China's "Belt and Road Initiative": Underwhelming or Game-Changer?

By Nadège Rolland, National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)

China’s Grand Strategy - The BRI is now one of the main instruments of China’s grand strategy.

In sum, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an essential component in China’s larger effort to solve the fundamental geopolitical challenge that it faces, something its strategic thinkers have been considering since at least the turn of the 21st Century: how can China “rise”—assert its influence and reshape at least its own neighborhood — in ways that reduce the risk of a countervailing response? The Belt and Road Initiative attempts to combine all of the elements of Chinese power and to use all the nation’s strengths and advantages in order to achieve these ends. China’s banks, SOEs, diplomats, security specialists, intellectuals, and media have all been summoned to join in this effort. In other words, the BRI is now one of the main instruments of China’s grand strategy, coordinating and giving direction to an extensive array of national resources in pursuit of an overarching political objective. Focusing only on specific components or dimensions of the BRI, as most Western studies currently do, risks missing the point that all of these aspects are part of a comprehensive vision with a potentially global reach. To those who feel “underwhelmed” by its concrete achievements to date, it is important to keep in mind that the BRI goes well beyond the simple pursuit of economic gain through a series of ambitious engineering projects. It is intended to take a large step toward the realization of the “China Dream,” restoring the nation to its rightful place as the paramount power in Asia in time for the PRC’s 100th anniversary in 2049.

It remains to be seen how far the Belt and Road can go. If it unfolds as Beijing envisions, the implications would certainly be far reaching: an integrated and interconnected Eurasian continent with enduring authoritarian political systems, where China’s influence has grown to the point it has muted any opposition and gained acquiescence and deference; a new regional order with its own political and economic institutions, whose rules and norms reflect China’s values and serve its interests; and a continental stronghold insulated to some degree from American sea power.

Of course there are many obstacles along the way, as China’s leaders are well aware. Some of these can no doubt be overcome, but the BRI will also produce effects that are unexpected and unintended. The tremendous effort and massive resources China has committed to the Belt and Road should at a minimum generate greater international Western attention to its development, underlying motives, and possible strategic implications. This is an endeavor that the Chinese leadership takes very seriously. Others should do the same.

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