

Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

Key Points

- It is entirely plausible that China, the world's largest exporter, would like to guarantee and diversify its trade routes while also looking to reach new energy sources safely.
- Since the announcement of the BRI in 2013, the Communist Party of China has been making the necessary legal arrangements to achieve its goals.
- China wants to legitimize using military force to defend the PRC's economic interests abroad.
- Dual use is a leitmotif of Chinese economic expansion, including the BRI.
- While operating the Port of Haifa, China could use coercion to force Israel to support Chinese *raison d'etre* under a threat of slowing the sea deliveries or diverting Chinese shipping.
- The Port of Gwadar will not inevitably become a PLAN base; however, China is gaining foreign policy leverage over India.
- The problem presented by China's "weaponization" of the BRI is not primarily a military one, and its solution can't be primarily military either.
- The intensity of China's efforts on civil-military integration makes them visible to some extent. Nonetheless, these efforts should be carefully monitored and timely action taken.

Introduction

In October 2012, Professor Wang Jisi was the first Chinese scholar to speak about the need for China to revitalize the three Silk Roads to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia. One year later, China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative became prominent. President Xi Jinping, in a September 2013 speech at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University, called for reviving the ancient "Silk Road" by establishing the "Silk Road Economic Belt". On October 10, 2013, Premier Li Keqiang spoke about the new "Maritime Silk Road" at the 16th ASEAN-China Summit in Brunei. Finally, on March 28, 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce published the first document, "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road".¹

Thus, within three years of the idea's emergence, the economic breakthrough that is mainly known as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) to increase China's global economic connections began. (*The term "belt" constitutes the land*

¹ Ionela, Irina Pop, Centre for Geopolitics&Security in Realism Studies, "Strengths and Challenges of China's " One Belt, One Road " Initiative, 2016, <http://cgsrs.org/publications/46>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

route of the project, which includes highways, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, and infrastructure investments. The term "road" consists of the sea routes covered by the project.² See figure no. 3).

It is entirely plausible that China, the world's largest exporter, would like to guarantee and diversify its trade routes while also looking to reach new energy sources safely. And in doing so, China recognizes the need to protect such a significant investment. We already know that China wants to be the world's superpower by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. However, intermediate objectives are also ready in a timeline until the main goal is reached.

Accordingly, the first aim is to become the dominant power in ten leading technologies by 2023.³ Then it comes, before fully modernizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by 2035, to modernize the PLA's capabilities to be networked into a system of systems for 'intelligentized warfare' by 2027. Socialist modernization is another intermediate objective under the China Vision 2035 - to become a strong and technologically advanced country that is a global leader in innovation and new forms of industrialization.⁴ And finally, by 2049, transforming the PLA into a "world-class" military to build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious.⁵

This document, in accordance with the timeframe and the legal framework China has followed, refers to military-civilian cohesion in terms of the dual use of ports and merchant navy. Also, the document talks about how China can use all of this to its advantage and will try to scrutinize its effects on the United States.

Legal framework for protecting investments

The Chinese Communist Party, which must increase its economic development to maintain its popularity in the country and continue to receive the people's support, has made the necessary legal arrangements to achieve the objectives mentioned above since BRI was announced in 2013.

In this context, in 2016's National Defense Transportation Law, Chinese state authority was further expanded by placing "obligations on Chinese transportation enterprises located abroad or engaged in international shipping" to "provide logistical support for PLA forces operating overseas" as "strategic support forces."⁶ This law also strengthened construction standards for ships and aircraft to be built to military specifications, in keeping with the dual-use concept.⁷

The 2017 National Defense Transportation Law specifies its purpose as "strengthening the construction of national defense transportation, promoting the development of military and civilian integration in the transportation field,

² Yilmaz, Serdar, Astana Publications, "OBOR Project: Concepts, Actors, Practices", 2019, https://www.academia.edu/48858865/Bir_Ku%C5%9Fak_Bir_Yol_Projesi_Kavramlar_Akt%C3%B6rler_Uygulamalar, (accessed Jul 10, 2022).

³ Allison, Graham, "Is War between China and the US inevitable?", <http://www.ted.com>, 2019, (accessed June 30, 2022)

⁴ Taylor, Jon, China Focus, "China 2035: Achieving Socialist Modernization Basically", 2021 http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/commentaries/202106/t20210625_800250626.html, (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁵ ODI.org, "Global China 2049 Initiative", <https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/global-china-2049-initiative/>, 2021, (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁶ Kennedy, Connor M., US Naval War College, "China Maritime Report No. 4: Civil Transport in PLA Power Projection", 2019, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁷ Report To Congress, "US-China Economic and Security Review Commission", 2020, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-USCC-2020/pdf/GPO-USCC-2020-1.pdf>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

and guaranteeing smooth progress of national defense activities.⁸ It also declares that to further civil-military integration, the state will promote allocating and sharing military and local resources and coordinated development of economic and national defense construction.⁹

The PRC has increasingly determined that its armed forces should advance its foreign policy goals more actively. In 2020, a revision to the National Defense Law tasked the PLA with defending “overseas development interests,” further cementing the PLA’s involvement in the PRC’s global economic and diplomatic activities.¹⁰

All Chinese citizens and companies, including those involved in overseas BRI projects, are obligated to cooperate with Chinese intelligence agencies under a National Intelligence Law of the People’s Republic of China.¹¹

The three-phase strategic projection of the PLA, shared by senior Chinese officials, is as follows.

In the short term, the military must be ready to fight and win a limited war in the maritime direction. To this end, the PLA will focus on the greater development of strategic sea and airlift forces. Efforts will include implementing technological advancements in self-loading trucks, fast passenger roll-on/roll-off (RO-RO) ships, large strategic transport aircraft, unmanned platforms, and precision projection systems.

In the medium-term, the PLA will focus on developing the ability to project power (ABO) to “countries and regions along the ‘Belt and Road’ and areas crucially related to key interests around the globe.” To this end, the PLA will develop unmanned projection systems on land, sea, and air, with a significant focus on precision air projection capabilities.

In the long-term, the PLA will primarily focus on “global projection.” It will rely on China’s overseas bases and air and space multi-dimensional projection systems to meet the rapid reaction requirements of transportation projection capabilities in the event of war anywhere around the globe.¹²

Beijing views it as an imperative that China field a “world-class” military that can “fight and win” and “resolutely safeguard” the country’s sovereignty, security, and development interests. In support of this goal, on December 26, 2020, the National People’s Congress passed revisions to the PRC’s National Defense Law which broadened the legal justification for PLA mobilization to include the defense of China’s economic “development interests.”¹³ Simply put, the aim here is to legitimize using military force to defend the PRC’s economic interests abroad. In recent years, the PRC has continued to advance the Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) Development Strategy while establishing or reinforcing the legal framework for the Party’s concepts of national security.¹⁴

⁸ Daniel R. Russel and Blake H. Berger, “Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative”, *The Asia Society Policy Institute*, September 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/weaponizing-belt-and-road-initiative>, (accessed January 10, 2022).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Annual Report to Congress, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China”, 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

¹¹ “National Intelligence Law of the People’s Republic of China June 2017,” 28th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People’s Congress, June 27, 2017, http://cs.brown.edu/courses/csci1800/sources/2017_PRC_National_IntelligenceLaw.pdf, (accessed July 10, 2022).

¹² Liu Jiasheng, “Development of Carriers for Strategic Projection in Response to National Security Needs”, 2019.

¹³ Annual Report to Congress, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China”, 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

¹⁴ Ibid.

Military – Civil Fusion

In its simplest definition, China's military-civilian fusion aims to reduce China's dependence on foreign technology, align the economy for rapid mobilization and support of the military, and build strong capabilities in cyber and information warfare.¹⁵ Or in other words, The PRC follows the Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) Development Strategy to combine economic, social, and security development strategies to create an integrated national strategic system and capabilities to support PRC's national rejuvenation goals.¹⁶

From here, we understand that Beijing's MCF strategy aims to develop advanced dual-use technology for military purposes. It seeks to do this by deepening reform in the national defense science and technology industries. There is a greater purpose here, such as strengthening all the PRC's instruments of national power.

The PRC's MCF development strategy encompasses six interrelated efforts: (1) fusing China's defense industrial base and its civilian technology and industrial base; (2) integrating and leveraging science and technology innovations across military and civilian sectors; (3) cultivating talent and blending military and civilian expertise and knowledge; (4) building military requirements into civilian infrastructure and leveraging civilian construction for military purposes; (5) leveraging civilian service and logistics capabilities for military purposes; (6) expanding and deepening China's national defense mobilization system to include all relevant aspects of its society and economy for use in competition and war.¹⁷

Under China's program of MCF, the National Defense Transportation Law and several other regulations on standards require civilian industry standards to support defense sector requirements in critical projects and, in some cases, provide government subsidies to absorb the cost where while doing so is not commercially advantageous. For instance, analysts for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have flagged commercial port infrastructure standards as far below those required to provide logistical support to the PLA Navy in cold chain storage, cargo terminal size, refueling capacity, and other standards.¹⁸

Chinese companies' construction of potentially dual-use ports and telecommunications networks along the ever-expanding BRI are representative of the mutually reinforcing nature of its military-civil fusion strategy and expansionist goals.¹⁹

In recent years, the basis for future military access has been a key driver behind the PLA's robust efforts to expand its presence, influence, and image in BRI countries.²⁰ Now let us take a closer look at how PLA does this with dual use.

¹⁵ US-China Economic And Security Review Commission, "Technology, Trade, and Military-Civil Fusion: China's Pursuit of Artificial Intelligence, New Materials, and New Energy", 2019, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-10/June%207%2C%202019%20Hearing%20Transcript.pdf>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

¹⁶ Annual Report to Congress, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China", 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

¹⁷ Annual Report to Congress, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China", 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

¹⁸ Annual Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-USCC-2020/context>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

The dual-use maritime ports concept

Naturally, China's growing overseas economic expansion needs protection. For decades, China, like many other countries, has allowed others to protect its maritime interests, including the US Navy patrolling the seas, protecting strategic fuel supplies, and ensuring the free flow of commerce. As China grew in power, the fear of the authorities in Beijing grew that they would be prevented from fulfilling their ambitions and would be denied the full extent of their national growth and international standing. The globalized world of the 21st century favors free market principles and the free movement of goods. The Chinese leadership, on the other hand, does not believe in this at all, and instead is rooted in nineteenth-century thinking, full of fear that the rest of the world, led by the US, is conspiring against them - that to be great power, they must be independent and self-sufficient.²¹

Approximately 20% of the world's maritime trade and 60% of China's trade flows through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, making it the most important sea line of communication (SLOC) for China's economy. Nineteenth-century concerns were voiced in November 2003 by President Hu Jintao, who referred to China's situation as the "Malacca Dilemma," referring to the lack of alternatives and vulnerability to a maritime blockade.²² Adding to the Taiwan issue, China has prepared for a possible confrontation with the US, and Chinese leaders insist that Taiwan will eventually be "reunified."

According to China's 2019 Defense White Paper – "the flag follows commerce." This is not unusual – the investor protects its investment. Dual-purpose is thus a philosophy reflected in individual BRI projects, such as how overseas ports are designed. In the technology used, Chinese equipment and installations are manufactured according to the concept of compatibility with military systems. This is also reflected mentally and/or in a culture of labor. According to the CCP's programmatic premise, dual-use should be the leitmotif of Chinese manufacturing, business, engineering, and Chinese citizenship, as well as the functioning of the entire Chinese society – from a simple worker, through a skilled professional, up to the executives.²³ What may puzzle and bother representatives of the liberal world, in addition to China's rootedness in nineteenth-century concerns, are Beijing's ulterior motives. Many difficult and contentious issues in geopolitics are often subject to different interpretations by different sides of the dispute. As a rule, the targets of China's maritime expansion (selection of sites for commercial and war ports) are relatively unstable and crisis-prone countries (*in the perspective of BRI investments, China seems to treat cooperating countries from a "master-vassal" position*).²⁴

Chinese investments are, in principle, attractive to such countries because it offers the hope of rising from a slump and/or better development. Of course, nothing is for free, and apart from the danger of falling into a debt trap, which can lead to the formal loss of territory, e.g., a seaport with its surroundings, there are other risks in hosting PLAN installations and forces. China, through its presence, can exert pressure in a region (*e.g., through naval blockade operations*) or interfere with a host state's foreign policy (*so-called Finlandization*)²⁵. At the same time, the host state is not able to stop aggressive Chinese actions physically or legally and finds itself embroiled in a crisis or becomes a direct victim of it (*through destabilization or retaliation, including economic sanctions*).²⁶

²¹ Robert Kagan, "The return of history and the end of dreams", p. 35, *Alfred A. Knopf*, New York 2008.

²² Paweł Paszak, 'China and the "Malacca Dilemma', *The Warsaw Institute*, February 28, 2021, <https://warsawinstitute.org/china-malacca-dilemma/> (accessed May 12, 2022).

²³ Daniel R. Russel and Blake H. Berger, "Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative", *The Asia Society Policy Institute*, September 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/weaponizing-belt-and-road-initiative>, (accessed January 10, 2022).

²⁴ Robert Kagan, "The return of history and the end of dreams", *Alfred A. Knopf*, New York 2008.

²⁵ Timo Kivimäki, "Finlandization and the Peaceful Development of China", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, May 05, 2015, <https://academic.oup.com/cjip/article-abstract/8/2/139/353232?redirectedFrom=fulltext> (accessed May 12, 2022).

²⁶ Daniel R. Russel and Blake H. Berger, "Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative", *The Asia Society Policy Institute*, September 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/weaponizing-belt-and-road-initiative> (accessed January 10, 2022).

In the western world, we are used to the fact that the host provides protection of a business operating in a host country. This is not only part of the business arrangement but also a matter of a certain trust between business partners. China does not have such trust, hence the rash of the Private Security Companies (PSC) and the significant expansion of the PLAN (*in addition to protecting the BRI facilities and SLOC, the new PLAN's mission includes the protection of Chinese overseas businesses, interests, and citizens*).²⁷ One would have to wonder why. Apart from the Chinese mentality rooted in the nineteenth century, two more answers come to mind: a host country does not have such capabilities, or Beijing has ulterior, impure motives that they are not willing to reveal to anyone.

A mental difference between nineteenth-century Chinese thinking (*and Russian, by the way*) and the twenty-first-century perception of the world by Western and some Indo-Pacific countries gives a sense of how much the liberal world may lose in terms of culture and values, and what needs to be protected in the context of Chinese expansion. The BRI's investment in CASA, ME, or even North Africa is quite different than the expansion into the wider West and countries in other regions (e.g., Indo-Pacific) that have set their sights on a progressive twenty-first-century mentality. Therefore, it is important to keep a close eye on Chinese inclinations and intervene accordingly, even if it means pulling another country out of financial trouble due to exploitive Chinese credit (*e.g., in 2021 the EU intervened with financial aid to Montenegro's \$1 billion debt to China, which the Balkan country incurred over a controversial highway project*²⁸).

The “strongpoints” along the maritime Silk Road

According to the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), a dual-use port network is planned along the maritime Silk Road, named the "strategic strongpoints." In the near term (*meaning the current Five-Year Plan of the NDRC*), authorities in Beijing are seeking to establish military (naval) bases in countries with which they have long-standing good relations and shared strategic interests and/or with countries that are heavily indebted to China – Myanmar (debt to China accounts for 40% of GDP), Cambodia (22.5% of GDP), Sri Lanka's (9.5% of GDP), and Pakistan (7% of GDP).²⁹ The launch of China's first naval base in Djibouti, one of the smallest yet strategically most important countries in Africa, has drawn global attention. Situated on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea, Djibouti is the gateway to the world's busiest maritime trade route, which continues through Suez to the Mediterranean and ports in Europe. This is where a quarter of all the world's merchant ships and most of the tankers that supply the West with oil from the Middle East sail.

China has also been known to seek to establish a permanent military presence in much more remote areas of the world, e.g., the Solomon Islands and Argentina. The Chinese are not only interested in building but probably also in operating a "logistics base" near Antarctica in the city of Ushuaia, in southern Argentina. China supports Argentina's position when it comes to the disputed islands, the Falklands/Malvinas.³⁰ This raises a dispute with Great Britain, determined to defend the islands, where London has maintained a reinforced military presence since the 1982 war. This, combined with the weakness of Argentina's armed forces due to years of underdevelopment, makes the risk of a renewed attack on the islands so far low. However, establishing a Sino-Russian military presence (in Argentina) could alter the balance of power in the region, to London's disadvantage.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Srdjan Jankovic, Reid Standish, Gjeraqina Tuhina, "Montenegro Getting European Help To Refinance Its Massive China Debt", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-china-debt-eu-assistance-refinance-1-billion-motorway/31322151.html> (accessed January 13, 2022).

²⁹ Srdjan Jankovic, Reid Standish, Gjeraqina Tuhina, "Montenegro Getting European Help To Refinance Its Massive China Debt", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-china-debt-eu-assistance-refinance-1-billion-motorway/31322151.html> (accessed January 13, 2022).

³⁰ By PAP, 'Chiny i Rosja rozmieszczą bazy w Argentynie?', *Defence24*, February 10, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/chiny-i-rosja-rozmieszczaja-bazy-w-argentyinie> (accessed May 12, 2022).

According to General Stephen Townsend, the former commander of US Africa Command, Beijing is also looking to establish a large naval base capable of hosting submarines or aircraft carriers on Africa's western coast. China has approached countries stretching from Mauritania to the south of Namibia, intent on establishing a naval facility. That prospect would enable China to base its warships in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.³¹ The Chinese have outmaneuvered the US in select countries in Africa in terms of port projects, economic endeavors, infrastructure, and agreements and contracts that will lead to greater access in the future. With China targeting West Africa, both trade and the military balance of power calculations will change in China's favor if the plans come to fruition.³² Meanwhile, in pursuit of options to counter China's BRI, the Western leaders in the G7 formally launched the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII).³³ This is intended to build connectivity, infrastructure, and trade projects in Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America as a "values-driven, high-impact, and transparent infrastructure" partnership – free of the threats that come from China's presence and/or becoming dependent on Chinese investments.³⁴

A port case study: Israel's Port of Haifa

In 2021 a Chinese company (*the Shanghai International Port Group – SIPG*) won a tender to construct a new terminal at the Haifa port (*see picture no. 1*) and operate that terminal for 25 years, beginning in 2021. The deal prompted objections from the US government in 2018, as ships from the US Navy's 6th Fleet frequent an adjacent Israeli navy base, including docking.³⁵ The base at Haifa reportedly houses Israeli nuclear weapons-capable submarines. The main risks identified were espionage (including industrial ones), intelligence, and sabotage. In addition to the long-term presence of Chinese assets and likely its forces in the future to "protect the BRI infrastructure", which is a risk per se. Operational control of the Port of Haifa could facilitate intelligence collection of the tactics, techniques, and procedures used by the US Navy elements during their Mediterranean/ Middle East deployments. The port expansion process poses a good opportunity to install certain equipment to collect very specific information, such as the physical fields of the warships of other flags (including, of course, the US), details on electronic warfare systems, radar and radio spectra, or interception of official communications. Additionally, Israel exposes its critical infrastructure and its critical capabilities to recognition, manipulation, and misuse by China at its will. Besides, stealing technology by China is more than likely.³⁶ All Chinese infrastructure projects in Israel are in strategic locations (*expansion of the Ashdod port, the Carmel Tunnels in Haifa, a light rail in Tel Aviv*). Beijing has a long record of espionage, and the recent announcement that China and Israel may sign a trade and military agreement makes Chinese surveillance of key Israeli infrastructure both real and concerning. Apparently, the process for approving the Chinese contract did not adequately include national security officials, not to mention a lack of consultations

³¹ Thomas Lifson, 'China is seeking an Atlantic port for major naval base', *The American Thinker*, May 07, 2021, <https://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2021/05/china-is-seeking-an-atlantic-port-for-major-naval-base.html> (accessed May 07, 2022).

³² *By the editors, 'Chiny i USA umacniają się na Pacyfiku'*, *Defence24*, April 20, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/chiny-i-usa-umacniają-sie-na-pacyfiku> (accessed May 28, 2022).

³³ Andrew Reamer, "Partnership for Global Infrastructure (PGII) -- G7 launches, Biden issues policy memo", *American Economic Association*, July 11, 2022, <https://www.aeaweb.org/forum/2731/partnership-global-infrastructure-launches-issues-policy> (accessed August 11, 2022).

³⁴ The White House, "Memorandum on the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment", June 26, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/06/26/memorandum-on-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/> (accessed August 11, 2022).

³⁵ Al-Monitor Staff, 'Report: Israel turned down US request to inspect Haifa port after dealing with China', *Al-Monitor*, February 01, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/israel-china-haifa-port-inspection.html> (accessed May 18, 2022).

³⁶ ADM Jonathan W. Greenert, USN (ret.) and VADM John M. Bird, USN (ret.), 'Countering Chinese Engagement with Israel: A Comprehensive and Cooperative US-Israeli Strategy', *The Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA)*, February 01, 2021, <https://jinsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Countering-Chinese-Engagement-with-Israel-1.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2022).

with a longtime security cooperation partner – the US. Post factum, Israel’s government declined a request by the President Trump administration in 2020 to allow the US Coast Guard to inspect the port at Haifa for Chinese surveillance capabilities. It was a significant step back in a three-year disagreement between Israel’s government and US officials over a Chinese majority state-owned company assuming management of the port.³⁷ Future US Navy visits could face limitations or end altogether because of the potential intelligence value that China could gain with SIPG operating a port terminal. Israel is making a Faustian bargain with China. China may steal or buy all their military and civilian technology and then compromise Israel.³⁸ China has no historical, cultural, religious, or philosophical connection to Israel. The Israeli government may think they can pull out of any deal anytime they want; however, once China has an economic stranglehold over the Israeli economy, Israel can be paralyzed from acting in its own interests. Israeli short-sighted commitment to deepen its reliance on China will likely downgrade its security cooperation with the US.³⁹ Chinese management of the port gives Beijing an advantage if Israel attempts to demonstrate independence on an issue of interest or concern to China. In that case, China could use coercion to force Israel to support Chinese *raison d’etre* under the threat of slowing sea deliveries or diverting Chinese shipping.



Figure 1. The Port of Haifa with its crucial facilities and Chinese presence.⁴⁰

³⁷ Arie Egozi, 'Israel Rejects US Plan To Inspect Chinese Harbor At Haifa', *The Breaking Defense*, February 03, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/02/israel-rejects-us-plan-to-inspect-chinese-harbor-at-haifa/> (accessed May 18, 2022).

³⁸ Brooke Crothers, "Chinese cyber espionage targets Israel", *Fox News*, August 14, 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/tech/chinese-cyber-espionage-targets-israel-report> (accessed May 18, 2022).

³⁹ ADM Jonathan W. Greenert, USN (ret.) and VADM John M. Bird, USN (ret.), 'Countering Chinese Engagement with Israel: A Comprehensive and Cooperative US-Israeli Strategy', *The Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA)*, February 01, 2021, <https://jinsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Countering-Chinese-Engagement-with-Israel-1.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2022).

⁴⁰ ADM Jonathan W. Greenert, USN (ret.) and VADM John M. Bird, USN (ret.), 'Countering Chinese Engagement with Israel: A Comprehensive and Cooperative US-Israeli Strategy', *The Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA)*, February 01, 2021, <https://jinsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Countering-Chinese-Engagement-with-Israel-1.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2022). Google Maps, "The Port of Haifa", 1:250, *Google Maps* 2022, <https://www.google.com/maps/@32.8239142,35.0091621,3922m/data=!3m1!1e3> (accessed May 28, 2022).

A port case study: Pakistan's Port of Gwadar

In the case of Gwadar, a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) signed a 40-year lease with the Pakistani government in 2015 to become the port's sole operator.⁴¹ Gwadar, which is already used by the Pakistani Navy, can accommodate a considerable number of PLAN ships, which would increase the presence of the PLAN in the region's waters. Beijing's interest in Gwadar lies in China's internal and external security. In the external realm, access to Gwadar provides China with a convenient base of operations in the northern Indian Ocean region to support its economic, diplomatic, and military interests and interactions and a window into the Arabian Gulf. Internally, Gwadar is an extension of China's national security and development policies. Beijing seeks to develop trade ties between western China, Pakistan, and Central Asia States to promote economic growth and manage risks to social stability in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.⁴² In terms of the port's capacity and capabilities, as the Pakistan Navy uses Gwadar for their Chinese-made combatants – frigates and submarines – the port, with its facilities and services, may be readily employed for the majority of the PLAN vessels, including the largest vessels when it comes to compatibility. PLAN aircraft carriers could also call on Gwadar, though conditions such as tidal variation, wind, and atmospheric pressure could push depth at the port below PLAN under-keel clearance limitations.⁴³ Gwadar has a large staging area where military equipment and supplies can be accumulated, but it does not currently have sufficient utility to establish a wartime military base for commanding and supporting operations in a sustained campaign.⁴⁴ However, the main regional peacetime replenishment and transfer hub for PLA equipment and personnel is currently the most feasible in Gwadar. Therefore, it is likely that Chinese leaders envision Gwadar's development as an international transport hub, the centerpiece of an ambitious bilateral economic and security program.⁴⁵ What is the most challenging in utilizing Gwadar, though, is its hinterlands which are sparsely populated, a poor region prone to drought, flooding, energy shortages, labor unrest, terrorism, and anti-government unrest. Reportedly, the area is rich in resources yet lacking in developed industry and modern infrastructure. Therefore, the port has seen very little maritime traffic in over a decade of operation, and its overland transport links remain insufficient.⁴⁶

Knowing the problems that trouble Gwadar, it appears that it is the Pakistani government that is looking for Chinese investment, hoping to find a healing solution to get the sedated seaport up and running most efficiently. Pakistan is vital to Chinese ambitions to cure the "disease" of terrorism with economic development. The China Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC) was the general contractor for the site's initial development in March 2002, planned for two phases. The project faced significant security and technical challenges, including fatal terrorist attacks

⁴¹ Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, Peter A. Dutton, 'China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan', *China Maritime Studies Institute, US Naval War College, August 2020*, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/7/> (accessed June 15, 2022).

⁴² By the editors, 'Chiny i USA umacniają się na Pacyfiku', *Defence24*, April 20, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/chiny-i-usa-umacniają-sie-na-pacyfiku> (accessed May 28, 2022).

⁴³ 'Gwadar West Tide Times & Tide Charts,' Surf-Forecast, *SURF-Forecast.com*, <https://www.surf-forecast.com/breaks/Gwadar-West/tides/latest>, (accessed June 15, 2022).

⁴⁴ Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, Peter A. Dutton, 'China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan', *China Maritime Studies Institute, US Naval War College, August 2020*, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/7/> (accessed June 15, 2022).

⁴⁵ Frederic Grare, "Balochistan: The State Versus the Nation," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (April 11, 2013),

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/04/11/balochistan-state-versus-nation-pub-51488> (accessed May 18, 2022).

⁴⁶ Gurmeet Kanwal, "Pakistan's Gwadar Port: A New Naval Base in China's String of Pearls in the Indo-Pacific", *The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, April 02, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pakistans-gwadar-port-new-naval-base-chinas-string-pearls-indo-pacific> (accessed May 18, 2022).

against the Chinese engineers and laborers working on site.⁴⁷ The CHEC completed Phase I (*including multipurpose ship berths outfitted for containers, RO-RO, breakbulk, and heavy cargo vessels*) of construction in the spring of 2007, three months ahead of schedule but far over the budget. In 2007 the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) won a 40-year build-operate-transfer (BOT) lease for Gwadar port. As part of this concession, PSA agreed to develop Phase II of the port (a construction of four additional container berths, a bulk cargo terminal, two oil terminals, a roll-on roll-off terminal, and a grain terminal). Stymied by political, engineering, and legal obstacles, PSA failed to implement the Phase II expansion, and by February 2013, PSA had opted to sell all its equity to the Chinese SOE, the China Overseas Port Holdings Company, Ltd. (COPHC). Shortly after President Xi Jinping's landmark trip and announcement of the CPEC project, COPHC finalized a new 40-year lease on the Gwadar port in November 2015.⁴⁸

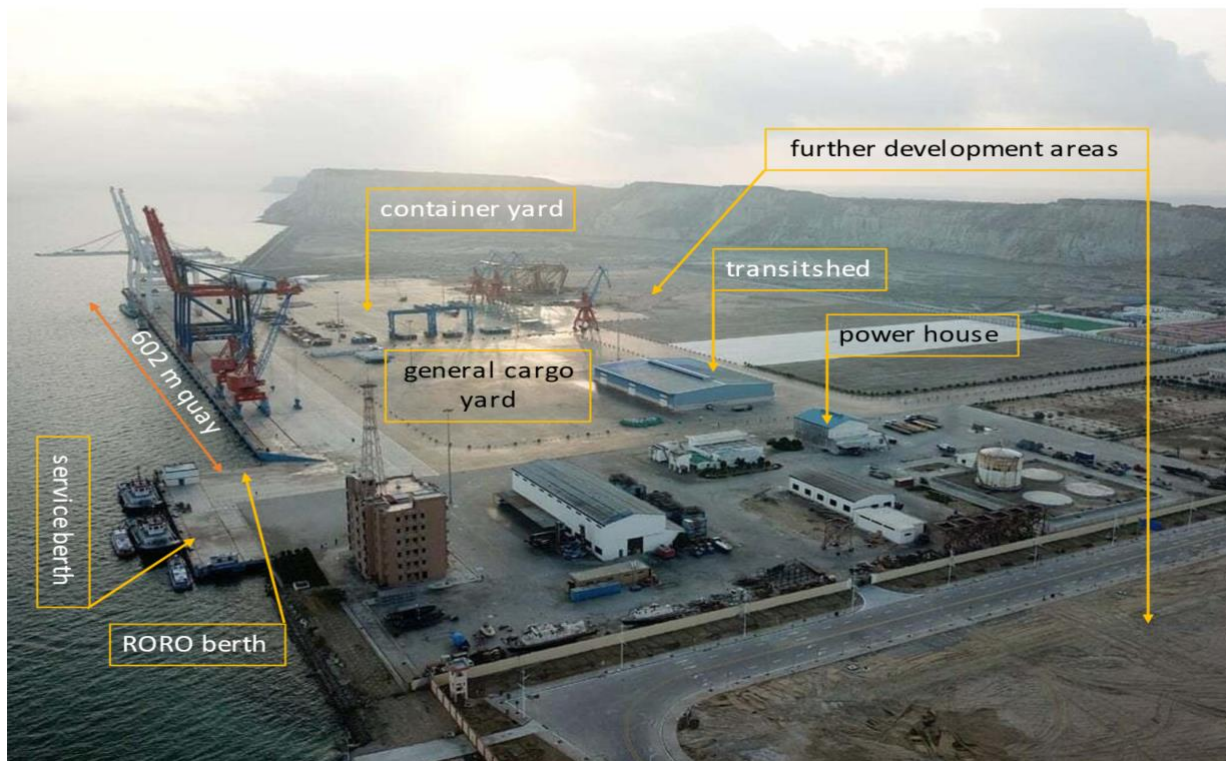


Figure 2. The Port of Gwadar and some of its features.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Zofeen Ebrahim, "Pakistan's key CPEC port a long way from trade hub vision", *The Third Pole*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/regional-cooperation/pakistan-gwadar-port-long-way-from-trade-hub-vision/> (accessed May 18, 2022).

⁴⁸ Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, Peter A. Dutton, 'China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan', *China Maritime Studies Institute, US Naval War College*, August 2020, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/7/> (accessed June 15, 2022).

⁴⁹ Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, Peter A. Dutton, 'China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan', *China Maritime Studies Institute, US Naval War College*, August 2020, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/7/> (accessed June 15, 2022). Mushtaq Ghumman, "BoI shocked at lack of investors' interest in Gwadar", *Business Recorder*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40148783> (accessed May 12, 2022).

According to the arrangement, the Gwadar Port endeavor may be an expensive burden for Pakistan or at least not very lucrative. Reportedly, most of the port revenue is allotted to the COPHC, very little to the Pakistani federal government, and most likely nothing to the Baloch provincial government. Furthermore, Chinese people working across the country and Chinese projects are protected by dedicated security personnel provided by Pakistan. Pakistani "Special Security Detachment" (SSD) is headquartered in Karachi and Rawalpindi, with between 15,000 and 17,000 armed personnel.⁵⁰ At the same time, the Chinese SOE did not bring the port to commercial success, as commercial activity at Gwadar has been quite limited so far. The port is designed to incorporate an adjacent free trade and export processing zone based on the "Shekou Model" as well as other features characteristic of the Chinese "smart-port" concept. So far, Gwadar is clearly lacking most of the crucial ingredients that would make it "smart," and the Phase II expansions to the port and free zone are evidently of little progress. Additionally, there is low interest among foreign investors, who are likely to wait for Pakistan's economic fundamentals to be revitalized.⁵¹

The establishment of a PLAN base in Gwadar would be in Islamabad's interest in the context of Pakistan's strategic location, especially vis-à-vis India. India and Pakistan belong to the SCO (the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and establishing a PLAN base over the Pakistani coast could signal to India that China favours Pakistan over India in the alliance. This is certainly not in the interests of Chinese expansion, especially since Sino-Indian relations are already severely strained due to the border dispute. The more India feels threatened by China's presence in the region, the more attractive the US becomes as a guarantor of India's security. Especially given that India can potentially count less and less on a war-ridden and weakening Russia, it can be assumed that Gwadar port is an important but still only another "strongpoint" for China on the BRI route, which, in addition to its commercial utility, will be able to secure PLAN maritime operations in the northern Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf region. In terms of strained Sino-Indian diplomacy, China, through Gwadar and its dual use, can signal to India its ability to rapidly build maritime presence in the region. This makes Gwadar a kind of lever for China's foreign policy toward India.

The dual-use of the merchant navy concept

China's construction of support facilities in the BRI context and possible expansion of its overseas military presence, particularly after the establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, has only heightened speculation about China's strategic intentions.⁵² This new momentum was crucial to changing the approach from PLAN to forward operations.

China has converted civilian ferries for use in military amphibious operations, potentially enabling the country to significantly surge its amphibious assault capabilities. Since 2019, the roll-on/roll-off ferry *Bang Chui Dao*, a 15,560-ton vessel owned and operated by COSCO Shipping Ferry Company, has been fitted with a modified ramp to launch and recover amphibious armoured vehicles while offshore. This capability means the ship can launch and recover vehicles without dedicated port facilities. This contrasts with typical RO/RO vessels, which have straight hydraulic ramps for vehicles to drive on or off while ships are in port.⁵³ This military upgrade regarding civilian ferries provides China a unique advantage due to the civilian-military fusion to fill the amphibious capability gap quickly and create an opportunity to conduct amphibious operations without hard investment in the PLA Navy.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Mushtaq Ghumman, "Bol shocked at lack of investors' interest in Gwadar", *Business Recorder*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40148783> (accessed May 12, 2022).

⁵² Rolland Nadege, "Securing the Belt and Road initiative China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads", The National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2019., (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁵³ Mike Yeo, "China reportedly Converted Civilian Ferries for Amphibious Assault Operations", *Defense News*, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2021/08/04/china-reportedly-converted-civilian-ferries-for-amphibious-assault-operations/>, August 04, 2021., (accessed July 10, 2022).

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been increasing its ability to use civilian roll-on/roll-off (RO-RO) ferries to move troops and equipment ashore in amphibious landing operations. Exercise Eastern Transportation-Projection 2020A (东部运投—2020A) was unique in that it discharged military vehicles from RO-RO ferries directly onto a beach using a modular floating pier. Commercial satellite imagery of a PLA amphibious exercise area in late summer 2021 revealed that the PLA may have developed an improved floating pier system to support amphibious operations. These capabilities, components of what the US Navy calls "joint logistics over-the-shore (JLOTS)," allows the PLA to use civilian vessels to move large amounts of military equipment into unimproved amphibious landing areas without port infrastructure.⁵⁴ This exercise presents the success of the fusion and provides significant improvement in China's military capabilities. Large capacity RO-RO ships are ideal for rapidly transporting motorized and mechanized PLA units. PLA experts note that there are currently 63 civilian RO-RO ships suitable for use by military units. Many of the companies operating RO-RO ships have been organized into transport units and are actively cooperating with the PLA. Many of their ships are capable of long-distance oceanic transport.⁵⁵ While RO-RO ships are ideal for transporting unit equipment, container ships can more efficiently move the PLA's cargo. Containerized shipping brings advantages in speed and regularity that is often lacking in other forms of shipping. China COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited alone operates 497 container ships.⁵⁶ Some tankers are capable of both astern and alongside underway replenishment. This capability was demonstrated in October 2014 when a China Shipping Group (中国海运集团) tanker Huachuanre fueled the East Sea Fleet's Putian guided missile frigate (523) in the East China Sea.⁵⁷ All this supports China's short-term plan and creates a base for strategic sea lift without heavy investment in expensive naval assets.

The overwhelming strategic objective of PLAN modernization over the past quarter century has been to achieve a force level capable of defending Chinese interests in East Asia and keeping the Americans out of a Taiwan contingency, or at least keeping them at arm's length before the rest of the Chinese military can fulfill its mission. Now armed with over 100 advanced destroyers, frigates, and corvettes, Chinese strategists are starting to develop long-term plans for the Indian Ocean.⁵⁸ To achieve an effective military presence in both oceans, China should consider deploying two oceangoing fleets centered around aircraft carriers. This capability arises from the deployment of their new aircraft carrier.⁵⁹ That allows the possibility of rotating naval forces. Possible basing opportunities are on key South China Sea islands and friendly countries around the northern Indian Ocean. While we expect that the primary mission of such a fleet would be to work with the American and Indian navies to protect sea lines of communication and deter piracy, due to strategic competition, there could be fractions in space management. On the other side, this creates the possibility for the US Navy to reposition naval forces in accordance with the planned reduction of the military footprint in the CENTCOM region.

⁵⁴ Michael Dahm, Conor M. Kennedy "Civilian Shipping: Ferrying The People's Liberation Army Ashore", CIMSEC, <https://cimsec.org/civilian-shipping-ferrying-the-peoples-liberation-army-ashore/>, September 09, 2021., (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁵⁵ Kennedy, Connor M., US Naval War College, "China Maritime Report No. 4: Civil Transport in PLA Power Projection", 2019, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁵⁶ Kennedy, Connor M., US Naval War College, "China Maritime Report No. 4: Civil Transport in PLA Power Projection", 2019, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Christopher Colley, "A Future Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?", War on the Rocks, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/a-future-chinese-indian-ocean-fleet/>, April 02, 2021, (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁵⁹ Mario Stefanov, "Novi kineski nosač zrakoplova znak jačanja pomorske moći", Geopolitika.news, <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/m-stefanov-novi-kineski-nosac-zrakoplova-znak-jacanja-pomorske-moci/>, December 2, 2021, (accessed Jul 10, 2022).

The PLA Navy should become a "world-class military" by the end of 2049, in accordance with the strategy to rejuvenate the PRC into a "great modern socialist country".⁶⁰ Following the long-term plan, China is creating a swarm of drones on-board its aircraft carriers. Embarking the drones on an aircraft carrier would seem more likely to the broader integration of unmanned platforms, including far more capable types such as ones that might be able to work as fully autonomous networked swarms, into PLAN carrier air wings. It is no secret that the PLA, as well as China's state-run aviation industry at large, has made significant progress in developing an extremely broad range of unmanned aircraft, ranging from small swarming designs to stealthy unmanned combat air vehicles (UCAV).⁶¹ This new technology could create flexibility in conducting maritime operations by using aircraft carriers is a new capability for PLA Navy, and they still must train and create maritime air forces.

China's first domestically developed 200-ton-class unmanned surface vessel, characterized by its capabilities in stealth and far sea operation, has wrapped up its first autonomous sea trial. There's no risk of casualties with unmanned equipment, so the drone ship can be sent into dangerous combat zones to carry out reconnaissance, anti-submarine, anti-aircraft, or anti-ship missions with corresponding equipment. A group of drone ships can work as vanguards or scouts either for coastal defence or in a flotilla of larger warships with crews at far sea. They can be far away from each other and carry out distributed operations, meaning that enemies will have a hard time taking them out one by one, or they can form a swarm and overwhelm the enemies, the expert explained.⁶² This new naval asset by PLAN is still in the testing phase but could create significant support to the established fleets and provide impressive surveillance capability in monitoring SLOCs.

China has launched the world's first crewless drone carrier that uses artificial intelligence to navigate autonomously in open water. Regarding that, Beijing has officially described it as a maritime research tool, but some experts have said the ship has the potential to be used as a military vessel. The autonomous ship, the Zhu Hai, can launch, recover, and coordinate the actions of more than 50 other autonomous aerial, surface, and underwater vehicles equipped with different observation instruments.⁶³ This capability could be explored to create a network of the nodes connected by different mother vessels in the future. This network covers all space domains and could be used like a mobile network exploited by PLA Navy in the future.

It describes the vessel as "epoch-making" and the "world's first intelligent unmanned system mother ship." The Chinese military has fielded a significant number of these designs, including multiple types now employed operationally in the maritime domain.⁶⁴ This unmanned system can conduct all operations independently for any fleet, a group of vessels like this could create a worldwide network for intel gathering and monitoring SLOCs.

"From a pure science standpoint, which is the angle China is promoting, we could see Chinese drones (both surface and subsurface, launched from the Zhu Hai Yun) contributing to disaster mitigation, environmental monitoring, etc." However, the drone mothership could also be used by China's military to gather intelligence in the contested South

⁶⁰ Annual Report to Congress, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China", 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>, (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁶¹ Joseph Trevithick, "Chinese Aircraft Carrier Seen With A Fleet Of Drones On Its Deck", The War Zone, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/chinese-aircraft-carrier-seen-with-fleet-of-drones-onboard>, June 02, 2020, (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁶² Liu Xuanzun, "China's stealth drone ship wraps up 1st autonomous sea trial", Global Times, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1267719.shtml>, June 09, 2022., (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁶³ Alia Shoaib, "China launched the world's first AI-operated 'mother ship,' an unmanned carrier capable of launching dozens of drones", Business Insider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-launches-worlds-first-ai-unmanned-drone-aircraft-carrier-2022-6>, June 11, 2022., (accessed July 10, 2022).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

China Sea, which several countries have made competing territorial claims.⁶⁵ This could create challenges not just in the South China Sea but also in the CENTCOM AOR. As already mentioned, this network could be a great asset for intelligence gathering.

Following China's idea to become a "maritime great power", projects like this unmanned drone carrier could provide them significant booster in the right direction. One of the possibilities is underwater mapping, and that could present a significant step forward for submarine activities of the PLA Navy. Benefits from these dual-use assets are significant, and China is working parallel in all three phases. If they reach all planned goals in the desired timeline, this could provide them with a significant booster.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, as China's national interests become more global, BRI may be expanded to involve more military support of a defensive nature. The challenge for the West will be to cooperate with China in sharing common interests, like securing SLOCs and competing in other areas. Some countries could perceive BRI as a security threat or monitoring the development of China's strategy regarding the use of the ports and merchant navy to reach desired strategic objectives, a possible threat could be inferred. Also taken into consideration are the importance of logistical facilities (ports, docks) are essential to maintain shipping lanes because without them there is no real possibility to protect SLOC's, and to project naval protection.

Increasing China investment overseas required protection for Chinese nationals, assets, and ships carrying its flag. Per China's white paper from 2015, "China's Military Strategy", the main function of overseas facilities is to provide China's "far sea protection". The base in Djibouti provides an opportunity for China to execute the naval doctrine of far seas protection. It is an important logistical hub for the PLA Navy but also creates an opportunity for regional security cooperation with regional countries.

Logistical companies can be an important partner for the PLA Navy, and China has already established that connection by outsourcing logistic support to the private sector to increase the flexibility and sustainability of its marine endeavors. China may gradually select overseas commercial ports for dual use to project power. Overseas naval logistics and basing sites would better position the PLA Navy to execute "near sea defense, far sea protection" operations and enable expending of the military presence.

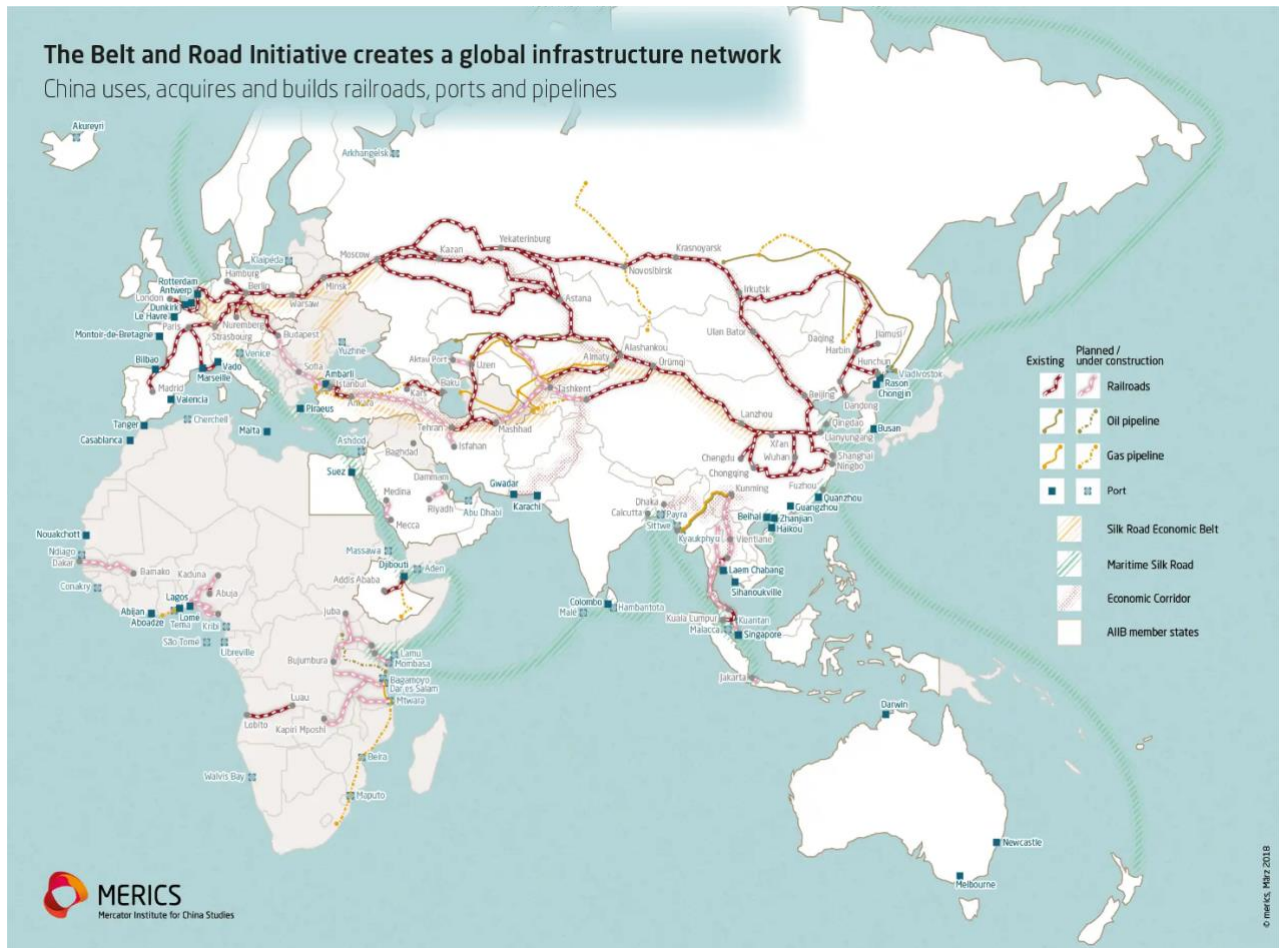
China currently must weigh the potential gain and losses, reduce the risk for the operations of BRI, and consolidate existing resources with nonmilitary tools rather than expanding its military presence along BRI. Excessive military expansion could lead to heavy economic and political burdens.

Recommendations for the US/USCENTCOM

- 1) Establish a database for merchant vessels used by the PLA Navy and share it with allies and partners to create movement patterns worldwide. This initiative can also be used in pursuit of new partners.
- 2) During key leader engagements in Israel, stress the inherent risks and long-term consequences of China's expansion, including within the BRI.
- 3) Attempt to persuade Israeli leaders of the inherent risks of placing critical infrastructure in Chinese control.

⁶⁵ Andrei Dergalin, "New 'Unmanned Drone Mothership' Could Benefit Chinese Navy, Media Says" Sputnik International, <https://sputniknews.com/20220612/new-unmanned-drone-mothership-could-benefit-chinese-navy-media-says-1096247550.html>, June 12, 2022., (accessed July 10, 2022).

- 4) Provide stakeholders with a threat assessment of China's dual-use doctrine at the military level.
- 5) Invite parties (*e.g., India, Israel, and Indo-Pacific stakeholders*) to contingency planning against Chinese expansion, including organizing Tabletop Exercises (*the parties as above*) to play out scenarios of Chinese misdeeds and to validate response options.
- 6) To counter BRI – identify military projects and push them through PGII (i.e., engagement in Port of Gwadar). Also, the US, as well as the other Western countries involved in the PGII, could be the partners of choice for some of the AOR states while using PGII investments, as a “safer than Chinese” option.



7) Figure-3. The Belt and Road Initiative creates a global infrastructure network.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Mercator Institute for China Studies, “The Belt and Road Initiative Creates A Global Infrastructure Network, March 2019, https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2_020-06/Silkroad-Projekt_EN_2020_150dpi.png, (accessed July 10, 2022).