

*The Military Drivers of China's Belt and Road Endeavor: Expanding the Global Reach from Land Mass to the Maritime Domains**

Xiangning Wu and You Ji

Abstract

Chinese scholars have cordially insisted on the tangible economic benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, their counterparts outside China mostly focus on BRI's revisionist outcome. This dichotomy in the BRI study testifies to a security dilemma embedded in the geostrategic tug-of-war between China and the United States. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) openly postulates a "pushback" of the BRI, which further highlights China's potent vulnerability in BRI expansion along with the critical choke points in both global waterways and through continental masses. As the BRI's military geography overlaps its geostrategic reach, the military factor is relevant. This article holds that it is plausible to assess the likely BRI geostrategic effects with the instruments of international relations theories, such as geopolitics. This article evaluates the BRI's well-being from a military standpoint that reflects the great power rivalry. The BRI's inherent military-security

Xiangning Wu is Assistant Professor in the Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau. Correspondence should be sent to xiangningwu@umac.mo.

You Ji is Professor in the Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau.

* The authors would like to express their deep appreciation to Dr. Zaijun Yuan and the two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments and insightful suggestions.

ramifications contribute to the restructuring of the existing geopolitical order across the Eurasian continents. A major security challenge for the BRI is the IPS's security/defense connectivity that may point to a new pattern of coordinated military balancing against China in general and its BRI expansion in particular. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) will be logically tasked to protect the BRI through capability enhancement and overseas presence.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) literature is rapidly expanding, but so far, few articles have been written on the nexus of the BRI's geostrategic implications and its military connotation.¹ The whole idea of westward expansion now underlining the BRI originated from the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) wary about China's vulnerable geostrategic environment along its eastern flank in the 1990s. If the United States gets involved militarily, in another Korean war triggered by the nuclear crisis in the peninsula or a Taiwan war due to declared independence, China's costal line could be completely concealed. The search for an alternative strategic path in China's western geographic direction became a hot topic of defense debate among PLA strategists, for example, on how to cope with the two island chains in the West Pacific.² Today the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) openly postulates a "pushback" of the BRI,³ which further highlights China's potent vulnerability in BRI expansion along the critical choke points both in global waterways and through continental masses. This article evaluates the BRI's well-being from a military standpoint that reflects the great power rivalry. The military factor is relevant, as the BRI's military geography overlaps its geostrategic reach.

1. Conceptualizing the BRI's Geostrategic and Defense Nexus

The international debate about the nature of the BRI has created an interesting dichotomy in the BRI study. In essence, Chinese scholars enshrine the tangible economic benefits of the initiative, while their counterparts outside China mostly focus on BRI's revisionist outcome. Refraining from evaluating the elusive BRI intentions, this article holds that it is plausible to assess the likely BRI geostrategic effects with the instruments of international relations theories, such as geopolitics. For instance, incrementally the BRI induces changes in the balance of power in the Eurasian regions. Its divisive power has been proven by the European Union's disunity over a