Unpacking the Belt and Road Initiative: Does Its Public Diplomacy Narratives Match Its Implementation?

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Abstract
The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a well-acknowledged central economic and diplomatic policy of the Chinese government, which was proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013. This paper intends to discover the relationship between the public diplomacy narratives of the BRI and its implementation. By using content analysis, this paper analyzes Chinese President Xi’s speeches from 2013 to 2020 about the BRI, as well as official statements of the Chinese central government. It identifies the public diplomacy narratives of the BRI: an assemblage of constantly changing policy settings that accommodates various economic and political interests. Also, this paper draws on differences between countries joining the BRI or not, and several case studies to elucidate the implementation of the BRI.

Different from repetitive literature that explores either the BRI narratives or its implementation, this paper contributes by combining and comparing the two. Despite positive interpretations of the BRI the Chinese government has adopted, the paper argues that there are no deceptive tricks with skeletons in the closet of the Chinese government, as the BRI public diplomacy narratives are, in general, consistent with its implementation.

Keywords Belt and Road Initiative · Public diplomacy · Narrative · China · Implementation

Introduction

Within China, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is widely acknowledged as a central diplomatic and economic policy of the Chinese government. President Xi Jinping first proposed the BRI in Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013, initially as One Belt One Road. The Database of Xi Jinping’s Important Speeches in the People’s
Daily records President Xi mentioning the BRI 1653 times from 7th February 2014 to 23rd August 2019, on average once every 1.2 days [23]. In October 2017, the BRI was incorporated into the Constitution of the Communist Party of China (CPC), in the 19th National Congress of the CPC, attaching unparalleled importance to this economic and diplomatic initiative [73].

However, the various interpretations of the BRI by international and domestic observers have made the BRI a diplomatic problem for the Chinese government, in which these interpretations are specified in the next section. Public diplomacy, as defined by Cull [9, pp. 12], “is a two-way street: a process of mutual influence, whereby a state or other international player facilitates engagement between publics or tunes its own policies to the map of foreign public opinion.” It is not the first time that China has had this kind of issue. Despite the enormous investment, China’s public diplomacy has encountered misunderstanding and suspicion. Sun [52] argues that there is an imbalance between China’s strong economic power and shortcomings in the mode of messaging. To a large extent, as Ramo [43, pp. 13] argues “China’s problem is more complex than whether or not its national image is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but hinges on a more difficult puzzle: China’s image of herself and other nations’ views of her are out of alignment.” That said, it is clear that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a party state, driven by a devotion to staying in power and appearing successful and powerful to home audiences and only secondarily to international audiences. To this extent, the Chinese government neither looks solely at commercial benefits nor sometimes even at host country reactions when implementing the BRI.

Drawing upon content analysis, this study analyzes the public diplomacy narratives of the BRI by selecting President Xi’s speeches and the authorized BRI documents of the Chinese government. It identifies the narratives of the BRI public diplomacy: an assemblage of constantly changing policy settings that accommodates various economic and political interests. More crucially, in comparison with the implementation of the BRI, this paper argues the BRI public diplomacy narratives are, in general, consistent with its implementation. Different from repetitive literature that explores either the BRI narratives or its implementation, this paper contributes by combining and comparing the two.

International and Domestic Interpretations of the BRI Went Wild

International Interpretations of the BRI

International interpretations of the BRI are manifold, ranging from China’s overseas empire building to economic restructuring to a reinterpretation of the legacy of Silk Roads. In general, I divide these opinions into five different groups to define the BRI, although the five categories do not appear mutually exclusive and some of them may overlap with others.

First, some scholars argue that the BRI is China’s strategic plan to increase its global influence and seek supports from other countries. There exist nuances in this view. Maçães [38], Bhattacharya [2], Cau [4], Fallon [14], Leavy [31], Flint and Zhu

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[16], and Sági and Engelberth [46] argue that the Chinese Government seeks to build a Chinese world order, strengthen China’s regional hegemony, marginalize America in Asia, and diminish America’s global position through the BRI. By comparison, Ma [37], Wang [58], and Leverett and Wu [32] affirm that China is geared towards a more multi-polar order by deepening the EU-China economic integration and enhancing its “legitimacy in the international economic and financial order,” rather than replacing American dominance in Asia and the world [37, pp. 152]. Maçães [38], Li [33], Wang [58], and Cheng [5] argue further that the BRI is a cautious response to America’s rebalance to Asia during the Obama Administration in order to avoid direct confrontation with the USA, as the BRI focus more on Central Asia, West Asia, and beyond.

Second, Andornino [1], Dunford and Liu [13], Johnston [26], Leavy [31], Li [58], Z. Liu et al. [35], Tekdal [53], Wang [59], and Jiang [25] identify the BRI as mainly serving domestic economic and political concerns of China. This includes creating new markets, securing energy supplies, maintaining Xinjiang’s stability and unity, resolving regional development imbalance, internationalizing Chinese currency, and transferring industrial overcapacity to low-wage youth-rich developing countries and excessive foreign exchange reserve.

Third, compared to the Trump Administration’s ‘America First’ foreign and economic policy, and withdrawal from some international institutions as de-globalization, Maçães [38], Xu [74], Johnston [26], W. Liu et al. [34], Flint and Zhu [16], Cau [4], and Hu [22] argue that the BRI can help create new markets, promote stagnating exports, secure energy supplies, internationalize Chinese currency, and transfer industrial overcapacity to low-wage youth-rich developing countries and excessive foreign exchange reserve; in terms of politics, the BRI can promote to maintain Xinjiang’s stability and unity by resolving regional development imbalance.

Fourth, Dellios [11], Summers [51], Toma and Grădinaru [56], and Yeh and Wharton [76] explain the BRI from the perspective of history. They contend that the BRI is the new interpretation of the historical Silk Road, and the continuing development of Chinese policy from the existing “Great Western Development Strategy,” “Go Out policy,” and some sub-national projects to a national level, because some BRI infrastructures are already under way before the BRI has been proposed.

Fifth, Zeng [77], He [19], Shepard [47], Jones and Zeng [28], and Dunford and Liu [13] all argue that the West overestimate the BRI, and in fact, in order to please the Chinese Government, Chinese municipal governments’ various interpretations of the BRI challenge the Chinese Government’s original meaning of the BRI so that the BRI now has become a loose, constantly evolving and indeterminate scheme to accommodate all stakeholders’ interests. In practice, after examining three BRI overseas economic and trade cooperation zones, Z. Cheng [6] argues that the BRI mainly relies on grand statements between the Chinese Government and other partner countries, but lacks practical implementation plans, which underpins Zeng’s view [77].

**Domestic Interpretations of the BRI**

China’s domestic interpretations of the BRI are also various and some of these narratives defy the official narrative of the BRI from the Chinese central government,
which specifies the fifth international interpretation. Officially, by playing down the geopolitical and military influence of the BRI, the Chinese central government clearly prefers to emphasize economic cooperation and peaceful development [72, 79]. However, some provincial governments, simply talk of a “bridgehead” that only vaguely alludes to a sense of growing military power [77]. Other provinces have gone as far as to claim the BRI will restore China’s “historical glory,” recalling the ancient tribute system in Southeastern Asia [77]. Also, Chinese academic circles have different views about the BRI. Sidaway and Woon [49] find out that numerous Chinese academics decipher the BRI as a geopolitical strategy. All these narratives, to some extent, belong to the first international interpretation and challenge the official narrative of the BRI from the Chinese central government.

No wonder the Chinese central government has attempted to control the narrative of the BRI [77]. According to the interview cited in Zeng [77], scholars at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, one of the most prestigious Chinese think tanks, were forbidden to speculate on the meaning and implications of the BRI after 2015, when the official narrative of the BRI from the Chinese central government was promulgated. Currently, they are mainly requested to discuss its implementation [77].

So, what are the authentic BRI public diplomacy narratives? Do they align with the implementation of the BRI?

Sample Selection

The biggest issue in this study is that the enormity of outlets related to the BRI in China. For example, more than 350,000 documents mentioned the BRI (yidaiyilu in Chinese) from September 2013 to December 2020, retrieved from Factiva, a global news and search engine. Due to the characteristics of the Chinese state-dominated media system and the fact that information is highly regulated, all news associated with politics can be regarded as official discourse if it is generated in China [81]. Under the Chinese media regulations, matters deemed detrimental to the reputation of the CPC, which endanger social stability or unity, and matters that are not publicly accessible such as abuse, civil strife, and large-scale commercial swindles should be published internally [7]. It can be observed that the views contained in the 350,000 documents have a similar mode of presentation. More critically, Ma [37, pp. 150] argues that Chinese media work as “a propaganda machine by repeating the same words everywhere.”

Admittedly, however, there is some degree of the plurality of opinions about the BRI, especially within China, as mentioned in domestic interpretations of the BRI, but they usually do not have too much public influence and sometimes academics feel constrained to express their criticism. There are evidently different views among Chinese elites as well, but they deliver their opinions to the top decision makers in the form of internal reference reports, which are called neican in China. More precisely, neican is expressed in internal restricted dissemination papers written for senior members of the Chinese government and the CPC [7]. The purpose of neican
is to remind Chinese top leaders of problems that are perceived as too sensitive to be addressed in the mass media [7]. Thus, they should deliver a more accurate version of events, more critical, and less censored. However, outsiders cannot access neican in China, because of their confidentiality.

In noting this difficulty in accessing internal documents, the aim is to identify the most salient materials available to the domestic and international public. The official BRI speeches of President Xi and the authorized BRI documents of the Chinese central government in Chinese language are selected as samples. The choice of Chinese texts is deliberate. Chinese language speeches and official documents are first and foremost for domestic consumption, as the PRC is a party state, driven by a devotion to staying in power. To achieve so, the CPC needs to appear successful and powerful to home audiences first. Meanwhile, they are also targeted at international audiences, even though it may be a secondary aim. For example, the main invited participants of the first and second Belt and Road Forums for International Cooperation, in which Xi delivered 8 speeches, are international leaders. English versions of these samples can readily be found but are not the subject of the following analysis.

With the assistance of the Database of Xi Jinping’s Important Speeches in the People’s Daily, I identify over twenty speeches and two official documents. To meet the demand of research, data cleaning was required. After deleting some repetitive and concise texts, sixteen speeches and two official documents were selected due to their significance and relevance to the BRI. They are listed in the appendix.

**Revealing the Public Diplomacy Narratives of the BRI**

Based on the five international interpretations, this paper identifies one main public diplomacy narrative: an assemblage of constantly changing policy settings. Identifying the narrative is challenging as there are many components; for example, researchers can categorize economic development, regional stability, and political ideology into separate narratives. However, this approach cannot reveal the unique feature of the BRI narratives. More importantly, all the narratives, to some extent, respond to or reflect the five international interpretations.

The term assemblage is originally derived from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s book “A Thousand Plateaus” [10, pp. 2] and refers to “a collection of things which have been gathered together or assembled.” Assemblage literally means something that has been put together but which remains somewhat incomplete and fluid as components can be added and subtracted [10]. As I will use it to explain the BRI, it signifies something adaptable to fit domestic agendas as well as being useful in diplomacy. The BRI is extremely mutable and new elements are added as the project evolves. Xi’s speeches can therefore be seen as amendments and even corrections to China’s public diplomacy. More concretely, all the narratives that Xi and the Chinese central government have offered begin with a general and vague concept first, and then later add extensive interpretations and numerous examples; sometimes these interpretations can be contradictory.

The goals of the BRI are a quintessential example. They are specified by the Chinese government as “Five Connects” for “promoting policy coordination, facilitating
connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds” [40]. These five connects essentially function as a way of integrating multi-objectives while allowing a certain degree of policy latitude if the geopolitical landscape changes. In particular, the final connect, “people-to-people bonds” has a wide-ranging meaning; and it includes but is not limited to cooperation and exchange in education, science, and technology [40, 67, 70]. Among all these facets, there is no doubt that scientific and technological innovation is the focus, since Xi has continuously mentioned it in his speeches [67]. In fact, scientific and technological innovation overlaps with another significant policy, Made in China 2025, which proves its assemblage characteristic.

Responding to the First International Interpretation

The public diplomacy narratives of the BRI respond to the international doubts about if the BRI is used to achieve regional hegemony. This is intended to resolve the concern that China seeks to marginalize other powers in Asia, belonging to the first international interpretation. Evidently, Xi and the Chinese government proposed the BRI as a win–win economic proposal, as China has pursued a so-called peaceful rise since 2003 [82]. In 2018, Xi [68] underscored that the BRI is an equal, open, and inclusive economic cooperation proposal beyond ideology; it was neither a zero-sum game nor a closed geopolitical or military alliance. Also, when Xi firstly proposed the BRI in Kazakhstan, Xi [62] claimed that China does not seek dominance and China would strengthen communication and coordination with Russia and Central Asian countries.

This speech was a response to the doubts and suspicion in the West and Russia regarding the possible power competition between China and Russia in Central Asia. Due to the economic ascendance of China, Chinese influence has increased in Central Asia that has been Russia’s “backyard” for decades [30]. Thus, there seems to see a contradiction between China’s claims of not replacing any great powers and the material reality. With the implementation of the BRI, China has increased its economic influence in Central Asia that has come at the expense of Russia [30].

Reflecting the Second International Interpretation

The public diplomacy narratives of the BRI point out it serves China’s domestic economic and political concerns, which aligns with the second international interpretation. Firstly, the BRI is attached to the Chinese economy. Xi [64, 65] states that the BRI meets the internal requirements of China’s economic development, economic reform, and the further integration of its domestic economy into the world economy. A speech in 2017 adds that the BRI is associated with the “new normal of China’s economy” and “supply side structural reform,” two of the most important economic concepts in China [66]. Secondly, regarding China’s regional security, Xi [65] asserted that the BRI will drive the development of China’s frontier regions, thereby resolving issues of regional imbalance and instability. Manifestly, “a key challenge for Beijing since the establishment of the PRC in 1949 has been to
integrate its traditional frontiers of Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Yunnan,” which have “non–Han Chinese ethnic populations, histories of autonomy, underdevelopment, geopolitically important position,” as well as potential issues with separatism and terrorism [8, pp. 73].

Reflecting the Third International Interpretation

The public diplomacy narratives of the BRI elaborates that it is used to facilitate economic globalization, even though some of the terms are not employed for globalization initially. These narratives reflect the third international interpretation. For example, the BRI plays a crucial role in the “Chinese dream” and the “community of shared future,” two of China’s key political slogans [71]. Interestingly, Xi’s usage of these metaphors aligns with globalization, even though the Chinese dream actually points to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, a nationalistic connotation. That said, Xi still frames the Chinese dream from the perspective of globalization. Xi [65] combines China’s development with the development of the BRI countries and proposes that the BRI facilitates the realization of the Chinese dream with the dreams of all the people along the route. It is difficult to judge if this reflects China’s intention, but it is certainly the interpretation of the party state.

By definition, the community of shared future indicates that the future and development of every nation and country are intertwined and mutually affected, although without providing precise clarification. Zhang [78] argues that this notion is both vague and comprehensive and reflects the first major alteration in China’s foreign policy in more than four decades, switching from being nation-oriented to centering on the whole human civilization. More significantly, unparalleled importance is now attached to this concept. Domestically, this notion was written into the preambles of the Party Constitution and the Constitution of the PRC respectively in 2017 and 2018 [36]. Globally, it was included in the three UN resolutions of 2017, one of which is the UN Security Resolution [75]. That said, the community of shared future does not clarify if the notion means another hierarchical order with China at the top and if the shared future should, to some extent, tie into Chinese national rejuvenation as well. This concept seems similar to another version of tianxia, which will be discussed later.

Reflecting the Fourth International Interpretation

The public diplomacy narratives of the BRI are frequently framed by Xi and the Chinese government as positive interpretations of China’s cultural and historical exchange, which refers to the fourth international interpretation. It is worth noting that almost all of Xi’s speeches begin with China’s cultural exchange with local countries and reminds the audience of the historical Silk Road. The history here is used as a means of showing a shared past, as much as a shared future. This linking of past and future corresponds with the symbolic notion of the BRI as the resurrection of the historical Silk Road.
Xi often cites Zhang Qian—who served as an imperial envoy in his mission to the Western Regions during the Han dynasty—and Zheng He—who conducted maritime expeditions to the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and beyond in the Ming Dynasty as the examples of China’s historical heritage about the BRI territories [67]. However, Zhang Qian was actually dispatched by Emperor Wu of the Han to ally with a nomadic tribe, the Yuezhi to attack another troublesome tribe, the Xiongnu; Zheng He was sent by the Yongle Emperor to boast the great power of the Ming Dynasty. None of the two exchanges was initially and subjectively planned with economic goals but objectively both led to economic contacts.

Xi [61] quoted the Indonesian saying, “Money is easy to get, but friends are hard to find” to compare Sino-Indonesian relations as genuine friendship. However, Xi has never mentioned the mass killings against Chinese Indonesians in the 1960s and the persistent discrimination against people of Chinese descent in Indonesia until now [57].

Often mentioned by Xi [68, 69] is tianxia, an ancient Chinese term. Originating from the Zhou dynasty, tianxia literally means “all under heaven.” Zhao [80], a prominent proponent of tianxia in China, argues that “existence presupposes coexistence… which literally means that being is only defined in relation to others, not by individual existence.” More concretely, Zhao argues “Tianxia is a hierarchical worldview that prioritizes order over freedom, elite governance over democracy, and the superior political institution over the lower level” [12, pp. 24]. This concept operates in contradistinction to the Western conception of sovereignty that stresses autonomy and boundaries. Tianxia essentially indicates the core meaning of BRI: connectivity that emphasizes the importance of interdependence and coexistence, although connectivity is different depending on the actual context [24]. This is similar to the community of shared future, as mentioned before. However, the interdependence of tianxia avoids mentioning that China may leverage its economic strength to achieve political intentions.

Additionally, Xi has avoided presenting the BRI as a copy of the historical Silk Road. The association would no doubt remind the Southeast Asian countries of the tribute system. This power structure indicates a China-centered global order, whereby in compliance with this hierarchical structure, foreign nations agreed to submit to the Chinese court and become vassals [38]. Rather what Xi stresses is to inherit and extend the harmonious spirit of the historical Silk Road. Importantly, although the BRI was proposed by China, it belongs to the world across different civilizations, which further reinforces the BRI as an open and inclusive globalization platform [41].

**Reflecting the Fifth International Interpretation**

Drawing on the above, the public diplomacy narratives of the BRI are not a cohesive perception. Instead, it is framed as a constantly evolving and ambiguously defined network of governments and enterprises, which refers to the fifth international interpretation. Some of these changes originate from Xi’s response to international and domestic criticism. Arguably, the BRI public diplomacy narratives are increasingly guided by the shifting international and domestic landscapes [77].
It is conspicuous that even the English name, geographic areas, and main fields of the BRI are not meticulously drafted. Regarding its English name, the official name of the BRI is the Silk Road Economic Belt and Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road, which was originally abbreviated as the One Belt One Road but later this experienced amendment to the “Belt and Road Initiative.” In addition, it took a year and a half for the Chinese government to issue an elusive BRI guideline “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” (The V&A). This document has been the only official document to explain the BRI for almost 4 years. In terms of geographic areas, in 2014, the BRI was only aimed at Asia, while in 2015, the BRI evolved to cover Asia, Europe and Africa [40, 63]. Furthermore, in 2017, the BRI further developed, focusing on Asia, Europe and Africa, and being open to all over the world [67]. With regard to its main fields, the BRI has adapted and moved into new fields, as the project unfolds, from digital infrastructure [67] and environmental projects [40] to more recent advances in the realms of health delivery [71]. In 2015, the BRI was an ambitious economic vision of opening up and cooperation among the member countries, whereas in 2018, the BRI has become China’s plan to participate in global economic development [40, 68].

To further prove the shifting BRI narratives that are guided by international and domestic landscapes, it is necessary to list several examples and the year of 2019 is chosen. Xi [70] advocated the construction of an incorruptible BRI with the launch of the “Beijing Initiative for the Clean Silk Road.” This ostensibly is a solution to unravel corruption in some BRI projects. For example, the former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Raza was found guilty of corruption over Malaysia’s state development fund 1Malaysia Berhad [20, 60]. One of the reasons behind this corruption is that Chinese officials consented to support the bail-out of the troubled fund by overstating the cost of infrastructure projects in exchange for the BRI deals [20, 60].

Furthermore, Xi [70] decided to welcome third party’s financing participation such as multilateral and national financial institutions. This is to counter domestic and international doubts that by only relying on the Chinese government and partner countries, the majority of which are developing countries with limited financial capacities, the BRI investment may not be financially sustainable because of the gigantic scale of infrastructure demand and cost [6]. Additionally, the Debt Sustainability Framework for Participating Countries of the BRI was issued to counter claims of debt-trap diplomacy, a widely reported example being Hambantota port in Sri Lanka [70]. The loans secured by China to build the port could not be paid by Sri Lanka, and therefore Sri Lanka had no alternative but to lease the port to the Chinese government to offset the debt [3, 27, 55].

Understanding the Implementation of the BRI

At first, it seems impossible to explore the complete outcome of the implementation of the BRI to compare with the BRI public diplomacy narratives. Since the BRI is in the direct command of President Xi, the BRI should succeed without any possibilities of failure in an authoritarian country like China, even if its success is only nominal. He [19, pp. 194] underpins this view:
It is difficult to provide an objective and comprehensive assessment of the outcome of the BRI. A starting problem is the lack of true information; a follow-up problem is the politics involved. Even if projects are economic failures, they can be said to be a ‘success’ since it is easy to claim that they have achieved their strategic or political task.

That said, I draw on differences between countries joining the BRI or not, and several case studies to elucidate the implementation of the BRI. It finds out that there are not many differences between joining the BRI or not. More importantly, it discovers that the BRI is a poorly planned economic and diplomatic proposal rather than a military strategy that faces many issues during its implementation.

**What Are the Differences Between Joining the BRI or Not?**

Being part of the BRI means to sign the BRI Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Chinese government, but the MoU is usually not legally binding and is well-acknowledged more of a symbolic rather than commercially meaningful. Taking Italy and France for example, Xi Jinping’s visit to Italy in 2019 led the Italian government to sign the BRI MoU with China that was accompanied by parallel deals worth US $2.8 billion [44]. However, after Italy, Xi continued his trip to France, which did not sign the BRI MoU, but obtained deals worth US $45 billion, more than 16 times higher than the Italian deals [48]. Thus, even though Italy signing the BRI may gain some political recognition from the Chinese government, there are not many differences between joining the BRI or not regarding commercial interests, as the real business deals seem much more dependent on the commercial demand, supply, and their calculations.

Furthermore, some BRI domestic infrastructures are already under way before the BRI has been proposed. Dellios [11], Summers [51], Toma and Grădinaru [56], and Yeh and Wharton [76] contend that the BRI is the continuing development of Chinese policy from the existing “Great Western Development Strategy,” “Go Out policy,” and some sub-national projects to a national level. Drawing on the Italian case, the BRI also applies to international projects. With a few exceptions, most of the 2019 deals in Italy were the product of cooperation that preceded 2019, and therefore Italy would have seen similar developments even if it had not joined the BRI [17]. No wonder the same Italian minister Giuseppe Conte who earlier pushed for the BRI has taken a more critical stance against China [18]. Similarly, the key reason for Australia’s hesitation and later rejection to join the BRI in 2017 was the lack of proof that joining would provide substantial advantages [29].

**Divining the Whole from Several Cases**

Drawing on some case studies, we may divine the whole from a part. Within China, Jones, Hameiri, and Jiang [23, 27] observe that the BRI is an economy-motivated program and stress that China’s development financing system is too disjointed and poorly organized to be a well-prepared strategy in the implementation of the BRI.
Understandably, Xi and the Chinese Central Government would like not to admit the weakness of the Chinese financing system in public.

Beyond China, a great number of scholars argue that the criticism against the BRI as debt diplomacy has been massively exaggerated and asset seizures have rarely occurred globally [3, 27, 42, 55]. Through scrutinizing three BRI overseas economic and trade cooperation zones, Cheng [6, pp. 14] believes that there are more problems than successes in the implementation of the BRI, which can be recognized as two main factors: “the lack of government support from either China or the partner countries and the extremely limited corporate awareness of those actors participating in the process.” In terms of the insufficiency of government support, Cheng [6] argues that the implementation of the BRI lacks clear guidance, sufficient communication, and adequate financial support of the two sides’ governments. In detail, the inadequacy of financial support especially on the side of host countries may lead to debt issues that have already emerged in Sri Lanka [22]. Regarding corporate awareness, some Chinese overseas economic and trade cooperation zones are not aware of the local environment before the inception of construction, neglecting the natural, infrastructure, cultural, and legal environment in the member country [6].

In some extreme cases, local politicians seize opportunities to promise their voters economic miracles, rarely questioning the utility of proposed infrastructure. Taking BRI projects in Pakistan and Sri Lanka as examples, the three sides have ambition in abundance but lack clear practical execution [21]. Especially in Sri Lanka, Chinese firms bizarrely finalized the feasibility study for their own proposed projects [21]. Alternatively, local governments spend little money to assess the project’s practicality and its potential market profits, but squander a lot on ceremonies to celebrate half-done projects [21].

In terms of the sensitive military influence of the BRI that has never been mentioned by Xi and the Chinese government, even some hawkish, former American diplomats and scholars have to admit that some of the BRI ports are only designed to be utilized commercially and it is almost impossible for them to be employed militarily [45]. In the world-noticing China’s lease of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, there is no documentation of any Chinese military operation in or around Hambantota since the inception of the tenancy [27].

Even the pro-BRI official advisory group [54] confessed that the BRI has neither a centralized coordinating mechanism nor a clear set of underpinning work streams. The essence of the BRI projects in developing countries is determined by their governments and their related political and economic interests rather than the Chinese government [27]. More concretely, it is the “political-economy dynamics and governance problems on both sides” that have led to poorly conceived and operated projects [27, pp. 2]. Thus, the BRI mainly relies on a grand statement between the Chinese government and other partner countries, but lacks a practical implementation plan, leading to the piecemeal implementation of the BRI through diverse and time-consuming bilateral interaction [6, 27].

Conclusion

This study has two parts: (1) revealing the public diplomacy narratives of the BRI and (2) understanding the implementation of the BRI. By analyzing how the BRI is framed by Xi’s speeches and official documents of the Chinese government, the
first part discovers the public diplomatic narratives of the BRI as an assemblage of constantly changing policy settings that accommodates various economic and political interests. In sum, this part finds out that the public diplomacy narratives of the BRI respond to or reflect all the five international interpretations; but in essence, it aligns more with the fifth group, as the BRI was proposed as a grand and extensive policy concept, utilizing slogans that were filled in with concrete details afterwards. Thus, irrespective of the misunderstanding of the BRI in the world and domestically, initially, the story of the BRI has not been told well from the Chinese side, again showing China’s shortcomings in the mode of messaging.

The second part of this paper identifies that there are no many differences between joining the BRI or not. More importantly, it discovers that the BRI is a poorly planned economic and diplomatic proposal rather than a military strategy that faces many issues during its implementation. Comparing its implementation with its public diplomacy narratives, it is clear to see their alignment. Different from repetitive literature that explores either the BRI narratives or its implementation, this paper contributes by combining and comparing the two, and finds out that despite positive interpretations of the BRI the Chinese government has adopted, the public diplomacy narratives of the BRI are, at large, consistent with its implementation.

There are four limitations to this study. First, this paper exclusively focuses on the BRI, and global perceptions of China have not been considered. While official statements on BRI have tended to evolve in an incrementalistic way, global perceptions of China have been worsening throughout this period [15]. According to 2020 Pew surveys, negative views of China in many countries hit record peaks [50]. Some of the BRI issues may be the result of deliberate mischief making in the West, but it may also reflect failures of Chinese public diplomacy to convince some countries of the positive narratives that the Chinese government has advanced. Future studies can build upon this work by incorporating this factor.

Second, even though Xi’s speeches and official documents of the Chinese government can be the most representative and prestigious material of the BRI public diplomacy narratives, there are still differences among public outlets concerning how authoritatively they speak about the BRI, e.g., People’s Daily vs Global Times. So, narratives may be more “official” depending on the context and the particular media outlet. Future studies can rely on this by exploring more other Chinese state-owned media to find out their nuances among their narratives. Third, there may be not adequate evidence to demonstrate the implementation of the BRI. Future studies can build upon this work by incorporating more evidence about the BRI implementation.

Fourth, the second part of the article does not highlight the aforementioned regime survival interests of the CPC. While lack of implementation details might be a feature, the visibility or publicity of the BRI does make China look a better performer than other countries, thus gaining domestic and international credibility. As Milanovic [39 pp. 128] has posited, China “being active internationally is a matter of domestic political survival and arises because of potential domestic weakness.” The BRI does allow Xi to show the domestic Chinese population that China is doing more on a global stage, strengthening national pride and Xi’s prestige. More crucially, the BRI also has value for the party state to promote a Chinese model of
political and economic development, as mentioned by Xi [68], which may be imitated by other BRI member countries, thus enhancing the regime legitimacy. A lack of centralized coordinating mechanism nor a clear set of underpinning work streams does not necessarily mean that this will not become available eventually or even that existing structures are sufficient for the political goals China seeks. Future studies can build upon this work by incorporating more explicit regime interest framing.

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Declarations

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