

BRI: Bridging or breaking BRICS?

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Abstract

This commentary piece looks at the implications for BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and on communications in general of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and argues that the dimensions of communication and culture are not only vital to these ambitious infrastructure projects but to date have not received the prominence they deserve.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, BRICS, China, communication, culture

China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) formerly called One Belt, One Road (OBOR), has the potential to transform the geo-economic landscape of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and even Europe. Conceived in 2013 and outlined in 2015 by China's National Development and Reform Committee, it was formally launched in May 2017. Due for completion in the next decade, BRI comprises more than 900 infrastructure projects—ranging from ports and roads to digital infrastructure, valued at about US\$1.3 trillion and will form an economic “belt” across the Eurasian continent and a maritime “silk road” through South-East and South Asia to the Middle East, with the aim “to deepen economic integration and connectivity.”

The BRI projects are to be backed by a US\$40 billion Silk Road Infrastructure Fund, capitalized mainly by China's foreign exchange reserves and will also be supported by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)—established in 2016 with a membership of 70 nations, including Germany, India, Britain, Canada, and Australia—together with the Shanghai-based BRICS bank, or to give its formal name, the New Development Bank, established in 2014 by the five BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) nations.

The BRI epitomizes the extraordinary expansion of the Chinese economy and its rapid globalization over the last two decades (see essays in Thussu, de-Burgh, & Shi, 2018). Since 2006, China has been the largest holder of foreign-currency reserves in the world, and by 2014 its gross domestic product in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) had surpassed that of the United States, making it the world's largest economy. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), by 2017, China was the largest importer for more than 70 countries and accounted for about 10% of

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all imports globally. China's share of global GDP in PPP terms has grown from just over 4% in 1990 to nearly 18% in 2016. Chinese companies are becoming increasingly visible in global markets, acquiring foreign corporate assets and investing in a range of properties around the world, a process facilitated by the inclusion of renminbi in the IMF's Special Drawing Rights, making it one of the world's reserve currencies.

In the field of communication too, China has demonstrated extraordinary growth in the past decade with some companies—notably e-commerce mega-corporations Alibaba and Tencent—approaching the size in terms of market value of global giants such as Alphabet and Facebook. By 2017, China's e-commerce sales were the largest in the world, double those of the United States, the country where the Internet was invented, and which continues to dominate its commerce and governance. In mobile payments too China leads the world, their value in 2017 totaling US\$12.77 trillion, according to Chinese government data. According to *Forbes* magazine, six of China's ten wealthiest individuals are founders or top executives of Internet-related companies. Baidu, Huawei, Tencent, and Alibaba were listed among the world's 50 "smartest" companies in 2016 by *MIT Technology Review*—enterprises which combine innovative technology with effective business models to create new opportunities. These and other such companies are now increasingly going global.

The BRI should be viewed against this background. In most Chinese official and journalistic accounts, the BRI has been projected as "a win-win situation" for all concerned. However, some see this significant geo-political endeavor as designed to promote Chinese political and economic interests in strategically important areas in Asia and beyond, presenting an alternative to the US-dominated security and economic infrastructure that has shaped the world since the Second World War. Chinese claims on the South China Sea, through which about US\$5 trillion worth of goods pass every year, have challenged the position of United States and its allies in Asia, including Japan and Vietnam. One commentator noted that China is "building networks carefully and deliberately to connect to minerals, energy sources and access to cities, harbours and oceans" (Frankopan, 2015, p. 516). Although many Western companies are very keen to be associated with BRI projects as they are so economically lucrative, some Western governments have reservations about the geo-political implications of BRI, evident in various commentaries and concerns expressed by think tanks and government reports.

For many developing countries that are involved in the BRI projects it opens-up huge potential for rapid access to modern amenities and infrastructure and to benefit from Chinese largess. Among the BRICS nations the attitude is more complex. Two of China's main BRICS partners—Russia and India—harbor reservations about BRI, while for the other two members (Brazil and South Africa), it is not of such geo-political significance. Many commentators in Russia view BRI as undermining Moscow's traditional domination of its "near abroad"—the central Asian nations—by Chinese growing investment and infrastructural presence in the region. As for India, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project—an integral part of BRI—makes politicians and analysts in New Delhi nervous about what many see as the "encircling" of India by its eastern neighbor. There is also an issue of sovereignty involved as the CPEC passes through territories claimed by both India and Pakistan. It is no coincidence that India was the only major country not to participate in the inauguration of BRI in 2017.

Will BRI undermine the BRICS grouping? The BRIC acronym was coined in 2001 by Jim O'Neill, a Goldman Sachs executive to refer to the four fast-growing emerging markets. South Africa was added in 2011, on Chinese request, to expand BRIC to BRICS. Although in

operation as a formal group since 2006 and holding annual summits since 2009, the BRICS countries represent five large and diverse nations with different political systems and socio-cultural norms, as well as stages of development. The emergence of such grouping coincides with the relative economic decline of the West and thus creating an opportunity for non-Western powers, such as China to shape in global governance structures hitherto dominated by the United States and its Western allies. Although the individual relationships between BRICS countries and the United States differ markedly (Russia and China being generally anti-Washington while India, Brazil, and South Africa relatively close to the United States), the group was conceived as an alternative to American power and is the only major group of nations not to include the United States or any other G-7 members. Nevertheless, a majority of BRICS nations do not want a confrontation with the United States, the country with which (with the possible exception of Russia) they have their most important relationship. Indeed, China is one of the largest investors in the United States, while India, Brazil, and South Africa demonstrate democratic affinities with the West: India's IT industry is particularly dependent on its close ties with the United States and Europe. China is also central to the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a Eurasian political, economic and security grouping founded in 2001 and comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan—India and Pakistan were added as full members in 2015. For Russia, Western sanctions and expulsion from the G-8 have made ties between Moscow and Beijing closer—they signed a 30-year oil and gas deal worth US\$400 billion in 2014. China and Russia see the potential of economic convergence in trade and financial activities, for example, between BRI and Russia's recent endeavors to strengthen Eurasian Economic Union.

The China-India dynamics within BRICS is also affected by BRI, compounded by tensions over border disputes (notably in summer 2017 which almost stymied the Xiamen BRICS summit). However, at the same time economic cooperation between the two Asian giants is growing rapidly—China is one of India's largest trading partner (nearly half of India's smart phone market is now dominated by Chinese-made smartphones). India could also learn from Chinese successes, especially in reducing if not eliminating poverty. As the World Bank's (2017) *Atlas of Sustainable Development Goals* shows, in 1990 China had 756 million citizens living in extreme poverty (at less than US\$2 a day), while India had less than half that number, at 338 million; by 2013, barely 25 million Chinese lived in extreme poverty, while the corresponding figure for India was 218 million. In other words, in just over two decades, the one-party state of China was able to raise more than 700 million people out of poverty while democratic India only managed 120 million in the same period (World Bank, 2017).

Yet, the coverage of China in the Indian media remains very limited, generally negative and arguably influenced by Western perspectives. A recent study observes,

... since the European and American news media are major sources for Indian English newspapers that serve the political elites, the China-related media agenda in India is always consistent with that of the Western media, for example, the constant criticism of Chinese nationalist emotion. (Ji, Hu, & Muhammad, 2016, p. 238)

The coverage of India by Chinese media is equally problematic, where, in official discourses, Indian democracy is deemed as "dysfunctional." Wrote Li Xin managing editor of *Caixin*, China's leading financial magazine:

Despite its size and proximity, India is a gigantic blind spot in China's foreign policy. On the rare occasions when India comes to mind, it is usually for its association with other, apparently more pressing countries—the United States, Pakistan, or Tibet. (Xin, 2013)

Such lack of understanding between the two of the world's largest civilizational powers, most populated countries and fastest growing economies (since 2015 India has been the world's third largest economy after United States and China in purchasing power terms) bodes ill for the future of BRICS, too. Although the idea of BRIC was initiated in Russia, it is China that has emerged as the driving force behind this grouping. British author Martin Jacques (2009) has noted in his book *When China Rules the World*, that China operates “both within and outside the existing international system while at the same time, in effect, sponsoring a new China-centric international system which will exist alongside the present system and probably slowly begin to usurp it” (p. 362).

Creating information and communication networks are an integral part of the BRI infrastructure projects and yet the focus on trade and investment has meant that the role of media and culture has been largely missing from the discussion. For example, concepts such as communication, connectivity, circulation, people-to-people exchange, and, above all, building a “Community of Common Destiny” have set the tone for the official narrative; transport and communication infrastructures have spearheaded the formation of a China-centric socio-economic space; and the expansion of cyber business, cultural ties, and political influence hinges not only on techno-financial prowess but also on the capacity of consensus formation.

The historical Seidenstrassen, the Silk Roads, so designated in 1877 by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, were not only trade routes but communication arteries that facilitated interactions among cultures and religions of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam (Frankopan, 2016). Winning hearts and minds of foreign populations, however, is a key objective of China's soft power discourses. However, the Chinese media's reluctance, for example, to address religious issues, particularly pertaining to Islam, can be a limitation in a region steeped in a culture defined by religious beliefs. In China, home to more than 20 million Muslims, Islam is a religious as well as an ethnic and racial category but its coverage in Chinese media is negligible. The Chinese authorities have recognized that the officially sponsored news media are less effective in achieving this and therefore the strategy seems now to be to focus on entertainment media, in collaboration with private domestic and transnational content providers.

The BRI projects could be harnessing the globalizing tendencies of Chinese media that have been “going out” for more than a decade, made possible by the information and communication infrastructure that has been put in place in the past decade by Chinese government supported infrastructural projects. In 2014, addressing the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, President Xi Jinping announced that China should “give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world.” As part of disseminating this message to the world, the state-funded “central media”—Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV—which in 2016 changed its name to China Global Television Network [CGTN]), China Radio International, *People's Daily* and the English-language *China Daily*—were generously funded for global expansion. This funding came as part of a broader government effort to create internationally competitive media conglomerates in China that would make “China's voice heard internationally.”

China Daily, “a voice of China on the global stage,” claims to have 45 million readers worldwide for its print and digital versions. Apart from having various international editions—including in the United States and in Europe, *China Daily* is circulated with the *Washington Post* and *Wall*

Street Journal in the United States and several other newspapers around the world. In addition to English, the *China Daily* monthly supplement, *China Watch*, also publishes supplements in French, German, and Spanish. Since 1997, the online version of *The People's Daily*, People.cn—one of the top ten newspapers in the world—has been available in nine international languages. In 2017, China Radio International was broadcasting in 61 languages via its six overseas regional hubs and 32 correspondents. It had affiliations with 70 overseas radio stations and 18 global Internet radio services. Apart from English, CGTN news (launched with the aim to “re-brand our product to the world, to cope with the global trend in media convergence”) is available in French, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic. Xinhua too has expanded its international operations—being particularly strong in the developing world and claiming to articulate a Southern news agenda. However, massive expansion and technological prowess has not translated into professional output: none of the Chinese international media has ever broken a major global story. More successful have been privately funded Chinese media conglomerates, which, although following state strictures, have a greater degree of manoeuvrability to work around China’s highly regulated media system. The e-commerce giant Alibaba is the most prominent example: its 2014 IPO in the New York Stock Exchange raised US\$25 billion, the largest stock market flotation in history. What is described as the “iron triangle”—e-commerce, logistics, and finance—has made Alibaba, within a very short time, China’s best-known global corporate brand. Jack Ma, its founder and executive chairman, is dubbed by some as China’s Rupert Murdoch. Since 2013, he has acquired the Hong-Kong-based *South China Morning Post*, China’s largest video-sharing site, Youku Tudou and social media outlet, Sina Weibo and Alibaba Pictures. Beyond China, Ma has also invested, among others, in popular social apps Snapchat and PayTM, India’s largest e-commerce venture.

Given the scale and scope of change that the “Belt and Road” projects engender, the Chinese media and government have been putting a favorable gloss on what is essentially an economic program with significant geo-political connotations. At the third World Internet Conference in 2016, China suggested that the “Belt and Road” initiative offered opportunities for the countries involved to improve their telecommunication infrastructure using Chinese investment. *China Daily* quoted a senior official as saying that “network construction, services and applications and digital economy” were crucial for deepening exchanges and cooperation. Yang Xiaowei, General Manager of China Telecommunications, said that the mission of the Chinese telecom operators was to bridge the gap and make people all over the world part of the “information civilization.” Xinhua has launched a web portal—Silkroad.news.cn—which provides “Belt and Road-related government policies by China and relevant countries, official documents, market information, investment and financing environment, project progress as well as updated news and experts’ views’ but not yet very much on the cultural and communication aspects of BRI.

Chinese President Xi Jinping described BRI as the “project of the century” and given the scope and scale of the various projects within the rubric of BRI it is not merely a rhetorical claim. However, it is important that the communication of this is organized in such a way that China’s BRICS partners do not feel isolated while the West is not threatened. It is interesting to note that in American policy circles China and Russia are increasingly being described in terms of “sharp power,” a term coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig of the US-based National Endowment for Democracy, which “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries.”

Chinese media and communication policy makers have much to do to help change this perception. Having support from such major non-Western groupings as BRICS would be invaluable in such an endeavor. Conceptualizing BRI as involving new communication processes and formative

communication spaces is important in understanding the dynamics of a potential new international order, which are not limited to states and capitals, but include sub-national and transnational regions, cultures and historical narratives. In order to win over “hearts and minds,” the communication and media will need to flow in both directions, building a dialogue of cultures, not only “going out” to others but receiving from them as well.

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