasons. Strategic ambiguity can be used as a hedging tool against a potentially adversarial greater power. It can also be used as a tool to retain flexible policy options in face of uncertain future events. China has a history of using ambiguity in the latter sense: China is regularly ambiguous about its foreign policy positions when it does not concern its core interests (Ekman, 2012). Strategic ambiguity can also help states to project uncertainty and unpredictability towards each other to obtain an advantageous position, yet China has no clear interest to project unpredictability and to appear as a potential threat, as this could lead its Asian neighbors into the hands of an anti-China coalition. Following this argument, it is worth investigating the BRI's ambiguity as a form of strategic ambiguity to establish flexibility. This is unique given that the BRI does involve China's core interests and is even enshrined in its constitution. Why China would remain so flexible and fluid on such pivotal issues thus deserves further investigation.

The BRI and strategic ambiguity

The BRI's strategy ambiguity is best understood as the outcome of an ambivalence in ambitions and helps China to maintain a position of flexibility in order to bolster the CCP's performance legitimacy at home. As communist ideology became a less reliable source for the CCP's legitimacy to power, following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacres, government performance became the only remaining source for their claim to power, bringing the CCP into serious trouble if they fail to deliver on their promises (Zhao, 2009). Simultaneously, China needs to prevent appearing too threatening to other states as this would not only jeopardize international stability but would also limit the attractiveness of the BRI to potential partner states. Putnam (1988) famously states that international relations are a two-level game and China thus has different interests at stake on the domestic and international level. This entanglement between domestic and international political considerations is key in explaining the BRI's strategic ambiguity.

Two-level game, winning coalitions & heuristics

Putnam's (1988) seminal paper on the 1978 Bonn Summit revealed that domestic and international politics are often intertwined and argued that focusing solely on international-level or domestic-level elements are only one part of the complete story. Putnam united both the domestic and international dimension in the metaphor of a two-level game: domestic pressure groups and politicians try to pressure their governments on the national level whereas national governments seek the most beneficial result on the international level (ibid.). A national leader, in other words, must find an equilibrium between the two levels simultaneously. The two-level game thus became a powerful metaphor to stress the continuous entanglement between international and domestic politics, as one cannot simply be detached from the other. In addition to Putnam's two-level game metaphor, a leader's international policies are dependent on his or her winning coalitions: a domestic group that keeps a leader in power, be it voters (in democracies) or people who hold sufficient instruments of power (in autocracies) (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 8). Failure to maintain support among the winning coalition thus puts the national leader at risk of displacement out of office. The character of a winning coalition influences a leader's international policy: leaders with a small winning coalition (as

in autocracies) are more incentivized to pursue territorial goals compared to leader with a larger winning coalition (as in democracies). This reliance on winning coalitions ultimately leads to national leaders viewing their international politics through a lens of national politics (ibid: 406).

International and national politics are thus often intertwined, and a state's leader on the international level must make sure to deliver to his or her winning coalition on the domestic level. This logic goes for both democracies and autocracies. Poliheuristic theory builds on this and claims that leaders often wish to satisfy political aims (survival, that is) before considering economic or diplomatic aims (Kinne, 2005). The emphasis on political survival, according to poliheuristic theory, is logical since decision-makers must use heuristics (or cognitive shortcuts) to make swift decisions in complex situations. This thinking process is prevalent among both democratic and autocratic leaders, although their definitions of political aims are different: a leader in a single-party autocracy, for example, depends on the party for political survival and consequently must make decisions that benefit the party primarily (ibid). In sum, national leaders must maneuver between the international and domestic level simultaneously and need to deliver to their winning coalitions in order to stay in power. Because decision-makers tend to use heuristics when making decisions, political survival is often the first thing that comes to mind when making these decisions. In single-party autocracies, such as China, the most important thing for a national leader is not to lose support from the party behind the leader. In other words, when Xi Jinping must make a decision in a complex international environment, he needs to consider his national political considerations. In particular, Xi has to maintain support from his 'winning coalition', and because China is a single-party autocracy, that would be the CCP. To better understand Xi's foreign policy and specifically the BRI, then, an analysis of the CCP's foreign policy and domestic interests is necessary.

China's foreign policy

The starting point for interpreting China's foreign policy is its dual identity. As the role of China in international politics changes, so does its self-identification. Concretely, China is said to be both a rising global power and a developing state (Breslin, 2013). On the one hand, China considers itself to be a major international power that deserves its fair share of influence. This is well reflected by Xi's 'China Dream' vision (Friedberg & Boustany, 2020; Chiang-Liao, 2016a; Kristensen & Morgan, 2018). On the other hand, China has domestic issues that could potentially threaten the legitimacy of the CCP. Maintaining that legitimacy is at the heart of Chinese foreign policy. Since the post-Mao era, every aspect of China's foreign policy is targeted to ensure survival of the CCP's leadership (Tsang, 2019). As a result, three categories of China's core interests point towards its main goal of CCP legitimacy: political stability (e.g., Xinjiang, Tibet), territorial integrity (e.g., Taiwan, South China Sea) and economic development (including access to resources) (Ekman, 2012). How China deals with issues involving their core interests differs widely from their approach regarding other international issues. Specifically, China employs a two-track diplomacy: when it comes to their core interests (issues threatening CCP legitimacy), China takes a firm, fixed position with a proactive approach. Contrastingly, when it comes to other, non-threatening international issues, China takes a more ambiguous, flexible approach without a fixed position (ibid). In short, the areas that directly concern the CCP's legitimacy to power appear to take emphasis in China's foreign policy.

Economic development and nationalism are two areas where international and domestic politics converge. Both areas are vital to the CCP's legitimacy and thus play a crucial role in China's foreign

policy (Tsang, 2019). They are also issue areas that reflect China's dual identity as both a global rising power and a developing country. In terms of economic development, Chinese foreign policy has increasingly focused on Chinese economic projection abroad. This includes the large Chinese investments in Africa or the 'Go Out' policy to encourage Chinese businesses to invest abroad. This economic projection abroad is assumed to have positive effects on China's economic challenges, such as industrial overcapacity, underdeveloped western regions, and reliable access to resources. These economic issues threaten the CCP's power if not dealt with (Zhao, 2009). Nationalism is another focal point since Xi introduced the 'China Dream' vision as the idea of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Although its specific ramifications are open to multiple interpretations, one dominant interpretation is that the 'China Dream' is the nationalist, revisionist narrative that China deserves its place in international politics and should be a more assertive global power (Wolf, 2020: 48). This is in stark contrast to China's 'century of humiliation' when it was dominated by foreign powers in the nineteenth century (Tsang, 2015: 29). To claim that this rejuvenation is only possible with the CCP is another way to establish a legitimacy to power (Tsang, 2019). As a result, the BRI can be described as a policy that combines the two pillars of the CCP's legitimacy to power, as it combines elements of economic development and nationalism into an ambitious international flagship policy. The BRI consequently faces its challenges on both the national and international level.

On the domestic level, the CCP has an incentive to make the BRI ambitious and successful to its domestic audiences. CCP rule rests upon performance legitimacy: it needs to deliver concrete results in order to stay in power (Zhu, 2011). The Chinese people will tacitly tolerate CCP rule as long as it continues to improve their daily lives. This performance legitimacy depends on tackling pressing economic issues, most notably overcapacity and the underdevelopment of Western regions, and by stimulating nationalism through the 'China Dream' narrative, which is already reflected in Xi's remarks that Asian security should be ruled by Asians (Xinhua, 2014) and the idea of the Chinese state's rejuvenation (Chiang-Liao, 2016a). Because the BRI aims to combine both elements of economics and nationalism, the ultimate winner of its implementation would thus be the CCP which further secures its performance legitimacy to power (Nordin & Weissmann, 2018). Consequently, the BRI is promoted to domestic audiences with highly ambitious rhetoric which stimulates state mobilization across all layers (Ye, 2020: 143). The implied risk here is that the CCP must deliver on these promises and make the BRI a success or risk a significant domestic audience cost. As demonstrated by Tomz (2007), leaders suffer from domestic audience costs when they fail to follow through on made promises. Generally, if leaders make promises they do not deliver on, domestic audiences will disapprove of their leader's inconsistent behavior. Failing to deliver on the BRI's highly ambitious rhetoric can thus have severe consequences for the CCP's performance legitimacy.

On the international level, displaying too much ambition can be dangerous. Tensions have risen in the Pacific most notably since Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' strategy and Xi's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes. In recent years, US-China relations were characterized by the Trump-imposed tariff war. The US is expected to continue its assertive stance towards China under the Biden administration. Meanwhile, India is suspicious of growing Chinese influence in the region (Jacob, 2017), together with the US and its Pacific allies. Secondary-order states in the region, such as the ASEAN states, are prone to hedging behavior (Kuik, 2016). This constitutes a volatile international environment: if China's ambitious, nationalistic rhetoric make it appear too threatening to other states, Beijing might ultimately face an anti-China balancing coalition. Because the BRI's success

depends on the willingness of other states to cooperate with bilateral agreements, China must make sure to not appear threatening to other states at any cost. This reflects China's tendency to downplay threats of replacing US hegemony, claiming that China has no hegemonic ambitions (BBC News, 2018) and pursues multipolarity instead of bipolarity (Can & Chan, 2020).

This ambivalence in ambitions between the domestic and international level leads to the BRI's strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity can help China to maintain flexibility to sustain CCP performance legitimacy, while avoiding to provoke other states too much. In particular, it can adjust the BRI fluidly to pressing issues and/or opportunities. This is why the BRI is not founded on rule-based treaties but rather on non-binding Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs). These are usually followed by cooperation agreements, also usually non-binding, and business contracts (Cai & Wong, 2019) that allow potential partners to couple their own interests and meaning to the initiative. This approach resonates with strategic ambiguity's original definition: keep your objectives fuzzy to attract potential partners (Braga & Sangar, 2020). This combination of ambitious rhetoric and ambiguous guidelines are characteristic of Chinese state-mobilized globalization strategies (Ye, 2020: 124). The true BRI objectives, economically or geopolitical, remain equivocal. In the following paragraphs, this study will illustrate the plausibility of this argument in a case study of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The methodology and motivation for this case selection is discussed in the next chapter.

III. Methodology

The previous section laid out the argument of this study and claimed that China uses strategic ambiguity to achieve a larger degree of flexibility which could help the CCP to make the BRI a success and maintain its performance legitimacy to power. This section explains the methodology of this study and proposes a case study of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. It addresses the advantage of case studies vis-à-vis quantitative studies, the reasons for the case selection, and introduces two key elements of the case study methodology. It then proposes the causal mechanism and operationalizes some key concepts. This section closes with some limitations and their consequences for conclusions in this study

Case study: selection & elements

This study aims to assess the validity and plausibility of the central argument via qualitative methods, in particular the case study. Case studies are not uncommon in the IR scholarly field, one particular reason being the explanatory value of case studies for complex, interactive phenomena (Bennett & Elman, 2007). Although quantitative methods have their value in IR studies, case studies sometimes have the advantage to tell richer and deeper stories. The subject of the BRI's strategic ambiguity, specifically the reasons for adopting such a strategy, is one such complex phenomena that deserves in-depth analysis. Employing a case study methodology offers these advantages in contrast to quantitative methods.

This study uses the case of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC is a multi-billion USD economic and developmental project that was initiated in mid-2013 and launched in 2015 and is aimed to last for at least 15 years (Wolf, 2020: 13). Given its ambitious scale, the CPEC is referred as the BRI's flagship project (Shulin, 2014). The CPEC is also a well-documented BRI project that lends itself well for research purposes. It is an archetypal BRI case: it is ambitious, long-term and has received lots of attention in domestic and international media and academics. This study examines the CPEC from its announcement in 2013. Following Gerring's (2008: 647) definitions of case selections in political science, CPEC can be described as a typical case of a BRI project since it is a high-profile, prototypical and flagship BRI project. This makes CPEC a representative case for other major BRI projects.

The case of CPEC offers perspective for generalizability in two ways. First, it provides a framework for further analysis of BRI-related projects. Because CPEC is the flagship project of the BRI, the application of strategic ambiguity can also be prevalent in other key BRI projects. One could think of projects surrounding the other major economic corridors, such as Mongolia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe. The analysis of CPEC and its strategic ambiguity might offer a valuable tool in researching other BRI projects and the character of the BRI in general. The application of CCP domestic legitimacy and the economic and nationalist considerations of CPEC might also prove to be applicable to other projects. Second, the concept of strategic ambiguity and its application to CPEC offers a framework to explore Chinese foreign policy through a new lens. Strategic ambiguity as a foreign policy tool is an underexplored concept in international relations theory. The application of

strategic ambiguity in the BRI and its specific CPEC application can provide a meaningful conceptual framework for future studies concerning Chinese foreign policy or grand strategy.

The analysis of CPEC contains two specific elements. First, the central argument is applied to the case through a causal mechanism. Causal mechanisms can be described as a complex system of different cogwheels between X and Y, where each cogwheel sets another cogwheel in motion (n_1 leads to n_2 , et cetera), ultimately leading to outcome Y (Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 29). In other words, the central argument is here split up in different cogwheels of specific entities that perform specific activities, ultimately leading to the use of strategic ambiguity with CPEC. The use of a causal mechanism helps to structure the argument in multiple elements, making it easier to assess the validity of the different parts of the central argument. Second, this study uses discourse analysis to assess some of the elements of the argument. Discourse analysis offers a valuable tool for IR scholars because it identifies representations from utterances through a wide variety of sources (Neumann, 2008: 63). Although a full discourse analysis lies beyond the scope of this study, such efforts are necessary parts of the causal mechanism's operationalization, as explained in the following section.

Operationalization

This study proposes a causal mechanism to explain the strategic ambiguity in the BRI by employing the case of CPEC (Table 1). It expects the Chinese leadership to select the CPEC project primarily based on China's economic needs (i.e., overcapacity and underdevelopment of western regions) and nationalism. This requires a thorough analysis of the CPEC and how it would tackle these economic issues and stimulate nationalism. The Chinese leadership then promotes the CPEC to its domestic audiences in an ambitious manner. This will be measured by examining the Xinhua state-owned press agency, the China Daily and Global Times newspapers, Xi's speeches, and official government documents regarding CPEC between 2013 (CPEC's inception) and 2020. The US (the status quo hegemon) and India (a major Asian power) are then expected to raise concerns over possible Chinese hegemony-seeking behavior. This will be measured by official government reactions by these states on CPEC. The Chinese leadership is then expected to downplay these fears of hegemony-seeking to other states by stressing CPEC's non-threatening, win-win character. This will also be measured by examining the Xinhua state-owned press agency, the China Daily and Global Times newspapers, speeches from the Chinese leadership, and official CPEC documents between 2013 and 2020. To enhance the readability of the case study, the international discourse is juxtaposed against the domestic discourse in order to illustrate contrasting elements and the different interests of the CCP on both levels. Nonetheless, it is still interesting to see whether the tone of domestic discourse changes after suspicions are raised on the international level. Finally, the outcome is reached where the Chinese leadership employs strategic ambiguity in CPEC. This is to be assessed by the flexible, non-binding character of CPEC.

<i>Causal mechanism</i>	<i>Entity</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Subject of analysis</i>
<i>X</i>	<i>Chinese leadership</i>	<i>selects CPEC project based on economic needs and nationalism</i>	<i>Chinese economic issues and CPEC potential economic benefits</i>

<i>Causal mechanism</i>	<i>Entity</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Subject of analysis</i>
n_1	Chinese leadership	<i>promotes CPEC in an ambitious manner</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Xinhua, 2013-2020 ■ China Daily, 2013-2020 ■ Global Times, 2013-2020 ■ Speeches from Chinese leadership ■ CPEC official documents, 2013-2020
n_2	United States, India	<i>raise concerns over Chinese strategic interests, pursuit for hegemony in Asia</i>	Reactions from US, India
n_5	Chinese leadership	<i>downplays fears of hegemony and stresses non-threatening character of CPEC</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Xinhua, 2013-2020 ■ China Daily, 2013-2020 ■ Global Times, 2013-2020 ■ Speeches from Chinese leadership ■ CPEC official documents, 2013-2020
Y	Chinese leadership	<i>employs strategic ambiguity in CPEC</i>	<i>Flexible, non-binding character of CPEC</i>

Table 1: proposed causal mechanism

‘Chinese leadership’ is a broad concept that needs to be narrowed down. Concretely, it should focus on the BRI’s top decision-makers. Chinese leadership is in the hands of the Politburo standing members of the CCP, of which President Xi is the head. Xi holds authority of the BRI’s messaging to make it a unitary voice and, unsurprisingly, delivered the most speeches compared with other members of the Politburo (Ye, 2020: 128).

When discussing the ‘ambitious manner’ of promoting CPEC to domestic audiences, it is expected that this rhetoric resembles or refers to the ‘China Dream’ vision that suggests the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Chiang-Liao, 2016a). This Chinese rejuvenation is to be fulfilled by completing Xi’s two ‘centennial projects’. The first is to achieve a ‘moderately prosperous society’ by 2021 (100 years after the CCP’s foundation). The second is to be a ‘modern socialist state that is prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized and harmonious by 2049’ (100 years since the CCP’s rule of power) (China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, 2013; Callahan, 2016). The China Dream is an appealing narrative that stands in stark contrast to the ‘century of humiliation’ narrative. Referring to the period between the Opium Wars of the 1840s and the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the narrative asserts that China suffered humiliation at the hands of Western imperial powers. The rejuvenation of the Chinese nation thus means for China to resume its rightful place in the international system (Smith, 2019). Such revisionist, grand themes are expected in the Chinese leadership’s promotion of CPEC to domestic audiences.

The concept of ‘hegemony-seeking behavior’ refers to Mearsheimer’s (2001) theory of offensive realism. It expects a rising power to translate its economic capabilities into military capabilities and to challenge the incumbent regional hegemon. Specifically, Mearsheimer (2006a; 2006b; 2010; 2014) expects China to increase the power gap with regional powers and to challenge the US as the regional hegemon in Asia. These two elements are subject of analysis when examining how other states react

to the CPEC. It is expected that the US and its principal Pacific allies voice concerns over a power gap with China and a challenge to US presence in Asia. Conversely, it is expected that the Chinese leadership aims to downplay these fears. Stressing the anti-hegemony-seeking and non-threatening character of the BRI and specifically the CPEC are important indicators for this step of the causal mechanism.

Three news sources are used to assess CPEC's press coverage. The first news source is the *Xinhua Press Agency*. Xinhua is China's only official national press agency and plays a leading role in transmitting CCP propaganda messages (Xin, 2009). The second news source is the *China Daily* newspaper. China Daily positions itself to report from China to the outside world on political, economic, and socio-cultural issues and constitutes China's most authoritative English-language newspaper. Sold in over 150 countries and the only Chinese newspaper with access to international mainstream media, China Daily thus represents China's most international newspaper (Zhang & Wu, 2017). The third news source, the *Global Times* is known as China's most belligerent tabloid newspaper and published by the CCP-related *People's Daily* (Huang Z., 2016). To view articles published by these news sources between 2013 and 2020, the LexisNexis digital repository was used. This resulted in a combined total of 2,091 articles published on the CPEC by Xinhua, China Daily and the Global Times. These three sources offer a variety of news outlets: an official press agency, a major mainstream newspaper, and a mainstream tabloid newspaper. Furthermore, the analysis includes official speeches from president Xi and premier Li. Official CPEC documents are also included, most notably the long-term plan document issued in 2017.

Limitations

Before continuing with the analysis and corresponding results, a few limitations are addressed here. First, and most importantly, there is a lot to write on the workings of CPEC and its discourse by Chinese media outlets and leadership – more than one thesis can bear. To write an in-depth analysis of CPEC projects, its potential benefits, risks, and ramifications would constitute a study in itself. The same applies to an in-depth and long-term content or discourse analysis on CPEC. As a result, this analysis is limited in scope in the sense that it explores three major Chinese news outlets and limits itself to Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang for its analysis of discourse by the Chinese leadership. Furthermore, an analysis of CPEC is limited to an overview of its contents, aims and implementation necessary to assess the proposed causal mechanism.

Second, there are some data limitations. An obvious news source that has not been incorporated in this analysis is the *People's Daily* newspaper, which is the official CCP newspaper. Unfortunately, no articles from this source between 2013 and 2014 were available on the LexisNexis digital repository, thus making it unavailable to use in the same manner as the other news sources. In addition, a lack of language skills in Chinese and Urdu have put constraints on available sources. This has caused a reliance on English-language press. It becomes problematic to solely use English-language news sources and to claim a distinction between the marketing of CPEC to domestic and international audiences, respectively, since domestic audiences would read the same sources in Mandarin and it is difficult to verify whether the English-language version is the exact same as its Chinese-language counterpart. As a result, conclusions on different ways of selling the CPEC to domestic and international audiences are more of an indicative nature. It is possible, however, to make claims on how the CPEC is marketed to international audiences. Furthermore, speeches from Xi and Li are

widely consumed by Chinese audiences as well as international and can provide tentative conclusions on the marketing of CPEC to domestic audiences.

Third, there is a lack of data availability because of the non-transparent and closed nature of Chinese foreign policy decision making. As a result, available data is often scarce. The official CPEC website (www.cpec.gov.pk), for example, is rather limited in concrete information but does offer a few publications, including magazines and a long-term plan document, along with a frequently asked questions (FAQs) page and an overview of ongoing CPEC projects and its status. This offers sufficient information to conduct an analysis of CPEC. In order to avoid a reliance on this data alone, this study also included a large number of secondary literature from mainstream news sources, scholars and experts.

IV. Strategic ambiguity in action: CPEC

The previous chapter elaborated on methodology, the causal mechanism, operationalization, data selection and addressed some limitations involved with this study. This chapter first presents an overview of CPEC and then presents how CPEC contains numerous ambiguous elements. It then considers the Chinese motivations for CPEC based on economics and nationalism. For reasons of structure, it then juxtaposes the discourse and international discourse on CPEC by first outlining the international worries from the US and India and contrasting these with China's ambitious and simultaneous 'win-win' domestic discourse. Although this order differs from the causal mechanism, this contrast between international and domestic discourse highlights the CCP's two-level game. Whether the domestic discourse changes over time, as the mechanism suggests, is also researched. Finally, this chapter concludes by stating that CPEC is illustrative of the BRI's strategic ambiguity as it maneuvers between ambition and ambiguity.

Overview

China-Pakistan relations take off in the 1960s, shortly after the 1962 Sino-Indian War. In 1963, commercial ties are established, but more notably, China and Pakistan settle their territorial disputes that would entrench their control of northern Kashmir, aggravating India (Small, 2015: 24). China-Pakistan relations have mainly been a military relationship (involving nuclear cooperation, too) with a shared interest against India as economic ties have been thin over the decades (ibid: 29). Nevertheless, economic ties would develop in the 2006 through a free trade agreement and an extended agreement in 2017 (McCartney, 2020). China and Pakistan have often emphasized their harmonious and 'all-flourishing' relationship, yet relations between the two countries are characterized by asymmetrical benefits. Financially, China benefits more from the relationship than Pakistan (Wolf, 2020: 9). But, as the 2010s set in, Pakistan was about to benefit much more from its relationship with China.

In 2013, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was announced by both leaders and officially launched in 2015. CPEC is a multi-billion-dollar economic developmental project that aims to connect the city of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province with the Gwadar deep seaport in southern Pakistan in the form of an economic corridor (Wolf, 2020: 13; Hussain & Jamali, 2019; CPEC, 2017). This corridor involves numerous infrastructural projects, including energy facilities, road and rail infrastructure and the development of Gwadar into a regional economic center. CPEC constitutes one of BRI's six economic corridors and has been dubbed as the BRI's flagship project (Shulin, 2014). It aims to connect western China to the Indian Ocean through three main routes (an eastern, western, and central) (Syed, 2020: 17).

The scope of CPEC is large and involves cooperation in multiple sectors. CPEC was launched in 2015 as a "1+4" cooperation scheme where both countries would hold CPEC as a guiding principle with four cooperation areas: (1) Gwadar; (2) energy; (3) transport infrastructure and (4) industrial cooperation (CPEC, 2017). More specifically, seven major cooperation areas can be distinguished: (1) connectivity; (2) energy; (3) trade and industrial parks; (4) agricultural development and poverty alleviation; (5) tourism, (6) people's livelihood and non-governmental exchanges, and (7) financial cooperation (ibid.). In practice, Pakistan's energy infrastructure and the development of the Gwadar deep seaport

are CPEC's two key areas. Of the initial projected costs of 46 billion USD, 71 percent was to be directed to energy infrastructure (McCartney, 2020). By late 2018, most of the projects that received funding were in the energy sector and only two Gwadar projects were being implemented (Syed and Ying, 2020: 3). The development of the Gwadar port offers China an alternative trade route with the Middle East that would considerably reduce trade distances and costs (Khetran, 2014). In sum, the concept of an economic corridor involves more than simply industrial cooperation. It is a much broader concept that aims to encompass all facets of economic development, including socio-economic development.

What CPEC exactly aims to achieve can be viewed from a Chinese, Pakistani and international perspective (ibid.). Most notably, China aims to improve its western regional development, accelerate the BRI and use Chinese advantages in capital, production capacity and technology. The Pakistani, on the other hand, aim to enhance their industrial capacity via new industrial zones and to simultaneously improve the country's socio-economic situation. An overriding international aim is to promote regional economic integration in South and Central Asia. To fulfill CPEC's ambitions, the project is divided in three temporal phases (Wolf, 2020: 16; Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017). The first phase (2015-2020) focuses on energy generation and distribution, alongside infrastructural development. The second phase (2020-2025) and third phase (2025-2030) aim to further establish CPEC and include regional actors as participating partners. Specific goals are formulated for 2020, 2025 and 2030 (CPEC, 2017). By 2020, CPEC should have reached its initial phase by addressing major bottlenecks. By 2025, the industrial framework should be formed, and most building projects ought to be basically finished. By 2030, CPEC should be fully accomplished in a holistic way, giving way to South Asia's economic development. To reach these specific goals, primary financial responsibility lies with the Chinese and Pakistani government and, in addition, both governments will strengthen cooperation between financial institutions, encourage Chinese firms to invest and welcome international financial institutions (e.g., World Bank, AIIB, Asian Development Bank) (ibid.). CPEC's ambitions are reflected in its costs, as its total value is roughly estimated at roughly 60 billion USD (McCartney, 2020). In sum, CPEC is a highly ambitious project with broad aims and objectives up to 2030.

Ambiguous elements of CPEC

A main area of ambiguity that is not addressed by neither the Chinese nor the Pakistani governments is that of geopolitics and strategy. As stated earlier, a main worry for both the US and India is that CPEC is chiefly a geopolitical project. This worry focuses on the Gwadar deep seaport, which could be utilized for dual-use (i.e., commercial and military) purposes. For India, this would constitute evidence of the 'String of Pearls' theory where China, together with its partners, would contain India's rise by encircling it completely (Wolf, 2020: 141). Officially, CPEC is not directed against other states (ibid: 65). In the meantime, however, security ties between China and Pakistan have deepened, reinforcing the idea that CPEC is mainly a geostrategic project (ibid: 142). The Pakistani government refuses to share details of the deals it has conducted with China (Dawn, 2017).

Second, CPEC's long term plan document includes visions and ambitions that are defined in multi-interpretive terms, such as 'harmony', 'inclusiveness', 'mutual benefits', 'sustainability', and most vaguely, the 'community of indivisible common destiny' (CPEC, 2017). The long-term plan, in other words, is mostly an aspirational document that includes little input from Pakistani businesses and does

not elaborate on how CPEC will benefit them, leading the Pakistani government to exaggerate potential revenues (Rafiq, 2018). To be sure, CPEC's long term plan document does name several cooperation areas, such as transport, energy and SEZs. But how this concretely benefits the average Pakistani business becomes unclear from this document alone. Take its definition of the principle of market-oriented projects:

The Chinese and Pakistani governments are the advocator, planner and guider of the CPEC project. Considering the Chinese and Pakistani economic systems, commercial projects related to the CPEC should be operated in a market-oriented way; quasi-commercial major infrastructure projects could adopt the public private partnership mode; and non-commercial projects concerning people's livelihood should involve multiple participants and be implemented through fair competition. (CPEC, 2017)

Third, the long-term plan document does not offer much information on the concrete implementation to achieve these visions and ambitions. Other documents aside from the long-term plan are generally unavailable or less informative (Wolf, 2020: 174). The visions and principles have not been translated into concrete actions. Aside from the energy and transport infrastructure projects, Pakistan hopes to benefit economically from the construction of multiple SEZs. Plans for these SEZs remain vague (Mardell & Eder, 2018). Questions on how many SEZs are to be constructed and where they will be placed remain unanswered as well and remains open to multiple interpretations and modifications (Wolf, 2020: 129). In short, even though there are projects listed under CPEC, a concrete implementation of the outlined visions and ambitions remain ambiguous.

Fourth, the geographical framework posited in the long-term plan document is ambiguous as well. The long-term plan document (CPEC, 2017) divides CPEC in a core zone, including additional sub-core zones, and a 'radiation zone'. There is no official definition on what this radiation zone means and what falls under it, other than that it does not fall under CPEC's core zone. This geographical arbitrariness challenges CPEC's connectivity (Wolf, 2020: 126). In addition, there is controversy regarding the implementation of one of CPEC's three main infrastructure routes which would mostly benefit well-developed regions instead of poorer areas. There has been no elaboration on this as maps are kept confidential and statements are ambiguous (Hameed, 2018). Where CPEC is to be implemented is thus ambiguous as well.

Fifth, there is a rumor that a second, more extensive version of CPEC's long term plan document exists. On CPEC's official website, only one version of the long-term plan (cited in this study) is publicly available. But according to Pakistani press, a more extensive version of the long-term plan is issued by the China Development Bank and the NDRC (Husain, 2017). The documents include details that were not publicly available beforehand. According to this second version of the long-term plan, CPEC integration in the Pakistani economy is much deeper than assumed earlier based on the available short-version document. It also places much greater emphasis on the agricultural sector than thought (ibid.). At the time of writing, the second version of the long-term plan remains unavailable to the public and has only been provided to the Punjab provincial government (ibid.). This controversy and ambiguity results in a CPEC image that is about secrecy (Wolf, 2020: 174). In other words, how far CPEC reaches is unclear to the public, aside from possibly one Pakistani local government.

Sixth, CPEC's environmental impacts are unclear. Cooperation between China and Pakistan on this issue, mainly the issue of biodiversity conservation, remains to be ambiguous (Wolf, 2020: 233). Numerous endangered species live in Pakistan's northern regions, which is one of CPEC's key areas (Nabi et al., 2017). In addition, many of CPEC's energy related projects involve the construction of coal power plants, which puts Pakistan at risks of becoming a large global emitter of CO₂ (Kouser et al., 2020). CPEC's (n.d.a) list of energy priority projects features seventeen projects listed of which nine include the use of fossil fuels, most notably coal power plants. The potential costs involved with polluting energy plants are much higher than those involved with wind farms and solar power plants. According to CPEC's official FAQ webpage (n.d.b), reasons for coal power plants are its reliability and low costs as a means to solve Pakistani energy shortages, while environmental safeguards are under adoption. It remains unclear how sustainable development can be achieved with this in mind.

Seventh, CPEC's financing mechanism is ambiguous. In fact, CPEC finances are described as one of the most ambiguous features of the entire project because the exact methods of financing are not made public (Wolf, 2020: 178). The publicly available long-term plan document shortly mentions CPEC's financing mechanism. It states that the Chinese and Pakistani governments bear the primary responsibility for financing CPEC, shall strengthen cooperation between policy banks, welcome international institutional banks for long-term loans and will support Chinese and Pakistani market players (CPEC, 2017). The secret extensive version of the long-term plan indicates that China's maximum annual direct investment in Pakistan is approximately 1 billion USD (Husain, 2017). When it comes to obligations and repayments, CPEC's FAQ page states that "It's a mix grant, long term government concessional loans, zero interest loans and simple partnership or investment mode" (CPEC, n.d.b). It also claims that CPEC will have a positive impact on Pakistani GDP growth and that toll collection revenues are projected to be 5 billion USD in 2022 (ibid.). This statement lacks further elaboration.

An eighth and final consideration goes out to the use of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and their flexible character. An MoU is the formal equivalent of a 'gentlemen's agreement' and is not a legally enforceable document (Kenton, 2021). This makes it very different from a treaty or another legally binding document signed between states. As mentioned earlier, cooperation within the BRI framework often occurs not through treaties, as is usually done in Western states, but through flexible and non-binding documents. CPEC is no exception. When Xi visited Pakistan in 2015 to formalize the launch of the CPEC, the state visit was ended with the signing of 51 MoUs (The Nation, 2015).

Chinese motivations: economics & nationalism

The launch of CPEC was met with great enthusiasm in both Pakistan and China, who both have their individual interests. The Pakistani hope that CPEC will reduce poverty levels and improve the country's socio-economic well-being (McCartney, 2020). Specifically, Pakistan hopes to upgrade its road and maritime infrastructure, improve its energy generation capacities and boost manufacturing in newly created special economic zones (SEZs) (Syed, 2020: 22). Energy is a crucial point for the Pakistani, who often experience energy shortfalls that hinder domestic industries (ibid: 22). In addition, Pakistan's economic growth is further hindered by poor infrastructure, terrorism, political instability, and a widening trade deficit (Rahman & Shurong, 2017; Wolf, 2020: 73). CPEC is thus an attempt to upgrade Pakistan's economy and industries and improve the lives of millions of Pakistanis. China and Pakistan built sufficient confidence over the last decades to undertake such a project (Rizvi,

2015). In China, the CCP hopes to bolster its domestic legitimacy to power through the BRI and CPEC. As stated earlier, the CCP's legitimacy to power is based on the pillars of economic performance and nationalism. The CCP hopes to tackle China's domestic economic issues via CPEC (Blah, 2018). It also hopes to stimulate nationalism through CPEC: the project is an instrument of the 'China Dream' that refers to China's ascendance to a leading global role (Wolf, 2020: 48-49). These Chinese economic and nationalist motivations, necessary for the CCP's performance legitimacy, are discussed below.

Economics

Discussing the issues facing the Chinese economy in-depth lies beyond the scope of this thesis. But to understand Chinese motivations for launching CPEC, it is essential to understand some of its more pressing issues. In general, the Chinese economy is usually portrayed with much optimism and one of inevitable growth (Lynch, 2019). Unsurprisingly, then, Chinese people are generally more optimistic about their economic future than those in the United States and Europe (Wike & Stokes, 2016). Although the Chinese economy performed surprisingly well during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, its negative effects would come to hit the economy most notably after 2012. China's annual real GDP growth fell sharply from 9.4% (between 2009-2012) to 7.3% (between 2013-2015) and China faced an increasingly rising debt. Its investment efficiency also fell, meaning that more valuable resources were wasted on less sufficient outcomes (Lynch, 2019). For the CCP, maintaining a healthy and growing economy is crucial for its performance legitimacy. There are several looming threats to the Chinese economy, of which three are considered here: a lack of energy security; industrial capacity and the underdevelopment of China's western regions.

First, China is a vulnerable net importer of energy resources. It imports nearly all (roughly 90 percent) of their energy resources and with China's economic growth, Beijing is faced with an increased energy demand (Rahman & Shurong, 2017; Garlick, 2020). Since the policies of economic reform in the late 1970s, China's energy security has not improved (Yao & Chang, 2021). Furthermore, China is dependent on oil imports from the Middle East and Africa that need to pass the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea to reach China's eastern ports. The Malacca Strait is regarded by the Chinese as a choke point and a strategic vulnerability (Rimmer, 2018; Zhang, 2011; Wolf, 2020: 67). Given the increased demand in energy resources and its reliance on strategically vulnerable routes, the CCP has designated energy diversification to be a top priority (Rahman & Shurong, 2017). In other words, China needs alternative routes to import energy resources to improve its energy security.

Second, China suffers from industrial overcapacity. China has long maintained an investment-led economic growth model, focusing on large investments to stimulate GDP growth. This results in industrial overcapacity: China produces too much for domestic consumption (Lynch, 2019). Industrial overcapacity mainly concerns China's steel, cement, flat glass, and aluminum industries. To illustrate its surplus: China produced 805 million tons of steel in 2015, more than the *global* production (Rahman & Shurong, 2017). In addition, China produced more cement between 2011 and 2012 than the US throughout the 20th century (ibid.). Prior to 2008, China would solve this overcapacity by rapidly increasing its exports, but after the global financial crisis, China's partners could no longer keep up with its exports. After the onset of the financial crisis, the CCP again doubled down on investment-led growth to maintain its GDP growth. This approach, however, led to an ever-steeper increase in overcapacity besides an explosion in debt. This not only concerns Chinese households, but

firms as well because they need to take out even more loans to pay back their initial investors (mainly state-owned enterprises and local governments) (Lynch, 2019). To tackle this, China needs to find new outlets for its industrial overcapacity (Clarke, 2017). In sum, China produces too much for its domestic consumption, so consumption must be found elsewhere.

Third, there are large developmental disparities between China's eastern and western provinces. Since Deng's opening of China to international markets, Mao's strategy of regional equality made way for the construction of SEZs in China's eastern coastal provinces. The western inland provinces failed to profit equally from China's subsequent economic growth (McCartney, 2020). To reduce disparities, the CCP initiated the Great Western Development campaign (GWD) in the late 1999 to stimulate growth in China's eastern regions (Clarke, 2019; Yeh & Wharton, 2016). In the 2010s, Xinjiang became the locus of China's western policy. Located closely to Central Asia and Pakistan, Xinjiang is at the crossroads of the BRI and is the starting point of the CPEC (McCartney, 2020). The GWD is a success in the sense that western regions benefitted economically. The Sichuan province was the GWD's poster child and profiled itself as China's agricultural center (ibid.). The Xinjiang province did not profit as much from the GWD. Located on China's ultimate western border with Pakistan, Xinjiang has a population of 23 million people (Griffiths, 2017) of mostly Uyghurs who have a difficult relationship with Beijing. Ethnic and political tensions escalated in 2009 into riots and terrorist attacks (ibid.). After a state-crackdown, the CCP initiated another strategy of western development that specifically targeted Xinjiang to reduce local discontent, including a SEZ in Kashgar and tax incentives (McCartney, 2020). Improving Xinjiang's economic status could possibly reduce the likelihood of further political and social tensions.

CPEC has the potential to not only upgrade Pakistan's economy by improving its energy, road, rail, and maritime infrastructures and stimulate economic growth via SEZs, but also to provide China with a possibility to mitigate its three economic issues. First, CPEC could improve China's energy security. The Gwadar deep-sea port offers China a valuable connection to the Indian Ocean. This is crucial for China's energy security since most of China's oil needs to pass the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, putting China in a vulnerable situation. By utilizing the Gwadar port for energy imports and transporting these resources through gas and oil pipelines to Xinjiang, China gains an important alternative route for crucial energy resources (Wolf, 2020: 54; Javed & Ismail, 2021). In fact, energy diversification is a key objective of the BRI in general, as the majority of the six intended economic corridors involve energy-related infrastructural projects (Clarke, 2019).

Second, CPEC could tackle China's industrial overcapacity. It offers China an avenue to utilize its surplus industrial capacity (Rahman & Shurong, 2017; Syed, 2020: 21). CPEC and the BRI in general offer Chinese industrial firms an opportunity to release their excess capabilities into ambitious infrastructure projects (Wolf, 2020: 52; Summers, 2019; Small, 2016). As of 2019, nine energy infrastructure projects were completed, with eight more under construction and an additional four planned (CPEC, 2019). Nevertheless, officials have refuted statements of exporting industrial overcapacity in the Chinese Global Times (Chu, 2015), despite importing Chinese building materials when they cannot be sufficiently produced locally. In short, although CPEC alone will probably not 'solve' China's industrial overcapacity, it does offer Beijing an opportunity to export a share of its overcapacity to infrastructural projects in Pakistan.

Third, CPEC could improve China's western development by making Xinjiang an industrial hub and connecting China to Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East (Syed, 2020: 21; Wolf, 2020: 56; Rahman & Shurong, 2017). At the same time, the inclusion of Xinjiang in CPEC can also be seen as part of Beijing's state-building agenda in the region to prevent social unrest from occurring again (Clarke, 2019). But most importantly, following the GWD campaign in the 1990s, some of China's western regions have grown to be drivers of the Chinese economy (Small, 2015: 168). Portraying Xinjiang as the gateway to South and Central Asia could further stimulate economic growth and thus reduce regional disparities. In addition, China could benefit from cooperation with Pakistan to combat religious terrorism. China has urged Pakistan to fight against militants who originally stem from the Xinjiang region (Blanchard, 2016). The Uyghurs minority comes to mind here since there are worries that CPEC projects may become a target for Uyghur terrorists (Wolf, 2020: 103). In sum, China has a clear economic incentive for CPEC. Its focus on energy and infrastructural building projects illustrates the Chinese need to enhance their energy security, offset their industrial overcapacity and stimulating growth in underdeveloped western regions.

Nationalism

Aside economic performance, nationalism is the second pillar of the CCP's legitimacy to power. Indeed, nationalism plays a great part in Chinese society. Chinese citizens grow up with the notion of China as a great civilizational power with distinct values and practices, while also being confronted with the 'century of humiliation' following Western-led interventions in China in the nineteenth century (Tsang, 2015: 29). This narrative provides an opportunity for the CCP to bolster its legitimacy to power by portraying itself as the defender of Chinese people and its civilizational values, thus placing itself within the framework of Chinese identity politics. Although this appeal to nationalism has existed prior to Xi's ascendance, nationalism has increasingly become a pivotal part of Chinese policymaking. Xi's 'China Dream' vision is nationalistic and revisionist in character: it aims for Chinese national rejuvenation, or 'making China great again', while also pursuing a greater leading role in international politics (Tsang, 2019). Instead of merely responding to the actions of others, China aims to pursue a foreign policy that goes longer and wider than ever before (Chang-Liao, 2016a). This explains China's growing assertiveness in international politics and provides context for the creation of the CPEC.

The BRI and particularly CPEC are also part of a Chinese increased interest in discursive power. Discursive power refers to a contributor's ability to maintain, amplify or silent topics and thus have a significant impact on public discourses (Jungherr et al., 2019). In the case of China, national image matters here. The CCP has a central role in sponsoring China's image abroad (Cappelletti, 2018). In most Western countries, China's image is a negative one: Beijing is often portrayed as a looming threat to international stability and one that seeks world domination. Over the last years, however, this negative image has become more mixed with positive elements, too (Zhang & Wu, 2017). Nevertheless, the CCP has established a campaign to 'tell the Chinese story well' (Chan & Song, 2020). One might consider this an element of China's soft power. This form of soft power does not only promote China's image abroad, but also has a negative element of exclusivity.

The 'China Dream' narrative illustrates the duality of China's soft power: it emphasizes the benefits of Chinese traditional values such as peace and harmony, but also contains a strong anti-Japanese and anti-Western element (Callahan, 2015). This is due to China's aforementioned 'identity dilemma' as

many Chinese scholars and intellectuals ponder over the question who China is and what its role in international politics should be. Part of this discussion is the increased focus on Chinese traditional values such as peace and harmony. This assertion of traditional values of Chinese civilization, however, also assumes the exclusion of those who do not share these values – enter the West and its allies. In practice, the ‘China Dream’ discourse not only focuses on China’s harmonious, peaceful yet inevitable rise, but also focuses on abandoning its ‘century of humiliation’ by Western invaders (ibid.). The discourse on the BRI features a similar duality: it promotes a harmonious model of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ but also vehemently rejects the ‘China threat’ narrative often heard in Western states (Zhao, 2016). As a result, China seeks to ‘de-securitize’ the BRI geopolitically by stressing the initiative’s economic benefits and win-win cooperation. But despite this peaceful narrative, BRI-related statements also include a revisionist discourse of a need to correct the existing Western-led international development structure due to China’s rise (Chan & Song, 2020). In other words, China’s BRI discourse is characterized by a sense of duality: it seeks a harmonious, peaceful rise as a responsible global power, but it also actively tries to position itself in a different light from its Western (and allies) counterparts: China’s rise is unique, and its uniqueness is its strength.

CPEC is a crucial first step in realizing the ‘China Dream’. The BRI and particularly CPEC are crucial elements of implementing the ‘China Dream’ from vision into practice (Wolf, 2020: 49; Clarke, 2018; Callahan, 2016). Because CPEC is known as the BRI’s flagship project, it provides the CCP with a political opportunity to showcase a new leading role for China in international politics. To make CPEC a successful flagship project is to showcase the success of the BRI in general. It sends a clear signal to domestic and international audiences: the ‘China Dream’ is not purely imagination but is being implemented on the ground in Pakistan. Furthermore, CPEC is a test case for the newly created financial institutions to implement the BRI. These Chinese-led institutions, such as the Silk Road Fund and the AIIB, are perceived by some as a revisionist reaction to the US-led financial institutional global order (Wolf, 2020: 60; Chen, 2019). Given their large functioning role in the implementation of CPEC, a successful realization of the flagship project would illustrate the success of these institutions and increase their appeal to potential partners. In other words, a successful implementation of CPEC would not only reaffirm Chinese nationalistic sentiments and search for global leadership but would also help China in providing an alternative to the US-led financial institutions. Providing an alternative financial institutional order fits well within the ‘China Dream’ because it helps to improve China’s global position. Part of China’s nation branding efforts is to establish itself as an alternative to global leadership, and successful BRI implementation in Pakistan can help to stimulate this idea (Wolf, 2020: 64-65).

As CPEC is part of China’s ambition to increase its global status, it also sends a clear signal to two of its political rivals: the US and India. Despite a cooldown in US-Pakistan relations in 2011, following the killing of Osama bin Laden alongside other factors, relations between Islamabad and Washington improved after 2012 after recognizing their common interest: counterterrorism in Afghanistan and ensuring regional security and stability (Rafique, 2015). In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proposed that Pakistan would play a key role in a US-led Silk Road initiative (Irish, 2011). In contrast to US interests, the development of CPEC symbolizes a deepened connection between Islamabad and Beijing and a successful implementation of CPEC could illustrate a shift in spheres of influence as Pakistan moves away from the US and grows closer to China. Given the long-term conflict between India and Pakistan, CPEC is also a clear signal to India that Beijing deepens its ties with Islamabad.

In sum, a successful realization of CPEC does not only help the CCP's legitimacy to power because of its economic opportunities, but also because of its nationalist appeal. Because it is the flagship project of the BRI, it provides the CCP with a crisp opportunity to prove that the 'China Dream' is not ideological imagination but is in fact real and has real effects. CPEC is a crucial element in realizing the 'China Dream' and raising China's status as a global power and an alternative to US-led institutions. Alongside this affirmation of Chinese confidence and pride is a message to rival states: CPEC is the symbol of growing China-Pakistan ties that may cause conflict with US and Indian interests. As a result, these two states have been the most vocal against CPEC and its geopolitical implications.

International discourse: fears of hegemony-seeking behavior

The US and India have been the most vocal on CPEC, reflecting their shared but also individual worries of a growing China and its political and strategic consequences. For the US, CPEC could be part of a Chinese scheme to overthrow the US for regional hegemony in Asia. For India, CPEC is a breach of its territorial integrity and sovereignty, while also worrying over a possible Chinese 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean. Faced with these developments and accompanying worries, the US and India have grown closer to each other.

United States

Relations between China and the US have deteriorated in recent years. This is assumed to be the result of Xi's more assertive behavior on territorial issues, such as the South China Sea, and Trump's confrontational approach to 'restore balance' in US-China relations, illustrated by the tariff war (Chengqiu, 2020). The perceptions of each other have changed as well. The US hoped to integrate China into the liberal world economy and transform it into a liberal democracy. China, however, interpreted its international rise as a victory of its political model. As a result, worries over hegemony-seeking behavior illustrates not only power politics, but ideology as well: Chinese statism versus American liberalism (ibid.). American views of China have become more negative than the other way around (Chung, 2019), which illustrates growing American discomfort with China's international rise. It is thus no surprise that the US is well aware of the BRI and its potential consequences, ranging from economics to geopolitics.

In 2019, the US spoke out against the risks and geopolitical dangers involved the CPEC, after a period of relative silence. The Obama administration, for example, initially reacted calmly to China-Pakistan cooperation and it reportedly welcomed the project as a means to further stabilize Pakistan and even sought to harmonize US-led development projects with Chinese counterparts in the country (Hussain, 2016; Markey, 2020). Under the Trump administration, however, the US approach to CPEC and the BRI in general changed to a more negative tone. In 2017, Trump agreed to send an official US delegacy to the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing (Lopez, 2017) as part of a trade deal with China. But a year later, the administration's stance on the BRI already seemed to have altered. In 2018, the National Security Strategy issued by the Department of Defense unequivocally stresses China's revisionist intentions and the implications for American hegemony:

“The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition* by what the National Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions. China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.” (United States Department of Defense, 2018)

It leaves no doubt that the US Department of Defense indirectly refers here to CPEC as a project led by a revisionist China to alter power relations in the Indo-Pacific via predatory economics. In line with this approach, a top US State Department official, Ambassador Alice Wells, addressed these concerns in a conference organized by the Woodrow Wilson Center. Wells specifically mentions CPEC here, publicly casting doubts on its ambitious rhetoric, criticizing China’s non-transparent manner of conducting business and urging the Pakistanis to ask questions on China’s endeavors in Pakistan. In line with the National Security Strategy, Wells also warned the Pakistan that it risks falling into ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ (Woodrow Wilson Center, 2019). American concerns reflect the growing dominance of the ‘China threat’ narrative in recent and ongoing administrations and the subsequent necessity of containing China’s rise to one that is more limited.

India

Relations between India and China have been uneasy at times. India’s biggest challenge is to manage its asymmetrical relationship to China, a state whose economy is developing much more rapidly than the Indian economy (Sachdeva, 2018). Because of this, the Chinese have a more relaxed position on India’s rise, while India is more concerned about the implications of China’s rise (Grant, 2010). This leads to the impression that China-India relations are defined by four ‘Cs’: conflict, competition, cooperation, and containment (Joshi, 2018). A source of conflict between China and India is their disputed border. After military conflicts in 1962 and 1967, tensions in the disputed area rose again in June 2020, even resulting in casualties (Ghoshal et al., 2020).

Not only the US, but India too is publicly critical of CPEC and specifically its geopolitical implications. China has considered India to become a part of the BRI. This is illustrated by Premier Li’s visit to India prior to Pakistan in 2013, after which India chose Japan and not China to become its economic ally (Hameed, 2018). India has been critical of the CPEC for two primary reasons. The first reason is the Kashmir region, a disputed territory that has been a source of conflict between India and Pakistan for decades. Kashmir is a Pakistani-administered region which is simultaneously claimed by India. Kashmir is part of CPEC’s territory and, as a result, China has supported Pakistan in its territorial disputes with India, much to the dismay of New Delhi (Miglani, 2017; Blah, 2018). In 2018, India brought the sovereignty issue regarding CPEC to the attention of the United Nations Human Rights Council, stating that India cannot accept CPEC as long as it ignores India’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (Mohan, 2018). To this day, this issue remains unresolved.

The second reason that India is critical of CPEC is strategic. India fears that China will use CPEC to establish a military presence in the Indian Ocean, ultimately encircling India and containing its rise

(Figure 2). For India, China's pursuit of a presence in the Indian Ocean is part of its 'String of Pearls' strategy that is ultimately aimed to attain Chinese regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific (Khan & Khalid, 2018; Ashraf, 2017). It is a metaphor for a collection of ports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives, and Pakistan. Pakistan is specifically mentioned because of the Gwadar port that China invests in via CPEC. In accordance with the theory, one Chinese navy official reportedly mentioned that China can no longer accept an Indian Ocean that only belongs to India and thus needs to establish more control in the Indian Ocean (Malik, 2012). Unsurprisingly, India sees CPEC not only as an economic project, but a geopolitical one as well. An Indian former foreign secretary stated that, since not all BRI projects are economically viable, there must be a geopolitical motivation involved (Blah, 2018). Whether the 'String of Pearls' theory is actually realized in practice remains ambiguous. As one Indian navy official stated: it does not really exist, but the Indian Navy surely believes in it (Miller, 2017: 180). Whether the fear is justified or not, it exists nonetheless.

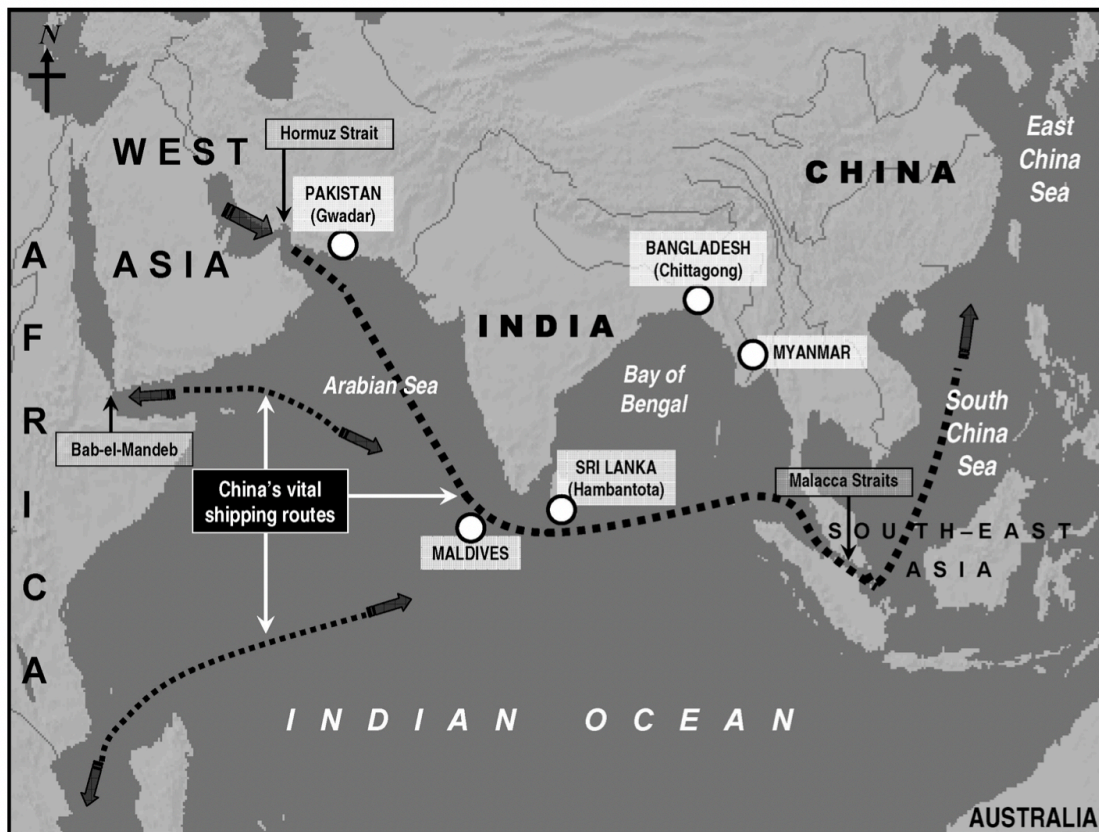


Figure 2: strategic ports according to the 'String of Pearls' theory (source: Khurana, 2008)

Concerns over territorial sovereignty and geopolitics caused India to refrain from participating in the BRI, as it turned down China's invitation for the BRI summit in Beijing (ibid.). President Trump shared India's concerns, stating that an improvement of regional economic connectivity should not breach territorial integrity and the sovereignty of others (DNA India, 2017). Worries over Chinese strategic interests have caused India and the US to grow closer to each other, as the US wants to maintain its role in Asia and India wants to improve its status as a regional power (Miller, 2017: 185). The Indian

position on the BRI and specifically CPEC has remained unchanged in recent years. To be sure, India does support initiatives to bolster economic growth and boost regional connectivity, but also states that these initiatives must respect territorial integrity and sovereignty. This causes India to be explicitly critical of CPEC and remain more ambiguous on its stance towards the BRI in general (Sachdeva, 2018).

Domestic discourse: ambitious & ambiguous

How CPEC is covered in Chinese press helps to assess how CPEC is sold to audiences by China. Because a successful implementation of CPEC can bolster the CCP's domestic legitimacy to power, it is expected that the CCP, through state-influenced media outlets, pushes a nationalistic and economically ambitious narrative on CPEC. The press coverage on CPEC by English-language Chinese media outlets mainly focusses on the potential economic benefits and emphasizes values as peace and prosperity (see Table 2). A total of 2,091 articles were published by Xinhua Press Agency, China Daily and Global Times between January 1, 2013, and December 31, 2020, that included the words 'Pakistan' and 'corridor'. The word 'corridor' was included as a search term to ensure that press coverage on Pakistan was about specifically CPEC instead of other subjects. Other search terms were then included to assess their prevalence. In 2020, COVID-19 was mentioned in 53.6 percent of CPEC-related articles, causing other percentages to drop.

Press coverage between 2013-2020

General BRI press coverage in China tends to emphasize recurring themes of friendship, growth, and the presence of China as a responsible global partner (Chen & Liu, 2016). The China Daily, for example, emphasizes the BRI's positive characteristics and China's rise as a global and responsible partner. For example, when reporting on the BRI, China Daily often uses corresponding terms such as 'co-build' and 'connect'. Simultaneously, China's role is presented as one of a global economic power (Zhang & Wu, 2017). Because of this, the China Daily emphasizes the BRI's positive contributions to the world economy, focusing on concrete measures of the initiative and the use of explicit positive vocabulary (Xiao et al., 2019). This focus on win-win cooperation is said to be general in Chinese-language reporting on the BRI (Xin & Matheson, 2018).

Search term	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Pakistan AND corridor	63 (100%)	168 (100%)	383 (100%)	251 (100%)	462 (100%)	292 (100%)	276 (100%)	196 (100%)
Pakistan AND corridor AND trade	33 (52.4%)	77 (45.8%)	211 (55.1%)	140 (55.8%)	242 (52.4%)	132 (45.2%)	117 (42.4%)	57 (29.1%)
Pakistan AND corridor AND peace	16 (25.4%)	46 (27.4%)	137 (35.8%)	59 (23.5%)	114 (24.7%)	63 (21.6%)	59 (21.4%)	35 (17.9%)

Search term	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Pakistan AND corridor AND strategy	14 (22.2%)	19 (11.3%)	85 (22.2%)	54 (21.5%)	100 (21.6%)	45 (15.4%)	45 (16.3%)	17 (8.7%)
Pakistan AND corridor AND prosperity	14 (22.2%)	27 (16.1%)	83 (21.7%)	73 (29.1%)	98 (21.2%)	53 (18.2%)	56 (20.3%)	30 (15.3%)
Pakistan AND corridor AND destiny	1 (1.6%)	22 (13.1%)	69 (18.0%)	18 (7.2%)	33 (7.1%)	7 (2.4%)	6 (2.2%)	7 (3.6%)
Pakistan AND corridor AND harmony	1 (1.6%)	4 (2.4%)	20 (5.2%)	6 (2.4%)	23 (5.0%)	6 (2.1%)	12 (4.3%)	6 (3.1%)

Table 2: search terms for articles by Xinhua, China Daily and Global Times, 2013-2020

In specific CPEC related articles, one word that is often mentioned is ‘trade’, with an average of 47.3 percent of articles issued between 2013 and 2020. In 2013 and between 2015 and 2017 ‘trade’ was included in a majority of CPEC-related articles. This is not surprising since the first announcement of CPEC stems from 2013 and the project was formally launched in 2015. Nevertheless, trade and potential economic benefits take a prominent place in CPEC press coverage. The same goes for ‘peace’, which was included in an average of 24.7 percent of CPEC-related articles. ‘Strategy’ was included in an average of 17.4 percent of articles. ‘Prosperity’ was mentioned in 20.5 percent of articles. ‘Destiny’ and ‘harmony’ were less often mentioned in CPEC-related articles, with an average of 6.9 percent and 3.3 percent of articles respectively. A notable outlier is the use of ‘destiny’ in articles between 2014 and 2015. In general, these news outlets often mention CPEC’s trade impact and its emphasis on peace and prosperity, with additional attention to destiny (of shared values) in 2014 and 2015. This projection of China as a non-confrontational and benevolent rising power is featured in numerous articles. A Global Times op-ed article states at the end of 2013:

(...) China's modernization is not aimed at confrontation with the US. If two nuclear powers fight each other, nobody wins. There is suspicion that China will seek regional or even global hegemony. Honestly, it is hard to say whether in the future there will still be a new hegemon like the US. The US became a hegemon through WWII, when it was almost as rich as the rest of the world put together. Will any other country have such a chance? What China's "peaceful rise" means is very clear; improving China's social conditions, enabling the nation to stand independently in the international arena, and realizing national rejuvenation. (Tao, 2013)

This position questions the whole notion of hegemony-seeking behavior and states that the idea of a new hegemon might not be possible after all due to changed circumstances. Rather than hegemony-seeking, the rise of China is portrayed as a benevolent force, but also explicitly means the realization of national rejuvenation and to stand independently in the international arena. A China Daily article

specifically addresses fears of Chinese maritime presence in the Indian Ocean, and quotes a Chinese military official:

“Some people worry that China becoming a strong maritime power means a new hegemony that will harm regional stability and global peace. Such worries are completely unnecessary,” said Fan Changlong, vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, China's top military authority. Never will China follow the path that some major countries took to pursue maritime hegemony and colonization of other countries, or exploitation of their resources” as it is not in China's fundamental interests, he said. (Zhao, 2014).

This article illustrates an interesting duality: China does not seek hegemony because China will never be like the Western powers who oppressed others. This could then be perceived as a reference to China's own century of humiliation when Western powers exerted influence over the Chinese in the nineteenth century (Tsang, 2015: 29). This seems to reflect Callahan's (2015) argument that China emphasizes its own traditional values while negating Western values and experiences. This duality is seen in another op-ed article in China Daily:

Those who study or work abroad (especially western countries) have been stuffed with ill themes about China. Hiding behind the themes of so-called free world, some of the elite have accepted western hegemony and are ready to forego their own culture and identity and sell it for few coins, compromising national security. Some Pakistani academia have been hijacked by them and young minds are being poisoned with negative themes about China-Pakistan relationship. Some newspapers and even social media platforms have joined in and are attacking through mainstream media to chop down the bonding tree. As the elite gets manipulated so does the overall perception of the nation. (Waqar, 2015)

English-language Chinese press coverage of CPEC thus reflects the narrative that project is mostly about improving trade and stimulating Chinese values such as peace and prosperity. These are often recurring themes in CPEC related articles. In accordance with the idea of soft power duality, press coverage on CPEC also provides the narrative that the project is not part of a Chinese scheme to seek Asian hegemony. While it emphasizes and promotes benevolent Chinese interests and traditional, civilizational values, it also contains an exclusionary anti-Western element in the sense that it posits Chinese rise against the backdrop of colonial Western powers or even boldly rejects Western worries over China-Pakistan relations altogether.

Chinese leadership statements

A CPEC narrative that focuses on economic benefits, peace and prosperity is not only put forward in English-language Chinese press coverage, but also by the CCP leadership. Premier Li Keqiang visited Pakistan in 2013 for his first official trip. After choosing Islamabad as his first destination, Li stated explicitly that China does not seek vengeance or hegemony after experiencing its century of humiliation:

China will not seek hegemony even when it grows stronger. Having had a full share of sufferings in modern history, we Chinese believe that you should not do unto others what you do not want them to do unto you. (Xinhua, 2013)

In April 2015, Xi visited Pakistan, making him the second Chinese leader to visit Islamabad after Li in 2013. Prior to his visit to Pakistan, Xi (2015a) published an op-ed article in a mainstream Pakistani newspaper on the Chinese-Pakistani friendship.

Over a long period of time, China and Pakistan have conducted all-round, mutually beneficial and fruitful cooperation in various fields, bringing tangible benefits to the people of both countries. At present, the two sides are working together to steadily advance the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Committed to building a China-Pakistan community of common destiny, we cooperate to expand our converging interests and strive for common development. (Xi, 2015a)

Xi here specifically refers to CPEC as a project of building a China-Pakistan community of common destiny, a theme that often recurs in the 'China Dream' vision Xi is building his legacy on. In the same article, the 'China Dream' is even specifically mentioned in relation to Xi's upcoming visit to Pakistan:

The Chinese people are working toward the Chinese dream of great national rejuvenation. It is a dream about peace, development and win-win cooperation. What we pursue is not just the interests of the Chinese people, but also the common interests of the world people. China wishes to live in harmony with Pakistan and other countries in South Asia and contribute its share to the development of this region. The aim of China's initiative of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is to promote common development by enhancing connectivity among countries along these routes. We hope that this initiative will enable us to work together with South Asian countries to fulfill our common dream of rapid development. (ibid.)

This excerpt exemplifies China's dualistic rhetoric in promoting CPEC and the BRI in general. On the one hand, Xi emphasizes the peaceful rise of a benevolent and responsible China that solely seeks win-win cooperation with other states in its neighborhood. On the other hand, Xi also emphasizes the 'China Dream' of national rejuvenation and refers to a common dream of rapid development. In Pakistan, Xi delivered a keynote speech at the national parliament titled "Building a China-Pakistan Community of Shared Destiny to Pursue Closer Win-Win Cooperation". During his speech, he not only emphasizes the 'all-weather' friendship and enduring cooperation with Pakistan (as the speech's title would suggest), but Xi notes the shared values and, more importantly, a history of oppression by Western powers:

Over 2,000 years ago, the Silk Road became a bridge of friendship linking our two ancient civilizations. Zhang Qian, China's emissary in the Han Dynasty, Faxian, the master monk in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, and Xuan Zang, the great monk in the Tang Dynasty visited Pakistan. Our two countries share similar cultural traditions and values. (...) In recent history, both China and Pakistan suffered from imperialist and colonialist aggression and oppression and we extended mutual sympathy and support to each other. Back in the 1930s, the great Pakistani poet Muhammad Iqbal wrote that the Chinese people are waking up from their sleep and the spring of Mount Himalaya is bursting. Those lines saluted and voiced support to the Chinese people in their struggle for independence and fight against foreign aggression. Similar historical sufferings and the common struggle have brought our hearts and minds together. (Xi, 2015b)

This resonates with Callahan's (2015) description of a Chinese narrative that emphasizes its own traditional, civilizational values, but one that also rejects its century of humiliation. But in the same speech, Xi also stresses that China does not seek hegemony:

Over 2,000 years ago, the Chinese already knew that a belligerent country, however big it may be, is doomed. "Do not do onto others what you do not want others to do onto you." This is a principle that we Chinese adhere to, and we do not subscribe to the belief that a country is bound to seek hegemony when it becomes powerful. Peaceful development is in China's interests, and also in the interests of Asia and the world. Nothing can shake our resolve to pursue peaceful development. China is committed to the principle of non-interference in other's internal affairs; it will never impose its own will onto others; and China will never seek hegemony however strong it may become. China will continue to pursue win-win cooperation and enhance friendship and cooperation with other countries. (Xi, 2015b)

Prior and during his state visit in Pakistan, Xi thus presented his audience a dual picture of CPEC: it is presented as part of a Chinese-Pakistani search for a community of common destiny as both states share not only cultural values in relation to Chinese civilization, but also seek to shake off its tumultuous past of Western oppression. The beneficial narrative of economic benefits, peace and prosperity is further enshrined in official CPEC documents. CPEC's long term plan states that:

We shall proceed with all-weather strategic partnership of cooperation, concepts of harmony, inclusiveness, mutual benefits and sustainability. (...) We shall bring China and Pakistan closer to each other with the physical economic bond of the CPEC and form a community of indivisible common destiny. (CPEC, 2017)

In accordance with the English-language Chinese press coverage of CPEC, the CCP leadership also emphasizes the benevolent character of CPEC, stressing a strive for a common destiny and maintaining an all-weather friendship. At the same time, the Chinese leadership states its non-hegemonic ambitions in clear contrast to the worries voiced by the US and India. A dualistic narrative of emphasizing Chinese values with an anti-Western element can also be seen in the narrative posed by the Chinese leadership. This makes Chinese domestic discourse on CPEC both ambitious and ambiguous. On the one hand, it promotes CPEC as an ambitious economic project that is part of the 'China Dream's' realization and bolsters China and Pakistan's all-weather friendship. On the other hand, the coverage and statements on CPEC are loaded with multi-interpretative concepts as 'harmony', 'inclusiveness' or 'community of shared destiny' and rejects Western fears of hegemony-seeking behavior while not elaborating on specific strategic ramifications. These dynamics illustrate how the CCP's interests differ on the domestic and international level: CPEC is sold as a revolutionary, ambitious project that seeks to realize the 'China Dream', but any worry of strategic or hegemony-seeking behavior must be played down.

Strategic ambiguity and CPEC

The preceding sections of this chapter illustrated several elements of Chinese use of strategic ambiguity regarding CPEC. After an overview of China-Pakistan relations and the announcement of CPEC, it became clear that CPEC has multiple areas of ambiguity that remain unclear to the time of writing this study. It then juxtaposed the international and domestic discourse as a means of

illustrating the two-level game that the CCP faces in selling CPEC: an ambitious project that is instrumental to realizing the 'China Dream', while avoiding to appear predatory to others. What the concrete objectives of CPEC are, how Pakistan will exactly benefit, how objectives are to be realized, and where they are to be realized are only some of the questions that still revolve around CPEC.

The CCP has both economic and nationalistic motivations for CPEC because delivering concrete results on these areas provide the CCP with performance legitimacy. CPEC offers opportunities for the CCP to tackle some of China's pressing economic issues, while also promoting the project in context of the ambitious, nationalistic 'China Dream' narrative and increasing international soft power. In accordance with this, it becomes clear that domestic discourse on CPEC, based on Chinese press coverage and CCP leadership statements, mainly focuses on presenting CPEC as a peaceful, beneficial, win-win project while also placing it in the context of the 'China Dream'. Internationally, the US and India have been suspicious of China's intentions with Pakistan and the possible geopolitical ramifications of CPEC. The Chinese leadership, most notably Xi, repeatedly stressed that China does not seek hegemony in Asia while also stressing China's different character from colonial Western powers. In other words, it presents CPEC not as a hegemony-seeking project, but it also actively presents CPEC as part of China's rise and the 'China's Dream' realization in stark contrast to the status quo Western powers. China, in short, maneuvers CPEC between ambition and ambiguity.

The ambiguity surrounding CPEC is strategic in nature because it provides China (and Pakistan) with a desired degree of flexibility to alter the objectives, contents, and implementation of CPEC to pressing needs and opportunities. The use of non-binding MoUs instead of treaties help to maintain flexibility and incrementalism. This, in turn, helps the CCP to sell CPEC as a success to its domestic audience, even though the project might experience setbacks. In fact, CPEC does experience some setbacks: a major transmission line project is stalled until September 2021, although the corresponding MoU claims that the project is to be completed no later than September 1, 2021 (Hasan, 2021). Nevertheless, now that Phase I of CPEC ends and Phase II begins, the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan stated in April 2021 that new projects were topic of discussion and that a hundred programs and activities are developed to celebrate seventy years of China-Pakistan relations (Dawn, 2021). Because the BRI and specifically CPEC are too big to fail for the CCP, as that might risk their legitimacy to power, it is unsurprising that CPEC is always sold as a success. This is an incremental, flexible, and ultimately pragmatic approach that does not ultimately reach concrete policy targets, but rather aims to fulfill a vision (Vangelli, 2019: 76).

Strategic ambiguity is also in play regarding Chinese reactions to fears of hegemony-seeking behavior put forward by the US and India. It is in China's interest to downplay these suspicions of hegemony-seeking behavior and to appear as a benevolent, 'win-win' global power. This is due to two reasons: first, appearing as a predatory state may lead other states to contain China's rise in an anti-China balancing coalition. The rise of China and its possible containment plays a central role in the growing US-India relations. Second, the success of the BRI depends on the willingness of other states to cooperate with China. The more states participate, the larger the reach of the BRI, and potential partners would rethink their position if their sovereignty appears to be threatened. Strategic ambiguity is then China's tool to present CPEC as an ambitious project while avoiding to appear predatory or revisionist internationally. Indeed, both president Xi and premier Li have stated that China does not seek hegemony but specific fears over a military use of the Gwadar port remain unaddressed. This

allows China to remain flexible on what it wants with the Gwadar port. Furthermore, China actively promotes ambiguity and secrecy with the second, more extensive version of CPEC's long-term plan. Because the extensive version is kept secret and only the short version is publicly available, it allows China to alter CPEC at its wish. As a result, it remains ambiguous for the general public how CPEC projects are precisely financed, implemented and coordinated.

In sum, strategic ambiguity helps China to advance CPEC as an incremental, pragmatic, and flexible project that cannot fail and thus helps CCP to maintain its legitimacy to power. This is in line with the idea that Chinese foreign policy revolves around the CCP's legitimacy to power. The case of CPEC generally supports the central argument and its individual components outlined in the causal mechanism. In order to enhance the structure of the chapter, the international and domestic discourse were juxtaposed against each other to illustrate their contrasts. One exception to the causal mechanism is that the case of CPEC does not show temporal differences in domestic discourse: the press coverage on CPEC and statements by Chinese leaders do not abruptly switch from ambition to ambiguity following American and Indian suspicions. Rather, elements of ambition and ambiguity are consistent over time. CPEC is a project that is predominantly built on economic and nationalistic motivations that help the CCP maintain their performance legitimacy. And indeed, the outcome of all these considerations is that China employs strategic ambiguity in CPEC's ambitions, contents, implementations, and ramifications in order to enhance its flexibility and chances of success.

V. Conclusion

The rise of China as a global power is a phenomenon that continues to baffle, confuse, worry, and inspire many IR scholars or anyone that is interested in world politics. Modern-day China is the story of the sleeping giant that is now awake: after relative international isolation under Mao, the nation opened itself to the world under Deng. The spectacular rise of China in economic and financial terms improved the lives of millions of Chinese citizens in poverty. As such, the Chinese 'miracle' is also a humanitarian miracle. Following the increase in economic capabilities, China under Xi continues to pursue a more assertive foreign policy that seeks to realize the 'China Dream' of national rejuvenation. The sleeping giant has awakened and now seeks its position in a rapidly changing world. Whether this development constitutes a threat or opportunity to international peace and stability depends on whom one asks. Nevertheless, the narrative of China's rise as a threat has grown more dominant in recent years, following Beijing's growing assertiveness. Most notably since the Obama administration and increasingly under the Trump administration, US-China relations have grown sour in the last years. At the same time, the South China Sea disputes and fears over a 'String of Pearls' cause some of China's neighbors to watch its rise with fear. The BRI is the next chapter of China's story and will undoubtedly continue to spark interest in the years to come.

The BRI is without a doubt China's most ambitious, far-reaching, and significant foreign policy since the establishment of modern-day China in 1949. The initiative aims to 'revive' the ancient Silk Roads by 'reconnecting' China with the rest of the globe through economic continental belts and maritime roads in Eurasia, Africa, and even extending to Latin America. If its long-term objectives for 2049 are to be reached, the initiative indeed has the potential to transform international politics. Perhaps even more importantly, the initiative has the potential to lift billions of people out of poverty and improve life standards. In line with the scholarly debate on the meaning of China's rise, IR scholars debate whether the BRI constitutes a threat or opportunity. In line with the currently dominant 'China threat' narrative, offensive realists perceive the BRI to be hegemony-seeking behavior from a rising power (China) vis-à-vis the status quo hegemon (the US) and expect the BRI to be an optimized, rational foreign policy. It is then puzzling to see that the BRI is full of ambiguities, and even more puzzling is that this ambiguity is deliberate and strategic.

The BRI is ambiguous in many ways, from its definition to its scope, its framework, and its implementation. It is a dual-sided tale that resembles the narrative of China's rise on the international stage. It is a tale of a peaceful rise of a benevolent, responsible power. It is also the tale of a nation that seeks 'national rejuvenation' and wishes to rebalance international institutions to the changing world order. It is also a two-level game: because the CCP's legitimacy to power is based on its performance capabilities, specifically regarding economics and nationalism, it is in the CCP's interest to present a successful flagship project to the Chinese people to enhance its legitimacy to power. International and domestic politics are intertwined, and so the CCP must also make sure to deliver on their promises. Being strategically ambiguous on the what, why and how of CPEC provides China a large degree of flexibility and pragmatism that can be used to increase the odds of the project's success. CPEC and the BRI in general are exemplary of this incremental, long-term, and pragmatic approach to grand strategy. It allows China to maneuver between ambition and ambiguity, between the domestic 'China Dream' and international political realities.

A case study of CPEC with an element of discourse analysis was used to assess the validity of this study's central argument. It first presented a causal mechanism that operationalized the central argument in observable entities and corresponding activities. The causal mechanism was tested based on the case of CPEC from its announcement in 2013 onwards. It first presented an overview of CPEC and its multiple ambiguous elements. It then explored the Chinese motivations of CPEC, specifically the CCP's need to both deliver on economics and nationalism. An analysis of domestic and international discourse followed, illustrating both an ambitious and harmonious narrative domestically while remaining ambiguous regarding American and Indian worries of hegemony-seeking behavior. It illustrates how China presents itself as a responsible rising power to be reckoned with, but also one that seeks national rejuvenation in reaction to Western oppression. Finally, it concludes that the outcome of all this is strategic ambiguity to enhance flexibility and pragmatism, as the CCP has the incentive to promote CPEC ambitiously domestically while avoiding to appear too predatory internationally. The BRI and CPEC specifically are too big to fail – but the demarcation between failure and success remains ambivalent. Regardless of the outcomes, CPEC will most likely be sold as a success to audiences. This is an entanglement of international and domestic politics at play, with strategic ambiguity as a rational foreign policy tool to achieve maximum results.

Although strategic ambiguity can be useful in practical terms, by enhancing flexibility and luring potential partners states (who each have their own individual interests) in joining the BRI, it also has the potential to become a significant danger to the BRI's future. For China, the BRI's success depends on the willingness of other states to cooperate and sign bilateral agreements. How China presents itself to its own people and to the rest of the world matters: appear too predatory or too ambiguous, and it risks itself to be watched suspiciously by others, or in the worst case, become isolated. That would cause the BRI to fail and, failing to deliver on economics and nationalism, might put the CCP's performance leadership at risk. Although China remains ambiguous on the potential geopolitical ramifications of the BRI because it wants to give the impression that it is capable of geopolitics, it remains pivotal for the CCP to address these fears more than simply stating non-hegemonic ambitions. This also means that it should show more transparency in the initiative's contents, framework, implementation, and finances. If not, the costs of ambiguity may become too high for its success.

For China's rivals, most notably the US and its allies, it is important to better understand China's foreign policy under Xi. It is important to comprehend the CCP's performance legitimacy and how it needs to deliver on economics and nationalism to maintain its rule. The 'China Dream' and the ideas of national rejuvenation are indeed revisionist but come from a deep shared sense of humiliation and the desire to play a significant role in international politics. Even if China does not seek hegemony, it at least seeks recognition in status quo international institutions. It is also important to understand that China's foreign policy is often based on domestic considerations instead of international power projection. Even if the 'China threat' thinkers might prove to be right in the eventual outcomes of China's rise, they must consider the domestic dynamics that influence the foreign policy choices China makes.

Further research is recommended on the use of strategic ambiguity in international relations, which has mostly focused on historical cases as Israel's nuclear program and US-Taiwan relations. Strategic ambiguity can be a useful foreign policy tool and its use is certainly not limited to China alone. A theory

of strategic ambiguity in international relations can address the causes, workings and consequences of strategic ambiguity as a foreign policy tool. This study also provides a new scientific lens on the scholarly debate on China's rise. The interpretation of China's rise differs widely from the 'China opportunity' to the 'China threat' narrative, with the latter becoming dominant outside academia in recent years. This study hopes to show that China's rise and its interpretations do not have to be deterministic: if China uses strategic ambiguity to advance its interests to enhance flexibility and pragmatism, the outcome is simply not yet known. Further research in how China interprets its own rise and how this influences their foreign policy choices may help to better understand China's long-term objectives. Ultimately, a better understanding of China might help to prevent the Thucydides Trap from happening.

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