What American Policymakers Misunderstand about the Belt and Road Initiative

Zenel Garcia
Phillip Guerreiro

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ABSTRACT: American accounts of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) contend that it is a coherent grand strategy that reflects Beijing’s geopolitical ambitions. These accounts ignore the BRI’s fragmented nature, whereby Chinese provinces have been pivotal actors in its development and implementation. Furthermore, these accounts disregard the agency of participant countries and their capacity to shape the BRI. This article illustrates this fragmentation and agency by studying the Yunnan province and its domestic and international neighbors. It contends that these dynamics indicate that the BRI lacks coherence and that Beijing's capacity to extract geopolitical benefits will remain limited.

Keywords: China, Belt and Road, fragmented authoritarianism, geopolitics

President Joe Biden attended the Summit for the Americas on November 3, 2023, promoting the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity initiative his administration had announced the previous year. He sought to differentiate American and Chinese lending in the region, stating he wanted to “make sure that our closest neighbors know they have a real choice between debt-trap diplomacy and high-quality, transparent approaches to infrastructure and development.” Empirical research consistently demonstrates no evidence of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy but continued reference to this alleged practice reflects wider anxieties in Washington stemming from the perception that Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides China with greater geopolitical influence at Washington’s expense. This perception reflects the consensus in American policy circles that the BRI represents a coherent grand strategy encapsulating China’s geopolitical ambitions to reshape the international order.1

As a result of this growing consensus, the Biden–Harris administration has increasingly coalesced around two policy approaches to address the perceived challenge. The first involves promoting alternative initiatives to compete with the BRI, such as the Build Back Better World, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, the US-Africa Partnership in Promoting Two-Way Trade and Investment in Africa, and the Americas Partnership for Economic...
Prosperity. The second involves a diplomatic campaign to deter countries from seeking deeper economic engagement with China. This campaign has been encapsulated in its promotion of the debt-trap diplomacy discourse in the Global South. These policy approaches miss the mark because they fundamentally misdiagnose the nature of the BRI. The first approach is a zero-sum competition policy based on a flawed assessment of the BRI—particularly its degree of coherence. The second promotes a false discourse poorly received in the Global South. More problematically, it disregards the agency of participant countries and undermines the American capacity to engage them positively.

We argue that the BRI’s grand strategic and geopolitical framing is inherently flawed for two reasons. The first is that provincial-level officials addressing the growing development gap between the country’s coast and interior have shaped the BRI’s origins and evolution. These officials have lobbied central authorities by appealing to institutionalized discourses within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that link security and development. In doing so, they have elevated their development priorities to the national level to extract additional resources and have situated their provinces as pivotal to national development. For example, Xinjiang’s 1990s “double-opening” provincial-level initiative sought to integrate the province with the rest of China while deepening economic links to its Central Asian neighbors and was incorporated into the Great Western Development Strategy in the early 2000s and into the BRI in 2013 via three economic corridors. This dynamic illustrates China’s competitive, fragmented nature of policy making and implementation. In fact, “fragmented authoritarianism” is widely known to researchers of Chinese politics but remains underappreciated in American policy circles.

The second reason is that BRI participants have exercised their agency in ways that fundamentally shape the initiative’s development and implementation. The selected projects and the locations and routes of the transportation and logistics corridors demonstrate this agency. For example, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the initiative’s flagship, Pakistani authorities lobbied the Chinese government for funding, selected the corridor’s routes within Pakistan, and prioritized energy projects for its first phase. A similar pattern emerges in other participant countries, including Sri Lanka and its controversial Hambantota Port project. Here again, the Sri Lankan government was the first to initiate the funding request from the Chinese government and lobbied for investment at the desired location. Far from exhaustive, these examples provide insight into the growing body of empirical work analyzing how local players in participant countries have shaped Chinese investment through the BRI. Strategic coherence is limited due to domestic and international actors, but more importantly, it is driven by them. While we do not reject the argument that the
CCP may desire to extract geopolitical benefits from the BRI, we contend that these two factors will limit their capacity to do so effectively. These factors enable US policymakers to diagnose the BRI’s characteristics accurately and capitalize on its inherent advantages.4

To illustrate our argument, we first discuss the role of provinces in Chinese domestic politics and present the case study of Yunnan to demonstrate how provinces have shaped the BRI’s development and implementation. We then illustrate how BRI participant countries exercise agency in consequential ways. Lastly, we explore the implications of our findings for US policy.

**China’s Provinces and the Belt and Road Initiative**

Tracing the BRI’s origins and evolution complicates conventional accounts focusing on its professed grand strategic scope and geopolitical effects. Discursive and empirical analyses indicate that domestic needs that link security with development drive the BRI. In essence, Chinese officials view underdevelopment as a source of insecurity and insecurity as a source of underdevelopment. The BRI represents the most recent iteration of China’s three-pronged approach to address this security-development dilemma. First, the BRI accelerates the simultaneous integration of China’s frontier with the rest of China and its neighbors through infrastructure to generate economic activity while enhancing the state’s reach. Second, it establishes new supply chains that link China’s underdeveloped interior provinces to international markets, reducing the burden of capital-intensive investment by central authorities. Third, it helps secure new markets for Chinese goods through greater connectivity and more efficient logistics to sustain economic growth.5

Despite this seemingly centralized approach, provincial-level officials drive and shape these processes, have been pivotal in promoting what ultimately became the BRI, and are now shaping its evolution. By the time Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt in Astana, Kazakhstan, and the “Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century” in Jakarta in 2013, more than two decades of provincial-level officials bringing economic development to their provinces had already laid much of their foundations. In the 1990s, central authorities became increasingly concerned with the development gap between the coastal and interior provinces. Provincial officials seized the opportunity to fund development in their region through three strategies that evolved into the BRI and still influence its evolution.

The first strategy was to create initiatives that situated their provinces as gateways or hubs linking China’s coastal provinces with its neighbors. These initiatives regularly involved competition between adjacent provinces
that sought to capitalize on their geographic, demographic, and resource endowments. The foundation of these policies was the discourse linking security and development, which appealed to central authorities. By appealing to this discourse, provincial officials employed the second strategy, which involved lobbying central authorities for additional resources to facilitate the implementation of their initiatives. In essence, they contended that these initiatives were necessary to bring economic development to their provinces and ensure social stability. These efforts sometimes involved collective bargaining by blocks of regional provinces but could also be undertaken individually. In both cases, it still involved competition between regional blocks or individual neighbors. The third strategy involved further lobbying central authorities to elevate these provincial initiatives to national-level priorities, legitimize the initiative, and grant additional access to resources.

The result of these strategies is evident in a Chinese 2015 white paper, “Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.” The document, the first official outline of Beijing’s position on the BRI, identifies six multimodal economic corridors. All six were derived from provincial-level initiatives that originated in the 1990s and were then incorporated into national development initiatives in the early 2000s, such as the Great Western Development, Rise of Central China, and Northeast Revitalization strategies. All six arose from frontier provinces, highlighting the BRI’s fundamentally domestic logic. Xinjiang and Yunnan have been, and remain, central to developing five overland BRI corridors. Here, we focus on Yunnan due to its incorporation into the “Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century.”

Yunnan as a Bridgehead

The Yunnan province borders Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam in China’s southwestern region. The province is ranked 17th in GDP (third quarter 2023) but 23rd in GDP per capita. Yunnan also has the 12th-largest population in China, with approximately 47,222,000 people (about twice the population of Texas), and ranks as the eighth-largest province in China. Although Yunnan’s terrain and higher altitude present development challenges, its size, population, ethnic diversity, geopolitical positioning, and its capital’s potential to function as a land port into Southeast Asia made the province a natural investment choice.

As early as 1943, leaders saw Yunnan’s potential to become China’s pivot into Southeast Asia. Fast forward to the 1980s, and the topic of Yunnan opening up had become more popular, further fueled by the central authority’s approval
to create border trade zones with neighboring states. While the prospect of cross-border investment was a boon for Yunnan officials and elites, the central government’s focus on coastal development dampened their enthusiasm. As a result of coastal priority, Yunnan had to supply the coast with raw materials at low rates. This dissatisfaction prompted provincial officials to take its development into their own hands.9

In 1989, He Zhiqiang, Yunnan’s governor, called for greater cross-border integration with Southeast Asia. His desire came to fruition in June 1992 when China’s State Council decided that the opening policies reserved for the coast should apply to some interior provinces, such as Yunnan. This decision opened the floodgates for Yunnan’s autonomy to seek cross-border ventures, leading to a convergence of multilateral interests. While Myanmar saw original cross-border investments, Yunnan officials wanted to cast a wider net westward. Multilateral trade discussion was underway with provincial representatives of Yunnan, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. The discussion eventually progressed to creating the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum, whose first meeting took place in Kunming in 1999, where representatives from all four states signed the Kunming Initiative. Although it lacked practical applications, the initiative represented the province’s ability to foster regional relations. The BCIM Forum’s 2004 meeting led to the Kunming Cooperation Declaration that resulted in the creation of a BCIM regional coordination office in Kunming. Consequently, Yunnan officials could position their province as a hub linking China’s interior provinces to South and Southeast Asian markets.10

As Yunnan cemented its centrality in Southeast Asia, its role as a bridge elevated to the national policy level, which is evident in the national discourse on Yunnan’s emergence as a “Bridgehead” (桥头堡) into Southeast Asia. After General Secretary Hu Jintao visited Yunnan in July 2009, the designation of Yunnan as a Bridgehead was nationally cemented. Beijing’s recognition of Yunnan’s Bridgehead strategy validated the province’s approach to cross-border development. In 2011, two years before Xi’s BRI speech in Kazakhstan, the CCP leadership issued an opinion supporting Yunnan’s desire to pursue a Bridgehead strategy to accelerate construction and economic development in Yunnan by promoting the construction of connective infrastructure and financial investments in Southeast Asia, thereby turning Yunnan into the Bridgehead linking China and Southeast Asia. The State Council’s opinion eventually became part of the CCP’s 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–15), which emphasized developing the border regions by leveraging regional advantages and “speeding up the ‘opening up’ of border areas.” The lineage of Yunnan’s cross-border development reflects the BRI’s fragmentation, whereby provincial leaders can steer and shape Chinese foreign policy priorities and leverage local advantages for greater success.11
This fragmentation also produces competition between provinces seeking to raise their development priorities to the national level to extract more resources. The Guangxi region, Yunnan’s neighbor, suggests this dynamic. Much like Yunnan, Guangxi is underdeveloped. While it does have access to the sea, it shares borders with the more economically dynamic Guangdong province, making it difficult for Guangxi’s officials to make a unique value proposition. Nevertheless, Guangxi officials outmaneuvered their Yunnan counterparts in 2004 in their bid to host the annual China-ASEAN Expo permanently in Nanning, Guangxi’s provincial capital. Later, the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Cooperation Forum, which Guangxi officials lobbied central authorities to upgrade to a national strategy, complemented the China-ASEAN Expo. These efforts collectively positioned Guangxi as an important actor in China-ASEAN economic and trade relations and a direct competitor to its neighbors.

Guangxi officials further leveraged these gains after Xi announced the BRI. They utilized their province’s position and growing cross-border links to promote a “four-dimensional support and four-alongs interaction” strategy. The “four dimensions” refer to:

1. positioning Guangxi as the gateway to Southeast Asia for neighboring interior provinces;
2. increasing connectivity with major domestic trade centers;
3. deepening cooperation with interior provinces; and
4. strengthening cooperation with developed countries to increase the internationalization of the province and facilitate the implementation of the BRI.

The “four-alongs” refer to opening areas along the coast, river, border, and the BRI to situate Guangxi as a central hub in the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century and the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor.

Yunnan and Guangxi demonstrate how provincial officials navigate the fragmented nature of Chinese domestic politics to promote their political agenda, sometimes in competition with their neighbors. Importantly, it shows how this dynamic changes domestic policy and deeply affects Beijing’s foreign policy. The BRI is not just a product of provincial official efforts but continues to be shaped by them. While central authorities have greater political and financial capital, this case illustrates how domestic factors limit their capacity to centralize policy formulation and implementation. International actors further complicate this dynamic.
Southeast Asian Agency and the Belt and Road Initiative

Like Yunnan and Guangxi, their Southeast Asian neighbors have leveraged their advantages to shape the BRI. As the recipient parties agree to the construction of infrastructure projects, they possess the agency to shape how the projects unfold in their territory. Despite conventional discourses framing the BRI as a coherent strategy, implementing a cross-border infrastructure project is complicated. Chinese state-owned enterprises, provincial officials, national regulators, and negotiators must deal with similarly fragmented counterparts with differing government models and civil society strengths. For projects spanning more than two states that require overlapping bilateral negotiations, the agency of Southeast Asian states becomes clear. Through a combination of negotiations, route selections, lobbied investments, diplomatic embarrassments, and local protests, Southeast Asian states can mold the BRI to their needs.

To illustrate this dynamic, we will focus on high-speed rail (HSR) and hydropower infrastructure. Both embody connectivity and facilitate the flow of trade, people, labor, and capital. Furthermore, they offer a cascade of development by enabling urbanization and incentivizing the construction of industrial zones. Importantly, both HSR and hydropower projects have a limited geographic scope that gives Southeast Asian states leverage in those projects. For HSR, if China wants to connect Kunming to Singapore with Bangkok as the central hub, then Chinese developers have limited alternatives for route selections. When Chinese negotiators began to hammer out deals for HSR routes in Southeast Asia, Thailand and Malaysia presented challenging hurdles and were able to alter deals and renegotiate established agreements to shape the project.

For example, geopolitically, Thailand hedges its relationships with large powers (such as the United States and China) to avoid overcommitting to or becoming dependent on a single power, which results in drawn-out negotiations and tepid commitments. Chinese negotiators have had episodic negotiations with Thailand for more than a decade. Thai officials know Bangkok is the central hub of the Southeast Asia HSR project, as it connects the North-South and East-West routes and is an economic center for the route. Furthermore, Thailand is not as underdeveloped as its immediate neighbors, making it less dependent on Chinese investment for infrastructure projects. In 2014, the Thai government signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with China on a $5.5 billion HSR project. Bangkok was unsatisfied with the 2.5 percent interest rate on the loan it received, so it began construction with its funds. As such, Thailand maintained ownership of its section of the HSR and retained rights of operations and stations within its borders, highlighting
to Chinese negotiators that Thais can build and operate the HSR without depending on external actors.14

Outside steering the development of infrastructure projects, Southeast Asian states can influence the BRI through public outcry and local opposition. If we accept the fragmentation of China’s side of the BRI, we must also accept the recipient states’ fragmentation. Fragmented domestic politics in Southeast Asia steer the BRI’s direction. From government changes to opposition over environmental impacts, Southeast Asian actors have the agency to delay, modify, or cancel BRI-facilitated projects.

Negotiating and implementing cross-border infrastructure projects with authoritarian one-party systems may be seamless, but negotiating with multiparty democracies where the governing authority’s political attitudes change has proven difficult for China. Malaysia gave China firsthand experience of democratic volatility. Malaysian officials have repeatedly negotiated with China over HSR integration since the mid-1990s. With extensive plans already underway, HSR in Malaysia initially appeared well secured. In 2018, however, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak was defeated, and the Mahathir administration took control. After campaigning on the corruption in Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad promised to review and renegotiate previously established deals with China. Since the goal was to connect Kunming to Singapore, Malaysian officials understood they had a sizable advantage, as the HSR route would have to go through their nation. Mahathir focused on renegotiating to obtain a more favorable deal for Malaysia and his constituents and, in the process, delayed the project long enough to field more bids from other international builders.15

Outside HSR projects, hydropower projects also present a unique view of the BRI. Unlike HSR, where routes must be negotiated and some states can be bypassed, hydropower is restricted to suitable sites on rivers that can generate a substantial electrical output. Dam developers must first find feasible locations and then negotiate to use that site. While constructing a regional HSR line will have clear environmental impacts, developing a hydropower cascade will have ecological challenges that span farther than the immediate construction zone. In Southeast Asia, the main hydropower resource is the Mekong River. It spans six states (Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam), functions as an agricultural lifeline, and is the second most biodiverse basin after the Amazon River, making it a key feature of Southeast Asia. Since dams force people to relocate, flood large swaths of land, and damage river health, local populations often protest these projects. Negative pushback on widespread dam building has altered, delayed, or canceled projects integral to the BRI.
In some cases, constructing a dam forces Chinese state-owned enterprises to construct relocated villages and facilitate their compensation, removing that burden from the recipient state. Part of PowerChina’s Nam Ou River dam cascade construction and operation deal included constructing the village where impacted locals would need to move. Since the Nam Ou River cascade was also built to power the Northern Laos HSR section’s construction and operation, negotiators could likely leverage that project linkage and place the responsibility of village construction on PowerChina.\textsuperscript{16}

In Cambodia, environmental impacts have dealt a significant blow to BRI ambitions for the near future. Cambodia has an impressive hydropower potential of 10,000 megawatts, with approximately 90 percent of it in the Mekong basin. Cambodia is geopolitically close enough to China to be called a full-blown Chinese client state. Beijing has many financial commitments in Cambodia—“it invested $9.6bn in the decade to 2013; and about a further $13bn is yet to come.” As an authoritarian state, negotiations on BRI projects should be easier than negotiations with multiparty democracies. Nevertheless, the environmental impacts and concerns over hydropower have changed that equation. With more than a dozen projects completed, under construction, or planned, the realities of hydropower and its impacts have become clear. Being further downstream, Cambodia would be hit hard by the effects of dams on the Mekong River. If hydropower development continues uninterrupted, Cambodia could lose approximately 35 percent of its fish catches.\textsuperscript{17}

Cambodia’s portion of the Mekong River is also tied to Tonle Sap Lake, one of Southeast Asia’s largest and most biodiverse lakes. The lake is also central to the local economy and food security due to its fish production. In one year, Tonle Sap Lake produces approximately 500,000 tons of fish, comparable to the 450,000 tons produced annually in North America. Given the clear vulnerabilities to hydropower, Cambodian officials had to reexamine their commitment to it. The conclusion was a shocking 10-year moratorium on mainstream Mekong River dams in 2020. If an underdeveloped, authoritarian, geostrategic ally was able to halt a major infrastructure leg of the BRI in Southeast Asia, imagine how much more a participant country that does not have all these factors could disrupt the project.\textsuperscript{18}

Whether through high-speed rail or hydropower, if the BRI’s purpose is to pursue connective infrastructure across an array of states, it will be impossible to dictate a single coherent set of standards upon recipients. Southeast Asian states have agency in project selection, approval, and negotiation. Exercising that agency has allowed them to shape the BRI in the region to fit their needs rather than China’s.
Implications

Research exploring the degree of influence Beijing has extracted from the BRI indicates it has had limited success due to fragmentation caused by domestic actors and the agency of its foreign partners. That dynamic does not mean the BRI does not generate geopolitical effects. The BRI has been the primary vessel through which Chinese construction and technology companies have emerged as industry leaders. This situation has clear geopolitical implications in the context of setting standards across a range of industries. It also does not mean Chinese officials do not seek to produce and exploit geopolitical effects through the BRI. As the BRI has matured, there has been a greater desire by senior leaders to do so. We argue, however, that Chinese policy making’s fragmented nature and participant countries’ agential capacity make it difficult for Chinese leaders to generate a coherent grand BRI strategy and to extract geopolitical benefits unilaterally.19

Chinese officials recognize this reality—to a degree. Since its announcement in 2013, Chinese officials have produced two BRI vision documents and several white papers expanding its scope to include the Arctic, climate change, and digital spaces. They have also made hundreds of individual and joint statements about its aims, signed hundreds of memoranda of understandings with participant countries, and hosted three Belt and Road Forums. The discourse in each document, statement, and event indicates that Chinese officials lean toward a broad, inclusive framing of the BRI to facilitate engagement with partner countries while mitigating challenges. Although one could argue that this broad and inclusive language is a strategic choice, it also reflects the realities of domestic and international constraints.20

Recognizing the domestic and international dynamics that shape the BRI allows for a more holistic understanding of the initiative’s characteristics and global impact. This realization also has important implications for American foreign policy. The BRI’s fragmented nature indicates that US officials must tailor their response to account for local conditions. For example, while it is expedient to produce an overarching economic policy like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, implementing such policies should account for signatories’ individual needs. A country that reaps economic benefits from the BRI is unlikely to respond positively to American “debt-trap discourses” or overtures to limit engagement with China.

That said, American firms can easily benefit from BRI infrastructure that lowers their barrier to entry, such as readily available energy generation, transportation infrastructure, and logistics hubs. Western firms have participated in the BRI for the past decade through joint ventures, as have
Western banks and financial institutions through their lending projects. For example, Standard Chartered, a British multinational bank, has supported “nearly 650 BRI-related projects with a total value exceeding $111 billion,” including “$515 million project financing for a power plant in Zambia, a $200 million loan for an electricity plant in Bangladesh, and a $42 million export credit facility for a Sri Lankan gas terminal.” What has been lacking is a more coherent policy that capitalizes on the agential capacity of participant countries. Washington can exercise its agency as a direct participant, but it can also empower host countries to exercise their agency in ways that maximize benefits for the local population while mitigating concerns about sustainability and transparency. This approach would be beneficial in places where BRI projects have had limited to mixed economic results.\(^{21}\)

Even if American officials continue the direct-competition approach across the world’s regions, understanding the BRI’s domestic and international constraints provides two important benefits. First, it exposes the initiative’s fundamental shortcomings, thus allowing for better policy formulation and implementation. For example, incorporating these findings could benefit the regional economic frameworks outlined in the introduction. It also drives home the point that Washington does not need to play Whac-A-Mole across the globe vis-à-vis China. The second point is that it allows for a clearer picture of the BRI’s effects, thus facilitating US prioritization and resource allocation to mitigate risks to national interests. This prioritization and resource allocation is important because America’s global commitments innately produce resource constraints.

**Conclusion**

This article and other studies suggest that the realities of the BRI belie the grand strategic and geopolitical framing American policy circles typically rely on to characterize China’s influence; its origin and evolution indicate that it is too fragmented. Domestic and international actors further complicate the BRI’s coherence since they shape the BRI and are primary drivers of its processes and implementation. Given that key actors outside Beijing drive the BRI, it is difficult to make a case for the existence of a grand strategy, much less a coherent one. Furthermore, the BRI’s political and economic effects vary too significantly worldwide to assume China is reaping geopolitical benefits unilaterally. In the decade since its announcement, rigorous empirical research has demonstrated that every economic corridor has different characteristics and that every participant country has had different experiences due to various factors.
Although trends indicate that massive BRI investment has slowed significantly, a number of projects have been completed, and Chinese officials are keener to focus on smaller-scale projects in the coming years. Furthermore, despite reduced lending, Chinese firms are still turning over projects at a growing rate, signifying that private lending has gradually overtaken the lending from major policy banks. The BRI is unlikely to disappear; Xi recently designated it as a pillar of the “Global Community of Shared Future.” Furthermore, it plays a pivotal role in China’s interior development. American policymakers need to understand what the BRI is and what it is not. Grand strategic and geopolitical framings misdiagnose the BRI and undermine prudent American policy formulation and implementation.22

Zenel Garcia
Dr. Zenel Garcia is an associate professor of security studies in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the US Army War College. His research focuses on the intersection of international relations theory, security, and geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia.

Phillip Guerreiro
Dr. Phillip Guerreiro is an instructor of political science in the Department of Political Science at the University of Arkansas. His research focuses on water security and environmental politics in China and Southeast Asia.


5. Garcia, China’s Western Frontier, 1.


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