

*Beijing has just concluded two days of summitry to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite rumours of the initiative's decline, the BRI is still alive and well, but here's why you should take news about the BRI with a pinch of salt.*

**China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a marketing slogan.** Read articles about the initiative and you might see it described as a "China-led infrastructure project," an "ambitious plan," or a "development strategy," but these labels all overstate the BRI. It is nothing so cohesive as a strategy - it is simply branding for a narrative that Beijing is trying to sell about its place in the world.

I've been researching the BRI for seven years - as a postgraduate student, as an analyst at the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin, and as a journalist, visiting dozens of BRI projects on the ground. My main takeaway from my time spent on the BRI is that it is a messy, ad-hoc collection of disparate projects and ideas.

**Beijing has not defined the BRI.** There is no official list of BRI projects nor even a definition of what constitutes part of the BRI. Chinese companies self-identify as part of the BRI out of political expediency. Although infrastructure projects steal the spotlight, the BRI encompasses every possible field of human endeavour, from archaeological exchanges to cooperation on atomic energy.

**There is little strategic coherence or central organisation to the BRI.** Some projects we associate with the BRI might involve strategic planning in Beijing - gas pipelines or important port projects perhaps - but most are driven by the demands of local elites and the ambitions of Chinese state owned enterprises. There are technically six economic corridors and three maritime "blue passages" outlined under the BRI, but I have encountered few BRI projects truly planned according to some larger goal of regional connectivity.

**The BRI is not an institutionalised platform.** At the end of the recent Belt and Road Forum, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi boasted that 458 "practical cooperation projects" had been signed at the forum. Examples of these "practical" projects include the signing of an "action plan" between the Chinese Communist Party and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party on "building a China-Laos community with a shared future." The institutional reality of the BRI consists almost entirely of such empty memoranda and talking shops. The BRI is not multilateral - Beijing prefers dealing one on one with partners, or in a +1 format, e.g. the C5+1 grouping of the five Central Asian republics plus China.

When you read about a country "joining" the BRI, what that means is that China and the government of that country have signed a non-legally binding memorandum on "jointly building" the BRI. This year, Italy signalled that it will "leave" the BRI. In practice that means Rome will let the piece of paper it signed on "jointly building" the BRI expire - it is entirely symbolic.

**The bottom line is that there are two ways to think about the BRI:** 1) As a concept and 2) as shorthand for any one of a number of things that Beijing is doing overseas. The projects that the

BRI brand is applied to are very real: Beijing is setting up vocational workshops, issuing renminbi-denominated bonds, building high-speed rail lines, mining critical minerals, etc., all under the umbrella of the BRI. All of these things are important and interesting, but to refer to all of it as the BRI is to imply a coherence that doesn't exist. The BRI bundles together a number of Beijing's strategic ambitions and aspects of its overseas footprint and sells them as a "global public good."

**As a concept, the BRI is worth watching.** Slogans are a vital part of Chinese politics and understanding their meaning helps us get to grips with what Beijing is thinking. If you are engaging with China, it also pays to understand the significance of politically potent concepts like the BRI.

During his keynote at the Belt and Road Forum, Xi Jinping's main message was, "the modernization we are pursuing is not for China alone." A BRI white paper released prior to the forum also states that the "BRI is committed to building a prosperous future that diverges from the exploitative colonialism of the past." Such rhetoric is not new to Chinese foreign policy, but it is the first time the BRI has been framed so explicitly at such a high-level.

The subtext here is clear: The U.S. and its allies perpetuate inequalities, while China, through the BRI, is willing to lead other countries in the struggle against colonialism and developmental injustice. The Chinese Communist Party sees itself as locked in a struggle against the U.S. for global power. It is hoping to win over what it increasingly calls the "Global South" in order to help in this struggle.

**The BRI has in recent years been joined by several new initiatives that are in a similar vein:** The Global Development Initiative (GDI); The Global Security Initiative (GSI); The Global Civilization Initiative (GCI); The Global Data Security Initiative; and recently announced at the Belt and Road Forum, the Global Artificial Intelligence Governance Initiative.

They are all essentially aimed at the collective West: the GSI at the U.S. alliance structure by arguing against "bloc confrontation;" the GCI at liberal democracy by insisting on "diversity" among civilizational models; and the new artificial intelligence initiative at U.S. chip restrictions by opposing "ideological lines or forming exclusive groups to obstruct other countries from developing AI."

Like the BRI, what these initiatives lack in substance, they make up for in narrative zeal.