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JOINT FORCES STAFF COLLEGE
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**Countering Belt and Road Influence:
Options for US Special Operations Forces**

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Options for US Special Operations Forces**

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Joint Advanced Warfighting School in partial satisfaction of the requirements of a Master of Science Degree in Joint Campaign Planning Strategy. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Joint Forces Staff College or the Department of Defense.

This paper is entirely my own work except as documented in footnotes (or appropriate statement per the Academic Integrity Policy).

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Abstract

Recent US national strategy documents emphasize the need to compete against revisionist states. China has drawn the most concern due to the global scale of its actions to contest the existing world order. US military documents also emphasize competition and the need to integrate the Joint Force with other elements of national power to compete successfully. Unfortunately, the guidance fails to provide the Joint Force or special operations forces the specific means for this whole of government integration.

Meanwhile, China continues to advance its agenda through programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an infrastructure development program that promises win-win partnerships by offering participating countries competitive loans, construction services, technology upgrades, and access to the Chinese market. BRI also positions Chinese investments astride some of the world's most important maritime trade routes and strategic choke points and provides China significant leverage over participating countries. BRI takes advantage of a lack of transparency surrounding its agreements as well as various influence mechanisms to attract and retain participating countries.

To counter BRI, the US must first develop a better understanding of the unique circumstances driving countries to participate. The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning (JCIC) provides an approach for the Joint Force to contribute to a whole-of-government effort such as countering BRI. However, it fails to describe a means for the integration with interorganizational partners that it suggests is necessary for success. Lessons from US counterterrorism efforts offer potential options for US government integration and for the application of special operations forces to achieve the JCIC's desired outcomes as well as the means to counter China's coercive BRI activities.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: The Belt and Road Initiative.....	5
Chapter 3: BRI Influence Operations.....	11
Chapter 4: Case Studies.....	17
Gwadar Port – Pakistan.....	17
Hambantota Port – Sri Lanka.....	24
PLA Logistics Base – Djibouti.....	28
Chapter 5: Analysis and Options.....	34
Response Options.....	38
New Structures to Focus Capabilities.....	42
A New SOF Approach.....	44
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	49
Bibliography.....	51
Vita.....	61

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Chapter One – Introduction

“Spaces in nature including the ground, the seas, the air, and outer space are battlefields, but social spaces such as the military, politics, economics, culture, and the psyche are also battlefields.” - Liang and Xiangsui, Unrestricted Warfare¹

China’s regional and global ambitions continue to raise concerns in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Depending on perspective, China’s strategy under President Xi Jinping represents an existential threat to the existing world order or a logical and non-threatening response to its domestic and international challenges.² The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s plans for infrastructure and economic development from Asia to Europe, highlights the contrast in opinions on China’s foreign activities. Some see the infrastructure projects as much needed investments in underdeveloped areas. Others see China engaging in debt-trap diplomacy and developing dual-use infrastructure in strategically important areas.

China itself seems to have perceived the mixed feelings their initiative would inspire and accompanied the BRI with extensive influence operations. As part of the introduction of BRI, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) formed specific organizations to target media, academic, and business institutions to shape favorable perceptions and behaviors toward BRI.³ Given the scope of the effort, China clearly recognizes the importance of gaining favorable popular opinions of BRI.

Despite their influence efforts, the popularity of China’s investments through BRI remains mixed. A Pew Research poll released in December 2019 found that China’s

¹ Liang Qiao and Xiangsui Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare*, trans. FBIS (Vermont: Echo Point Books & Media, 2015).

² Nadège Rolland, “Mapping the Footprint of Belt and Road Influence Operations,” Sinopsis, August 12, 2019, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/rolland-bri-influence-operations/>.

³ Nadège Rolland, “Mapping the Footprint of Belt and Road Influence Operations,” Sinopsis, August 12, 2019, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/rolland-bri-influence-operations/>.

neighbors in particular were wary of its growing influence.⁴ The polling also found that Chinese investment did not correlate to positive perceptions of China.⁵ And when asked whether Chinese investment was good because of job creation or bad because of the potential for increased Chinese influence, slightly more than half saw the investments as positive.⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic further decreased China's global popularity.⁷

The US government determined that China's ambitious actions constituted a threat, and the 2018 US National Defense Strategy (NDS) articulates the US military's requirement to compete with China.⁸ As a strategic document, the NDS does not specify exactly how the US military should compete with China. The challenge then for the US military remains defining its role in a predominately non-military competition. China does not yet have the means to project its military power abroad at the same level as the US and the logistics facility in Djibouti remains China's only permanent overseas base.⁹ The Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Security Strategy does provide some refined guidance by directing the department to "seize the initiative and use [irregular warfare] capabilities proactively to expand the competitive space, defeat our adversaries' competitive strategies, and prepare for an escalation to conflict, if required."¹⁰ The latter point is the clearest and easiest for the military to implement. Given this, it is no surprise

⁴ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "How People around the World View China," *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog), December 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/12/05/attitudes-toward-china-2019/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid..

⁸ James Mattis, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy" (Department of Defense), accessed November 11, 2020, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>. 1.

⁹ Leah Dreyfuss and Mara Karlin, "All That Xi Wants: China Attempts to Ace Bases Overseas," *GLOBAL CHINA*, September 2019, 1.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy" (Department of Defense, 2020), <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Oct/02/2002510472/-1/-/1/0/Irregular-Warfare-Annex-to-the-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.PDF>.

that the US military has focused its competitive actions on conventional deterrence by shifting from counterterrorism operations to preparation for large-scale combat operations in the Pacific.

This paper argues that the US military, and its Special Operations Forces (SOF) in particular, can compete against China's use of non-military power effectively by employing unique capabilities to assist other US government departments and agencies in countering China's coercive influence. Through its global presence, the military can assist in developing a better understanding of China's coercive influences and its information operations capabilities can assist other US government departments and agencies in the counter-narrative effort.¹¹ The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning (JCIC) acknowledges whole-of-government approaches are required to compete and also acknowledges that the Department of State, not the military, will likely lead in competition.¹² Unfortunately, the JCIC is aspirational in nature and provides no discussion of how the Joint Force might integrate with the capabilities of the other departments and agencies in the US government. This paper extends upon the JCIC and other joint concepts to suggest practical ways to organize US government capabilities using a competition-focused Center under the executive branch and subordinate Joint Interagency Task Forces, each led by civilians. Finally, the paper suggest adjustments SOF will need to make for competition such as re-invigorating its unconventional warfare capabilities and adopting new operational paradigms.

¹¹ Donald M. Bishop, "DIME, Not DiME: Time to Align the Instruments of U.S. Informational Power," The Strategy Bridge, June 20, 2018, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/6/20/dime-not-dime-time-to-align-the-instruments-of-us-informational-power>, (accessed 12 November 2020).

¹² Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning" (The Joint Staff, March 16, 2018), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concept_integrated_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257, (accessed 14 April 2021).

This paper focuses on three BRI projects as a representative subset of China's global economic and influence activities to better understand how the US military can assist a whole-of-government approach to competing with China. This study includes information about the nature of BRI, how China uses influence to support BRI, and provides analysis in support of a US response. Chapter two provides an overview of China's BRI and includes information on the potential for BRI infrastructure to support China's power projection which underscores US security concerns about BRI. Chapter three examines the influence operations accompanying BRI and how BRI itself is used as an influence mechanism. Chapter four explores three BRI projects: Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Logistics Base in Djibouti. The case studies include potential dual-use infrastructure and ports the PLA Navy (PLAN) could use to support Chinese power projection. Chapter five provides analysis of the information from preceding chapters to develop potential opportunities for US approaches to counter BRI and chapter six summarizes the main points of this thesis.

Chapter Two – The Belt and Road Initiative

“In China we have saying: If the water is too clear, you don’t catch any fish.” – Former China Export-Import Bank President, Li Ruogu, in 2007 when asked about his bank’s transparency policies¹

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is as ambitious as it is massive. The Chinese Government claims “the Belt and Road Initiative aims to promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, set up all-dimensional, multitiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries.”² BRI encompasses 138 countries which account for roughly 60% of the world’s population or 4.6 billion people.³ Four million or more Chinese workers are employed overseas, with 90% working in BRI countries.⁴ The BRI includes numerous plans beyond traditional hard infrastructure projects and now includes the Digital Silk Road (DSR), the Health Silk Road, the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor, and the Polar Silk Road.

¹ Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), https://books.google.com/books?id=EmAVDAAQBAJ&pg=PA296&lpg=PA296&dq=Li+Ruogu+water+clear+catch+fish&source=bl&ots=g9Wga7qcQE&sig=ACfU3U2_hVlwntW4L_FXIskZ0JefyKY8mw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjN-pmlpvjfAhWlp1kKHxEWAksQ6AEwGHoECACQAQ#v=onepage&q=Li%20Ruogu%20water%20clear%20catch%20fish&f=false, (accessed 14 April 2021), 296.

² “Full Text: Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative,” The State Council, The People’s Republic of China, March 30, 2015, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm.

³ “How Will the Belt and Road Initiative Advance China’s Interests?,” *ChinaPower Project* (blog), May 8, 2017, <http://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

⁴ Nadege Rolland, “Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China’s Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads” (The National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2019), https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf, 3.

While China's BRI narrative focuses on the benefits for partners, the initiative also supports both domestic and foreign policy objectives for China.

The BRI serves as a key component of domestic economic reform efforts in China. China needs economic reform to avoid falling into the 'middle-income trap' where it fails to transition from a primarily manufacturing-based economy to one that offers increased value-added manufacturing and services.⁵ Past Chinese economic growth depended on ever increasing exports which relied on increasing production capacity and efficiency.⁶ This past economic model is no longer sufficient to drive future growth because increasing labor costs make China less attractive as a manufacturing center.

China's policies following the global financial crisis and its changing demographics are exasperating its economic challenges. Chinese government stimulus to offset the impact of the 2008 financial crisis was used to overinvest in industrial capacity, housing, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs).⁷ Additionally, China's shrinking working-age population and increased education standards are creating demand for higher wages which makes its labor less attractive in the global market.⁸ In recognition of these and other economic challenges, the government introduced supply-side structural reform

⁵ Sagatom Saha, "The Future of Chinese Foreign Economic Policy Will Challenge U.S. Interests, Part 1: The Belt-and-Road Initiative and the Middle Income Trap," The Jamestown Foundation, January 29, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-future-of-chinese-foreign-economic-policy-will-challenge-u-s-interests-part-1-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-the-middle-income-trap/>, (accessed 20 December 2020).

⁶ Sagatom Saha and Ashley Feng, "Global Supply Chains, Economic Decoupling, and U.S.-China Relations, Part 2: The View from the People's Republic of China," The Jamestown Foundation, May 1, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/global-supply-chains-economic-decoupling-and-u-s-china-relations-part-2-the-view-from-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>, (accessed 20 December 2020).

⁷ John Boulter, "China's Supply-Side Structural Reform | Bulletin – December Quarter 2018," *Reserve Bank of Australia Bulletin*, no. December 2018 (December 2018), <https://www.rba.gov.au/publications/bulletin/2018/dec/chinas-supply-side-structural-reform.html>, (accessed 20 December 2020).

⁸ Sagatom Saha and Ashley Feng, "Global Supply Chains, Economic Decoupling, and U.S.-China Relations, Part 2: The View from the People's Republic of China," The Jamestown Foundation, May 1, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/global-supply-chains-economic-decoupling-and-u-s-china-relations-part-2-the-view-from-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>, (accessed 20 December 2020).

(SSSR) focused on: reducing excess industrial capacity, reducing leverage in the corporate sector, de-stocking property inventories, lowering costs for businesses, and addressing weak links in the economy.⁹

BRI supports China's SSSR efforts by employing the excess industrial capacity and reducing leverage in SOEs. The BRI infrastructure building program relies on Chinese industry, absorbing some of its excess capacity. SOEs benefit from many of the BRI contracts allowing them to repay their debt. Additionally, BRI simultaneously supports the acquisition of raw materials, commodities, and energy from foreign partners for Chinese industry while advancing the development of foreign partner markets to purchase Chinese finished goods.¹⁰ While China has extensively stressed the 'win-win' nature of BRI, it is clearly intended to serve as a key driver of domestic economic growth for China.

China also uses BRI to meet its foreign policy and security goals by increasing its influence beyond East Asia and securing critical land and sea lines of communication. China's stated policy goals for BRI include improving communications with partner governments; coordinating on economic and development strategies; and encouraging collaboration by signing trade deals, aligning standards, and improving economic integration.¹¹ From a geostrategic perspective, China is focusing BRI projects in areas

⁹ John Boulter, "China's Supply-Side Structural Reform | Bulletin – December Quarter 2018," *Reserve Bank of Australia Bulletin*, no. December 2018 (December 2018), <https://www.rba.gov.au/publications/bulletin/2018/dec/chinas-supply-side-structural-reform.html>, (accessed 20 December 2020).

¹⁰ Jon Jiang, "The Belt and Road Initiative: A Domestically-Motivated Program Fueling Global Competition," The Jamestown Foundation, May 29, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-belt-and-road-initiative-a-domestically-motivated-program-fueling-global-competition/>, (accessed 19 December 2020).

¹¹ "How Will the Belt and Road Initiative Advance China's Interests?," *ChinaPower Project* (blog), May 8, 2017, <http://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative/>, (accessed 11 November 2020).

that overlap with critical routes for importing hydrocarbons and other raw materials which China uses for domestic consumption or to export finished goods. In particular, China's port projects through Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and the Red Sea sit astride its most important trade routes. Additionally, projects such as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and pipelines through central Asia potentially provide alternative routes to its current shipping lanes which must transit through the Malacca Straits and other maritime choke points.

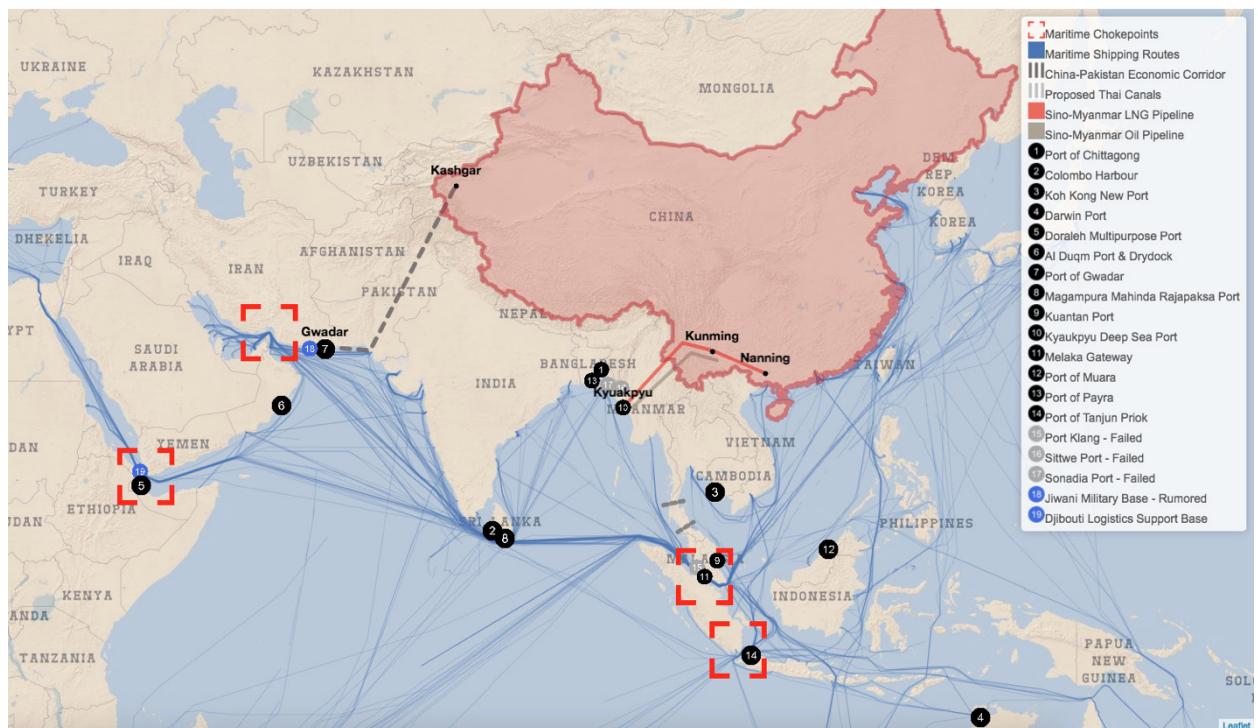


Figure 1: Shipping lanes and maritime chokepoints overlaid with BRI port projects¹²

While many of the BRI project locations are strategically important, they are also in areas subject to crime and terrorism. While China recognizes the security threats to BRI, it remains reluctant to accompany the effort with the deployment of its military

¹² Devin Thorne and Ben Spevack, "Harbored Ambitions: How China's Port Investments Are Strategically Reshaping the Indo-Pacific" (C4ADS, April 17, 2018), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/566ef8b4d8af107232d5358a/t/5ad5e20ef950b777a94b55c3/1523966489456/Harbored+Ambitions.pdf>, 26.

forces. China prefers to maintain an image of benevolence for BRI.¹³ Domestic pressure and legitimate security concerns will likely push China to expand its military presence along the BRI as it has in Djibouti with People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces and in Tajikistan with a paramilitary force from the Chinese People's Armed Police.¹⁴ Because China recognizes the unpopularity of accompanying its projects with military forces, in most areas they have pursued other options such as private security contractors and reliance on local security forces. The use of Chinese private security companies (PSCs), though not yet widespread, could offer advantages for securing BRI projects. Using PSCs would keep the PLA and thus the official face of Beijing's military power out of view. To fully realize the contribution of PSCs though, China must change its laws prohibiting the possession of weapons by PSCs and increase their professionalization and training.¹⁵ Without these changes, China and its BRI projects will have to continue to rely on local partner security services and foreign PSCs, or the PLA will need to expand its power projection capabilities.

The dual-use nature of BRI infrastructure projects provides the PLA with options to deploy forces when required, but with lower costs and less public criticism.¹⁶ Chinese

¹³ Nadege Rolland, "Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads" (The National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2019), https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf. 3.

¹⁴ Sergey Sukhankin, "The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Two: China's (Para)Military Efforts to Promote Security in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan," *Jamestown*, China Brief, 20, no. 14 (August 12, 2020), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-security-component-of-the-bri-in-central-asia-part-two-chinas-paramilitary-efforts-to-promote-security-in-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan/>, (Accessed 13 February 2021).

¹⁵ Sergey Sukhankin, "Chinese Private Security Contractors: New Trends and Future Prospects," *Jamestown*, May 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-private-security-contractors-new-trends-and-future-prospects/>, (accessed 7 February 2021).

¹⁶ Leah Dreyfuss and Mara Karlin, "All That Xi Wants: China Attempts to Ace Bases Overseas," *GLOBAL CHINA*, September 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FP_20190930_china_basing_karlin_dreyfuss.pdf. 6.

laws promote and enforce civil-military fusion that includes the requirement to build transportation infrastructure to military specifications. Even overseas projects are subject to the laws which means some BRI projects are likely being built to accommodate Chinese military requirements.¹⁷ Port projects in particular could prove useful to the PLA Navy (PLAN) in the future if built to their specifications. The model allows the PLA to save its own resources since the ports are primarily meant for civilian traffic and they don't impose an overt military appearance or permanent presence that could spark criticism while at the same time providing important naval access in a time of need.

The COVID 19 pandemic exposes the danger in China's potential overreliance on BRI to reform its economy. Because China extends massive loans to nations hosting BRI projects, it depends on the success of those projects to drive economic growth that facilitates repayment by the borrowing nations. Defaults on debt repayment as well as declining foreign reserves due the COVID-19 pandemic and trade tensions with the US may inhibit China's ability to continue loaning money at the same rate as previously.¹⁸ Available data suggests that China has slowed its lending since at least 2019 if not earlier and is attempting to focus more on the quality of investments over quantity due to international scrutiny and push back from partners concerning loan repayment.¹⁹

¹⁷ Daniel R Russel and Blake H Berger, "Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative" (Asia Society Policy Institute, September 2020), https://media.carnegie.org/filer_public/ff/97/ff977837-8bd4-4c36-9144-c33e9dc81b1b/weaponizing_the_belt_and_road_initiative_0.pdf, (accessed 12 February 2021).

¹⁸ Cecilia Joy-Perez, "The Belt and Road Initiative Adds More Partners, But Beijing Has Fewer Dollars to Spend," The Jamestown Foundation, September 26, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-belt-and-road-initiative-adds-more-partners-but-beijing-has-fewer-dollars-to-spend/>, (accessed 21 December 2020).

¹⁹ Matthew Mingey and Agatha Kratz, "China's Belt and Road: Down but Not Out," Rhodium Group, January 4, 2021, <https://rhg.com/research/bri-down-out/>, (accessed 7 February 2021).

Chapter Three – BRI Influence Operations

“Wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports must extend their tentacles.” - Xi Jinping in 2016 speech to state media¹

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) both benefits from the Chinese propaganda and influence mechanisms to secure partner participation and is itself a form of influence over participant countries. China recognized that not all nations would welcome the BRI with open arms. “To enable BRI’s smooth promotion and implementation abroad and ensure other countries’ cooperative behavior, Beijing has not only carefully crafted a benevolent narrative around BRI that has been widely disseminated worldwide, but also established, mobilized, and coordinated a web of specific “Belt and Road” organizations that act as proxies for central Party-State organs.”² In addition to its existing propaganda apparatus and BRI-specific organizations, China also uses inducement and coercion to more directly influence participation in BRI.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains a well-developed propaganda apparatus to craft and deliver its preferred narrative to foreign and domestic audiences and to refute critical narratives or those counter to the party’s interests. The goal of the party’s foreign propaganda machinery according to Xi Jinping is to “tell China’s story well” which really means to tell the CCP-approved version of the China story.³ The

¹ Sarah Cook, “The Implications for Democracy of China’s Globalizing Media Influence” (Freedom House, 2019), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-and-media/2019/media-freedom-downward-spiral>, (accessed 16 January 2021).

² Nadège Rolland, “Mapping the Footprint of Belt and Road Influence Operations,” *Sinopsis*, August 12, 2019, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/rolland-bri-influence-operations/>, (accessed 11 October 2020), 1.

³ David Bandurski, “The Fable of the Master Storyteller,” *China Media Project* (blog), September 29, 2017, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2017/09/29/the-fable-of-the-master-storyteller/>, (accessed 23 January 2021).

bureaucracy to tell the approved version of the Chinese story encompasses multiple party and states offices but the most senior party leaders, including Xi Jinping and other top party officials, still closely direct the propaganda. The various offices and departments manage a range of foreign propaganda mechanisms including traditional media, cultural diplomacy, and electronic media such as games and social media platforms.⁴ China uses these means to promote all its interests including BRI.

China utilizes traditional media to spread propaganda through its state-owned media outlets; through partnerships with, or outright ownership of, foreign media; and through outreach and training of foreign journalists. China's state-owned media includes newspapers, television, and radio outlets which have expanded their reach beyond China's borders. China Daily, for example, pays to have English-language "China Watch" inserts in major US newspapers that have promoted BRI.⁵ China created the Belt and Road News Network to share information and stories on the BRI rollout and has attracted 182 member organizations from 86 countries.⁶ Chinese state-owned media and private Chinese companies such as Alibaba invest in partial or full ownership of foreign media companies. After Chinese investment in foreign media companies, the companies tend to become less critical of China.⁷ Training programs to educate foreign journalists to

⁴ Anne-Marie Brady, "China's Foreign Propaganda Machine," Wilson Center, October 26, 2015, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/chinas-foreign-propaganda-machine>, (accessed 9 January 2021).

⁵ "Chinese Mouthpiece Paid US Newspapers \$19 Mn in Ads, Printing," *Business Standard India*, June 9, 2020, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/chinese-mouthpiece-paid-us-newspapers-19-mn-in-ads-printing-report-120060900514_1.html, (accessed 23 January 2021).

⁶ Nadège Rolland, "Mapping the Footprint of Belt and Road Influence Operations," Sinopsis, August 12, 2019, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/rolland-bri-influence-operations/>, (accessed 11 October 2020), 5.

⁷ Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, "Inside China's Audacious Global Propaganda Campaign," *The Guardian*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/07/china-plan-for-global-media-dominance-propaganda-xi-jinping>, (accessed 23 January 2021).

better tell the China story have included 3,400 media workers from 146 countries.⁸ The investments China makes in foreign media allow it to improve its control over the narrative on BRI.

China also practices cultural diplomacy to spread the CCP-approved version of Chinese policy, culture, and history to Chinese diaspora, Chinese students studying abroad, and foreign audiences. Two of the more prominent mechanisms for cultural outreach are the United Front Work Department (UFWD) and Confucius Institutes. The CCP uses the UFWD to specifically target overseas populations by influencing academic debates, promoting the CCP narrative among Chinese communities, controlling Chinese-language media, and co-opting foreign elites to promote the party's views.⁹ The Confucius Institutes exist to teach Chinese language, art, and culture to foreign audiences. Many of the over 548 Confucius Institutes worldwide are part of universities and many are in BRI participant countries.¹⁰ Critics argue that the institutes pressure universities to follow the CCP-approved version of topics sensitive to China such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.¹¹ The UFWD and Confucius institutes are examples of China's growing soft power propagation.

⁸ Andrew McCormick, ““Even If You Don’t Think You Have a Relationship with China, China Has a Big Relationship with You,”” *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 20, 2019, https://www.cjr.org/special_report/china-foreign-journalists-oral-history.php/, (accessed 23 January 2021).

⁹ “Backgrounder: A Brief History of China’s United Front,” *Geopolitical Monitor*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/backgrounder-a-brief-history-of-chinas-united-front/>, (accessed 23 January 2021).

¹⁰ Pratik Jakhar, “Confucius Institutes: The Growth of China’s Controversial Cultural Branch,” *BBC News*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49511231>, (accessed 24 January 2021).

¹¹ Pratik Jakhar, “Confucius Institutes: The Growth of China’s Controversial Cultural Branch,” *BBC News*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49511231>, (accessed 24 January 2021).

The CCP increasingly uses the online information environment to shape public opinion and social media to deliver its narrative to foreign audiences.¹² Early in the COVID-19 outbreak, China used social media to deliver false theories on the origins of the virus to deflect attention from its own missteps in preventing spread after the virus' discovery in Wuhan, China. China then used the opportunity created by this deflection to recast a positive narrative of China assisting the world in combating the virus.¹³ Many state-owned Chinese news outlets also use social media to disseminate their content though they do not disclose “their state ownership or CCP editorial control” as noted by Freedom House.¹⁴ The online information environment provides a useful mechanism for China to disseminate its preferred narrative, but it is also gaining increasing control over the technology used to disseminate it.

The Digital Silk Road (DSR) is China's digital component to the BRI that focuses on “improving recipients' telecommunications networks, artificial intelligence capabilities, cloud computing, e-commerce and mobile payment systems, surveillance technology, smart cities, and other high-tech areas.”¹⁵ The DSR, similar to what the overall BRI does for infrastructure companies, also assists China's technology companies in gaining overseas markets for their products. The spread of China's digital products and

¹² Kristine Lee and Kendall-Taylor Andrea, “Forecasting Synergies in Chinese and Russia Digital Influence Operations,” *Open Forum* (blog), July 2, 2020, <http://www.theasanforum.org/forecasting-synergies-in-chinese-and-russia-digital-influence-operations/>, (accessed 24 January 2021).

¹³ Kristine Lee and Kendall-Taylor Andrea, “Forecasting Synergies in Chinese and Russia Digital Influence Operations,” *Open Forum* (blog), July 2, 2020, <http://www.theasanforum.org/forecasting-synergies-in-chinese-and-russia-digital-influence-operations/>, (accessed 24 January 2021).

¹⁴ Sarah Cook, “Beijing's Global Megaphone,” Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>, (accessed 24 January 2021).

¹⁵ “Assessing China's Digital Silk Road,” Council on Foreign Relations, accessed January 24, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/china-digital-silk-road/>.

networks potentially provides China and recipient states the ability to further suppress critical narratives and discussions while collecting data on users. Through the DSR investments, governments can increase their ability to monitor, censor, and block the flow of information within their countries. China and partner nation regimes could use their newly acquired digital infrastructure, and the training China provides with it, to spread a positive narrative of BRI and China, and suppress any dissenting opinions.

In line with BRI's outwardly economic focus, China also uses what the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) calls "corrosive capital" in order to influence recipient countries and make them more susceptible to economic and political manipulation.¹⁶ While CIPE uses the term specifically as it applies to capital directed to new and transitioning democracies, their definition of "financing that lacks transparency, accountability, and market orientation flowing from authoritarian regimes" provides a useful descriptor for China's BRI lending activities in many countries regardless of their type of government.¹⁷ China prefers to negotiate deals for infrastructure projects in private and often does not release loan terms.¹⁸ This approach is often agreeable to the leadership and business elites in recipient countries as they can use the largesse from China's BRI investments for political and/or personal gain.¹⁹

¹⁶ John Morrell, "Channeling the Tide: Protecting Democracies Amid a Flood of Corrosive Capital" (Center for International Private Enterprise, September 2018), https://www.cipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/MXW_CIPE_CorrosiveCapitalPaper_PRINT_20190809.pdf, (accessed 16 February 2021), 2-3.

¹⁷ Ibid, 2.

¹⁸ Jonathan E. Hillman, "Corruption Flows Along China's Belt and Road," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 18, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/corruption-flows-along-chinas-belt-and-road>, (accessed 16 February 2021).

¹⁹ "Is The BRI A Corruption Magnet?," The ASEAN Post, October 10, 2018, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/bri-corruption-magnet>, (accessed 16 February 2021).

More directly, the BRI itself represents an influence mechanism by serving as a lender of last resort for countries with poor credit ratings but also in dire need of development. China may be the only option for such countries that are unwilling or unable to meet the requirements of other lenders. The case studies in the next chapter highlight two such countries, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, that found China as the only willing partner for certain projects. Also, in both cases the countries' high debt burdens forced them to seek additional loans from China, as well as other lenders, to meet loan repayment requirements. By becoming the de facto lender of last resort, China does not always need to use its other influence tools to gain partners. Instead, those partners seek out China to meet their own objectives.

Chapter Four – Case Studies

This chapter uses case studies to highlight how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) works in unique settings. The cases represented here: Gwadar Port, Pakistan; Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka; and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Logistics Base, Djibouti were selected due to their mention in multiple sources as representing strategic locations that serve China's power projection potential. Each of the three cases represent single projects that are part of broader Chinese investments in each country under BRI. Therefore, the projects cannot be completely separated from the totality of BRI investment in the respective countries.

Gwadar Port - Pakistan

The Gwadar Port project predates the BRI but was quickly subsumed under its banner once BRI was initiated. The port sits on Pakistan's southwest coast at the confluence of the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, approximately 120km from the Iranian border and 400km from the Strait of Hormuz. The China Harbor Engineering Company developed the initial site in 2002 as the general contractor while China's Export Import (EXIM) Bank provided the financial backing.¹ In 2013, the specially formed and Chinese state-owned, China Overseas Port Holding Company took over port operations. In April of 2015, Xi Jinping and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) from Xinjiang, China to

¹ Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, and Peter A. Dutton, "China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan" (China Maritime Studies Institute, August 2020), <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/gwadar-chinas-potential-strategic-strongpoint-pakistan/>, (accessed 22 December 2020), 12.

Gwadar Port as a means of furthering the economic and security cooperation between the two countries.² The CPEC project, a flagship of the overall BRI and with Gwadar Port as its centerpiece, serve different Chinese and Pakistani interests.

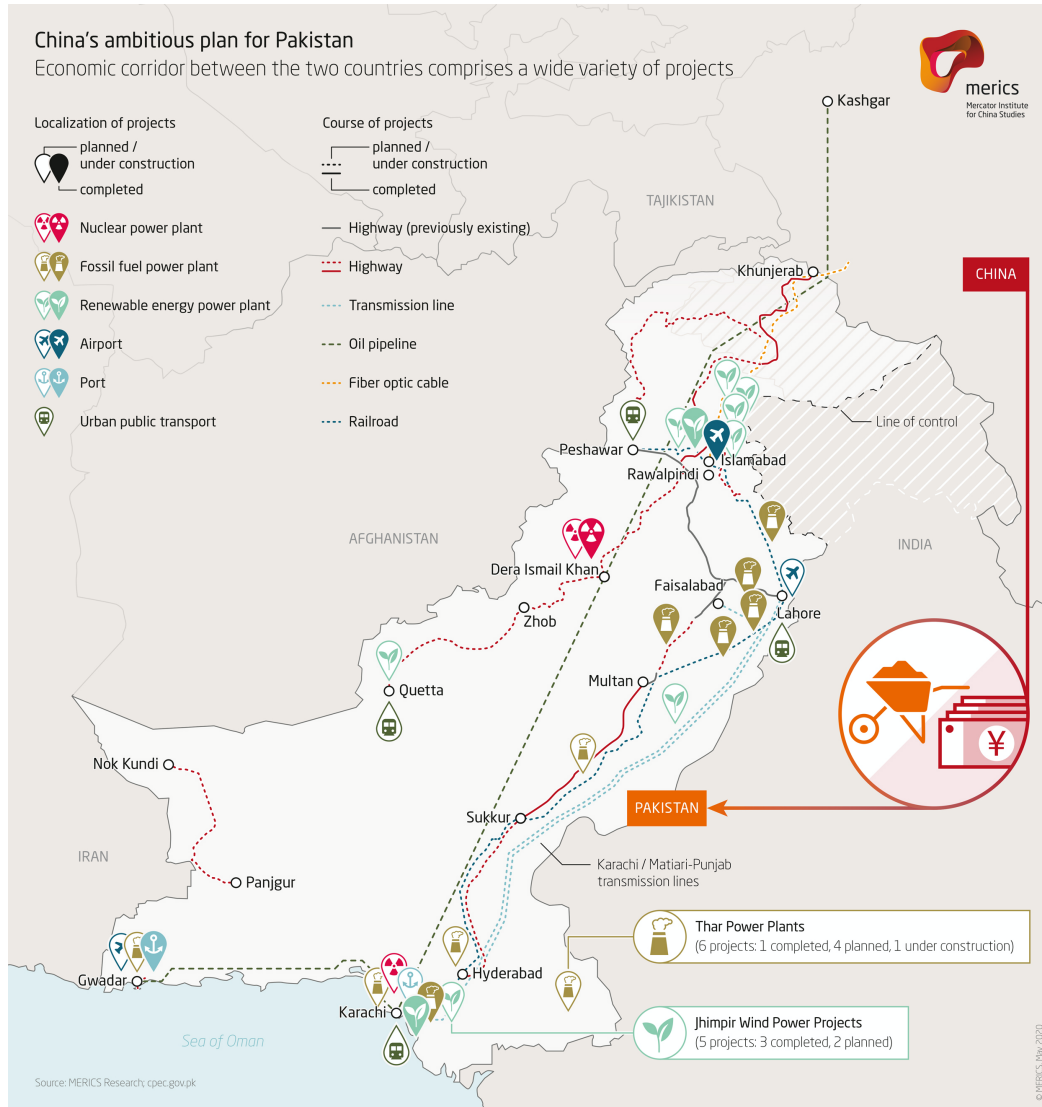


Figure 2: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor³

² Katharine Houreld, "China and Pakistan Launch Economic Corridor Plan Worth \$46 Billion," *Reuters*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-china-idUSKBN0NA12T20150420>, (accessed 23 December 2020).

³ Jacob Mardell, "The BRI in Pakistan: China's Flagship Economic Corridor," *Merics: Mercator Institute for China Studies*, May 20, 2020, <https://merics.org/en/analysis/bri-pakistan-chinas-flagship-economic-corridor>.

CPEC and Gwadar Port further both economic and geostrategic goals for China. Economically, as with other BRI projects, Gwadar supports the easing of Chinese industrial overcapacity and employs SOEs. Strategically, Gwadar serves two purposes. First, Gwadar Port and the associated linkage to Xinjiang offer an overland route between China and the Indian Ocean, thus theoretically solving China's Malacca dilemma. While technically the overland route is viable, it should be noted that the route requires passage through incredibly treacherous terrain including Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region, home to 18 of the 50 highest mountains in the world.⁴ Second, Gwadar and the larger CPEC investments represent "an effort to stabilize western China by shoring up insecurity on its periphery."⁵ China remains concerned about stability in Xinjiang and in particular has concerns about the radicalization of Chinese Muslim separatists by Pakistani extremists.⁶

Gwadar and CPEC serve economic and strategic purposes for Pakistan as well. Pakistan greatly needs the infrastructure development that CPEC offers and "seeks to leverage Chinese capital, production capacity, and know-how to upgrade Pakistan's infrastructure and build 'a mechanism for sustainable economic growth.'"⁷ Strategically, the investments and cooperation also serve to strengthen Pakistan's relationship with a rising regional power; an ally that Pakistan needs given its adversarial relationship with

⁴ "Mountains of Gilgit Baltistan » Adventure Pakistan," *Adventure Pakistan* (blog), August 5, 2018, <https://adventurepakistan.com/pakistan-gilgit-baltistan/>, (accessed 23 December 2020).

⁵ Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, and Peter A. Dutton, "China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan" (China Maritime Studies Institute, August 2020), <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/gwadar-chinas-potential-strategic-strongpoint-pakistan/>, (accessed 22 December 2020), 2.

⁶ Katharine Houreld, "China and Pakistan Launch Economic Corridor Plan Worth \$46 Billion," *Reuters*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-china-idUSKBN0NA12T20150420>, (accessed 23 December 2020).

⁷ Jacob Mardell, "The BRI in Pakistan: China's Flagship Economic Corridor," *Merics: Mercator Institute for China Studies*, May 20, 2020, <https://merics.org/en/analysis/bri-pakistan-chinas-flagship-economic-corridor>, (accessed 22 December 2020).

India. For both China and Pakistan, Gwadar and CPEC have yet to fully realize the desired economic and strategic results.

Politics, insurgency, the COVID-19 pandemic, and engineering and economic realities have all played a role in hindering the desired outcomes of Gwadar and CPEC. Politically, Prime Minister Imran Khan won election on a platform more critical of CPEC than his predecessor, Nawaz Shariff, which has led to a slowing of the pace of projects.⁸ The Chinese are also dealing with Pakistani military interference in CPEC and there are rumors of Pakistani military leaders using CPEC for their own enrichment.⁹ Security concerns also loom large especially for Baluchistan, the region surrounding Gwadar Port, and local Baluch politicians and citizens have continuously criticized the port and other CPEC projects for failing to improve the lives of the local population.¹⁰

Economically, the port has failed to create demand and a corresponding return on investment. Gwadar competes directly with the two main Pakistani ports, Karachi and Port Muhammad Bin Qasim. Gwadar accounts for less than 1% of annual throughput in Pakistani ports.¹¹ Since COPHC took over the port in 2013 until spring of 2019, Gwadar Port generated only \$2.26 million in revenue.¹² The economic outlook for Gwadar

⁸ Andrew Small, "Returning to the Shadows: China, Pakistan, and the Fate of CPEC," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, September 23, 2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/returning-shadows-china-pakistan-and-fate-cpec>, (accessed 22 December 2020).

⁹ Ayjaz Wani, "Pakistan: Why Has China Halted CPEC Projects," Observer Research Foundation, November 25, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/pakistan-why-has-china-halted-cpec-projects/>, (accessed 22 December 2020).

¹⁰ S Khan, "Why Chinese Investment Is Stoking Anger in Pakistan's Balochistan Province | DW | 15.07.2020," Deutsche Welle, July 15, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-chinese-investment-is-stoking-anger-in-pakistan-balochistan-province/a-54188705>.

¹¹ Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, and Peter A. Dutton, "China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan" (China Maritime Studies Institute, August 2020), <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/gwadar-chinas-potential-strategic-strongpoint-pakistan/>, (accessed 22 December 2020), 23.

¹² Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, and Peter A. Dutton, "China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan" (China Maritime Studies Institute, August

remains weak due to the lack of economically feasible transport linkage to the rest of Pakistan and the Central Asian countries.¹³

Finally, Pakistan continues to face a debt crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, Pakistan took an IMF loan for \$6 billion as part of an economic reform package.¹⁴ Despite the IMF loan, the country continues to struggle with a debt to GDP ratio of approximately 87%.¹⁵ Overall, the results to date and the future prospects for both Gwadar Port and the broader CPEC are well below those touted by Chinese and Pakistani leaders.

Despite the lack of results Pakistani leaders continue to champion CPEC initiatives. Increased involvement of the Pakistani Army in Pakistan's government and in CPEC in particular may account for the continued strong support.¹⁶ Prime Minister Khan appointed retired Army general Asim Bajwa as the Chairman for the CPEC Authority. It appears in the near-term that Pakistan wishes to emphasize the strategic gains of a closer partnership with China though the economic fruits of the partnership have not, and may not, appear.

2020), <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/gwadar-chinas-potential-strategic-strongpoint-pakistan/>, (accessed 22 December 2020), 16.

¹³ Arif Rafiz, "Regional Transit Trade Isn't Enough to Drive Pakistan's Gwadar Port," Middle East Institute, October 14, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/regional-transit-trade-isnt-enough-drive-pakistans-gwadar-port>.

¹⁴ "IMF Executive Board Approves US\$6 Billion 39-Month EFF Arrangement for Pakistan," International Monetary Fund, July 2019, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/07/03/pr19264-pakistan-imf-executive-board-approves-39-month-eff-arrangement>.

¹⁵ "Pakistan - National Debt in Relation to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) 2025," Statista, October 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/383884/national-debt-of-pakistan-in-relation-to-gross-domestic-product-gdp/>.

¹⁶ Arif Rafiq, "The Pakistan Army's Belt and Road Putsch," Foreign Policy, August 26, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy-com.ndueproxy.idm.oclc.org/2020/08/26/the-pakistan-armys-belt-and-road-putsch/>, (accessed 27 December 2020).

While the Pakistani public has grown skeptical of the benefits of Gwadar and CPEC, the Pakistani government has cracked down on anti-CPEC sentiment within the country. Numerous attacks against Chinese in Pakistan have plagued Gwadar Port and other CPEC projects. Pakistanis are increasingly critical of the inequitable distribution of Chinese investments and their associated returns, and remain concerned about the stated CPEC goals of spreading Chinese culture.¹⁷ In the summer of 2020, pro-freedom groups from the Baluchistan and Sindh regions of Pakistan united to protest the CPEC projects in their regions that they say further oppress their populations.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the Pakistani government treats anyone who protests CPEC as enemies of the state and has used judicial and extrajudicial means to suppress opposition; including attacks on media and academics critical of CPEC.¹⁹ In October 2020, Pakistan enacted new legislation to tighten control over social media and internet service providers that bans content that could “excite disaffection towards the reputation of Federal or Provincial Government” or threaten Pakistani security.²⁰ This legislation better enables the government to monitor and censor debate surrounding CPEC and other sensitive topics, further silencing critics.

China has also taken action to ensure the narrative surrounding CPEC remains positive. China has invested in Pakistani media outlets and has established Confucius

¹⁷ Syed Nooruzzaman, “Anti-China Sentiment Growing in Pakistan?,” *Tehelka*, December 1, 2018, <http://tehelka.com/anti-china-sentiment-growing-in-pakistan/>, (accessed 27 December 2020).

¹⁸ Geeta Mohan, “Baloch, Sindhi pro-Freedom Groups Unite to Oppose China-Pakistan CPEC Project,” *India Today*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/baloch-sindhi-pro-freedom-groups-unite-to-oppose-china-pakistan-cpec-project-1707745-2020-08-04>, (accessed 27 December 2020).

¹⁹ Siegfried O Wolf, *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16198-9>.

²⁰ R. Umaina Ahmed, “In Pakistan, Social Media Platforms Risk Bans under New ‘Draconian’ Rules,” *Global Voices Advocacy* (blog), November 27, 2020, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2020/11/27/in-pakistan-social-media-platforms-risk-bans-under-new-draconian-rules/>.

Institutes in Pakistan to spread positive views of Chinese culture. Additionally, China and Pakistan setup a collaborative effort between a Chinese news organization and a Pakistani think tank to respond to any negative perceptions of CPEC.²¹ In these ways, China seeks to proactively address concerns surrounding CPEC and ensure its flagship BRI project enjoys positive appraisals.

Concerns also remain over the potential for surveillance technology transfer under China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) that could provide Pakistan with increased capability to monitor and control legitimate political opposition.²² Other DSR components in Pakistan include an undersea fiberoptic cable from Pakistan to Mombasa, Kenya as a portion of the Pakistan East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) system, and a fiberoptic cable from China into and through Pakistan. The internet connection through China allows Pakistan to avoid connections that must go through its rival India.²³ While the DSR investments seem reasonable to improve connectivity rates, they provide both Chinese and Pakistani leadership additional avenues to monitor and suppress the Pakistani public's access to information.

Pakistan has real needs for infrastructure development and China's CPEC offers a hopeful means to meet those needs. Unfortunately, CPEC and Gwadar remain works in progress after many years and have failed to meet expectations. Despite the lack of tangible benefits, both China and Pakistan remain committed though investments have

²¹ Mehr Nadeem, "China Boosts Soft Power in Pakistan via Film and Social Media," *Reuters*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-pakistan-softpower-idUSKCN1VWOLJ>.

²² Siegfried O Wolf, *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16198-9>, 320.

²³ "Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy" (International Republican Institute, 2019), https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/chinese_malign_influence_report.pdf, (accessed 24 January 2021).

slowed and will likely not meet the lofty goals set initially. China and Pakistan both use various means including lack of transparency, media investment, cultural exchanges, and censorship to maintain a positive narrative in the face of the many obstacles to CPEC goals.

Hambantota Port – Sri Lanka

The Hambantota Port sits on the southern tip of Sri Lanka that juts into the Indian Ocean. With 70,000 to 80,000 ships passing just a few miles south of Hambantota every year, there remains a powerful illusion that the port can become financially viable despite multiple negative feasibility studies.²⁴ Hambantota Port appears to have been the personal project of Mahinda Rajapaksa, the former president of Sri Lanka from 2005-2015 and recently elected Prime Minister in 2020. Mahinda's father originally formulated the idea for a port at Hambantota in the 1970's.²⁵ Between 2001 and 2006, three feasibility studies were conducted, only the last of which showed any economic viability.²⁶ Mahinda continued to pursue the port project, as well as other projects in his home region, after he became president in 2005. The projects "reflected both need and greed" in that they supported Sri Lanka's need for infrastructure and greed in that Rajapaksa focused the projects on his home district where his party was challenged by political opposition.²⁷

²⁴ Eva Grey, "The Story of Hambantota Port: A Flunking Token of Political Corruption," *Ship Technology Global*, October 2018, https://ship.nridigital.com/ship_oct18/the_story_of_hambantota_port_a_flunking_token_of_political_corruption, (accessed 29 December 2020).

²⁵ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative" (Chatham House, August 19, 2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-25-debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy-jones-hameiri.pdf>, (accessed 28 December 2020), 13.

²⁶ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative" (Chatham House, August 19, 2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-25-debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy-jones-hameiri.pdf>, (accessed 28 December 2020) 13-14.

²⁷ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative" (Chatham House, August 19, 2020),

However strong Rajapaksa's personal feelings, the new port was never an economic requirement as Sri Lanka's main port in Colombo still had room to expand and met Sri Lanka's needs.²⁸

To realize his Hambantota dream, Rajapaksa looked to secure foreign funding for the project. India refused the project on the grounds that it was not economically viable, but China agreed.²⁹ The China Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC) supported Sri Lanka's bid for Chinese funding and also lobbied Sri Lanka to expand the project and exaggerated the expected economic benefit of the port.³⁰ Sri Lanka received the initial loan for \$307 million from China's EXIM Bank and Rajapaksa continued to push for funding for other vanity projects as well as additional expansion at Hambantota.³¹ China seemed more than willing to continue to let Rajapaksa borrow the money and CHEC supported his re-election campaign with millions of dollars.³² Rajapaksa ultimately lost his re-election bid in part because his opposition campaigned on an anti-China platform.

The new administration under President Maithripala Sirisena won in 2015 with a mandate to investigate Sri Lanka's financial deals. In their investigations they quickly

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-25-debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy-jones-hameiri.pdf>, (accessed 28 December 2020), 14.

²⁸ Maria Abi-Habib, "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port," *International New York Times*, June 26, 2018, Gale In Context: Global Issues, <https://go-gale-com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=GIC&u=wash60683&id=GALE%7CA553227911&v=2.1&it=r&s id=ebsco>, (accessed 28 December 2020).

²⁹ Maria Abi-Habib, "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port," *International New York Times*, June 26, 2018, Gale In Context: Global Issues, <https://go-gale-com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=GIC&u=wash60683&id=GALE%7CA553227911&v=2.1&it=r&s id=ebsco>, (accessed 28 December 2020).

³⁰ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative" (Chatham House, August 19, 2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-25-debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy-jones-hameiri.pdf>, (accessed 28 December 2020), 14.

³¹ Maria Abi-Habib, "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port," *International New York Times*, June 26, 2018, Gale In Context: Global Issues, <https://go-gale-com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=GIC&u=wash60683&id=GALE%7CA553227911&v=2.1&it=r&s id=ebsco>, (accessed 28 December 2020).

³² Ibid.

found that Sri Lanka was in extreme debt.³³ Of Sri Lanka's approximately \$64.5 billion in debt, approximately 9% was owed to China as of 2016.³⁴ For debt service payments though, the share going to China was about one third.³⁵

The Sirisena administration also discovered that scrutinizing past Chinese loans was easier than avoiding new ones. To help stabilize its financial position, in 2016 the Sirisena administration sought to lease equity in Hambantota port in return for cash. They offered the deal to Japan, India, and China who all refused. Xi Jinping did offer to find a suitable investor and China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPort) ultimately agreed to lease the port after Sri Lanka agreed to include 15,000 acres of adjacent property.³⁶ To quell public anger at the perceived loss of sovereignty, Sri Lanka sought to divide control between port operations and security through two different joint ventures between the Sri Lanka Ports Authority and Chinese contractors. While outwardly this appears to keep majority control of the port out of CMPort's hands, investigation by C4ADS shows that CMPort still retains a controlling stake in both the port operations and port security entities.³⁷

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative" (Chatham House, August 19, 2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-25-debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy-jones-hameiri.pdf>, (accessed 28 December 2020), 15-16.

³⁵ Devin Thorne and Ben Spevack, "Harbored Ambitions: How China's Port Investments Are Strategically Reshaping the Indo-Pacific" (C4ADS, April 17, 2018), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/566ef8b4d8af107232d5358a/t/5ad5e20ef950b777a94b55c3/1523966489456/Harbored+Ambitions.pdf>, (accessed 29 December 2020), 48.

³⁶ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative" (Chatham House, August 19, 2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-25-debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy-jones-hameiri.pdf>, (accessed 28 December 2020), 18.

³⁷ Devin Thorne and Ben Spevack, "Harbored Ambitions: How China's Port Investments Are Strategically Reshaping the Indo-Pacific" (C4ADS, April 17, 2018), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/566ef8b4d8af107232d5358a/t/5ad5e20ef950b777a94b55c3/1523966489456/Harbored+Ambitions.pdf>, (accessed 29 December 2020), 48-50.

In Sri Lanka's 2019 presidential elections, Mahinda Rajapaksa's younger brother, Gotabaya, won. In August of 2020, Mahinda was elected prime minister. The return of the Rajapaksa brothers to political power reinvigorated Sri Lanka's relationship with China. Over the period of Gotabaya's first year in office, 43% of loans for major projects came from China.³⁸ In December 2020, CHEC signed a \$1 billion contract to develop the Colombo International Financial Center as one of the first phases of a larger \$13 billion Port City project that China will likely have a major role in building.³⁹ Sri Lanka rejected a \$480 million US aid package because they said it came with too many conditions while at the same time their credit rating has been reduced and their sovereign debt was expected to reach 100% of GDP in fiscal year 2020.⁴⁰

As far as influence mechanisms, China initially used elite capture in Sri Lanka by fulfilling the desires of the Rajapaksa regime whether they were economically feasible or not. Now though, China can rely on being a lender of last resort to maintain its influence. Given its current fiscal situation, Sri Lanka's government is now beholden to China for more investment to continue needed infrastructure projects and debt repayments. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa admits that Sri Lanka freely took on debt to accomplish infrastructure projects and that it is not in a Chinese debt-trap.⁴¹ Regardless of fault, Sri

³⁸ Saeed Shah and Uditha Jayasinghe, "China Regains Clout in Sri Lanka With Family's Return to Power," *Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-regains-clout-in-sri-lanka-with-familys-return-to-power-11606568404>, (accessed 28 December 2020).

³⁹ Rezaul H. Laskar, "Chinese Firm behind Hambantota Port Project Gets First Contract in Sri Lanka's Port City," *Hindustan Times*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/chinese-firm-behind-hambantota-port-project-gets-first-contract-in-sri-lanka-s-port-city/story-bGzGjICQniSsMTohF8abmO.html>, (accessed 28 December 2020).

⁴⁰ Saeed Shah and Uditha Jayasinghe, "China Regains Clout in Sri Lanka With Family's Return to Power," *Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-regains-clout-in-sri-lanka-with-familys-return-to-power-11606568404>, (accessed 28 December 2020).

⁴¹ "Hambantota Port Not a 'Debt Trap' by China: Sri Lanka President," *The Indian Express* (blog), October 9, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/hambantota-port-not-a-debt-trap-by-china-sri-lanka-president-6718210/>, (accessed 28 December 2020).

Lanka is in serious debt and continues to seek additional loans to meet debt obligations but also for continued development. As of late 2020, Sri Lanka was exploring debt-relief deals with both India and China.⁴² And despite its debt situation, Sri Lanka under the younger Rajapaksa continues to seek infrastructure investments and signed another deal with Chinese Harbor Engineering Company Limited and a Sri Lankan conglomerate to build out Port City Colombo.⁴³ What level of continued influence this allows China in Sri Lanka affairs remains to be seen, but they appear beholden to China for now to continue their infrastructure investment binge.

PLA Logistics Base – Djibouti

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) logistics or support base in Djibouti, the PLA's only overseas military base, sits in an economically and strategically important location. Djibouti's position adjacent to the southern entrance to the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb, makes it an appealing location for many countries. This unique location and its willing government are the primary reasons Djibouti is home to military contingents from the US, Japan, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and now China.⁴⁴ For China, the economic value of Djibouti is likely just as important as the strategic location.

China has invested heavily in Ethiopian and Djiboutian infrastructure projects for many years. The reasons for China's desire to investment in Djibouti become clear only after understanding China's interest in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is home to 110 million people,

⁴² Marwaan Macan-Markar, "India and China Compete over Indian Ocean Debt-Relief Diplomacy," *Financial Times*, December 6, 2020, Online edition, <https://www.ft.com/content/79363b3b-534d-436c-9ede-af713d913570>, (accessed 16 February 2021).

⁴³ "Port City Colombo Secures LOLC's and CHEC's Investment," Daily News, December 18, 2020, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2020/12/18/finance/236441/port-city-colombo-secures-lolc%E2%80%99s-and-chec%E2%80%99s-investment>, (accessed 16 February 2021).

⁴⁴ Jeff Becker, Erica Downs, and Patrick deGateno, "China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base" (Center for Naval Analysis, July 2017), <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1038215.pdf>, (accessed 1 January 2021), 28.

the second largest population in Africa, and one of the continent's fastest growing economies.⁴⁵ Chinese companies are keen to tap into this large potential export market as well as tapping into natural resources including the energy resources of the Ogaden Basin.⁴⁶ By comparison, Djibouti has a tiny population and few natural resources beyond its strategic location. As a result of civil war and the resulting break-off of Eritrea, Ethiopia became a land-locked nation and must now depend on its neighbors for access to the sea. That dependency means 90% of Ethiopia's imports go through Djibouti and those imports bound for Ethiopia account for 90% of the traffic through Djibouti's ports.⁴⁷ Given this dynamic, Djibouti becomes a necessary part of any major investments in Ethiopia. China's investments in Djibouti and Ethiopia include the Doraleh Multipurpose Port, the Goubet Port, the Ethiopia-Djibouti water pipeline, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, and free trade zones in both countries.

Beyond access to the growing Ethiopian market, Djibouti's location also makes strategic sense for China's foreign policy. Shipping through the Red Sea accounts for anywhere from 12.5% to 20% of total global trade while China itself ships approximately \$1 trillion worth of goods through the Red Sea each year.⁴⁸ It's no wonder China would want to keep an eye on this significant sea line of communication. According to the PRC Foreign Ministry in 2015, a military base in Djibouti would also "better serve Chinese

⁴⁵ Peter A Dutton, Isaac B Kardon, and Conor M Kennedy, "China Maritime Report No. 6: Djibouti: China's First Overseas Strategic Strongpoint" (China Maritime Studies Institute, April 1, 2020), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>, (accessed 1 January 2021), 21.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 20.

⁴⁷ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 125 (2020): 731–47.

⁴⁸ Robert Henderson, "China's Red Sea Ambitions: Diplomat Magazine," *Diplomat & International Canada* (blog), October 7, 2018, <https://diplomatonline.com/mag/2018/10/chinas-red-sea-ambitions/>, (accessed 1 January 2021).

troops when they carry out international peacekeeping operations, escort ships in the Gulf of Aden and the waters off the Somali coast and perform humanitarian rescue.”⁴⁹ In particular, China has about 1,400 personnel supporting UN peacekeeping efforts in the Darfur region and South Sudan, and the PLA Navy’s more than 30 Escort Task Forces have offered anti-piracy escort protection for approximately 6,000 vessels in the Gulf of Aden since 2008.⁵⁰ Additionally, China’s experience in trying to evacuate it’s citizens from Libya in 2011 and from Yemen in 2015 reinforced the need for some type of military facility in the region.⁵¹



⁴⁹ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference on November 26, 2015,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, November 26, 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1318766.shtml, (accessed 1 January 2021).

⁵⁰ Joel Wuthnow, “The PLA Beyond Asia: China’s Growing Military Presence in the Red Sea Region,” *Strategic Forum* 303 (January 2020), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-303.pdf>, (accessed 1 January 2021), 3-4.

⁵¹ Jeff Becker, Erica Downs, and Patrick deGateno, “China’s Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China’s First Overseas Base” (Center for Naval Analysis, July 2017), <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1038215.pdf>, (accessed 1 January 2021), 22-23.

Figure 3: PLA Support Base and surrounding infrastructure⁵²

Djibouti also stands to gain significantly from Chinese investments by fulfilling its own development goals. The Djibouti “Vision 2035” lays out plans to transform Djibouti into an international and regional commercial and logistics hub while diversifying Djibouti’s economy to sustain long-term growth.⁵³ The goal of diversification is important to lifting the nation out of poverty. Djibouti’s ports currently serve as the primary economic drivers, but Djibouti has the possibility of capitalizing on tourism, marine resources including fishing, and establishing itself as a regional telecommunications hub given the undersea cables that land in Djibouti.⁵⁴ Due to COVID-19, the Djiboutian economy contracted in 2020 but is expected to rebound to an average GDP growth of 7.9% over the next two years.⁵⁵

Djibouti’s president, Ismael Omar Guelleh, governs his ostensibly democratic nation in an autocratic manner. Guelleh replaced Djibouti’s first president, his uncle, when he was elected in 1999. The Djiboutian Parliament amended their constitution in 2010 by ending term limits to allow Guelleh to continue to serve. Despite the number and size of the Chinese projects in Djibouti, there is no public discourse and no avenues for raising grievances about the lack of benefit of Chinese investment for the local population.⁵⁶ The government in Djibouti also controls information in the country as

⁵² Peter A Dutton, Isaac B Kardon, and Conor M Kennedy, “China Maritime Report No. 6: Djibouti: China’s First Overseas Strategic Strongpoint” (China Maritime Studies Institute, April 1, 2020), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>, 30.

⁵³ “Djibouti Vision 2035” (Government of Djibouti), accessed February 15, 2021, <https://djiboutiembassykuwait.net/assets/files/djibouti-2035-en.pdf>, 40.

⁵⁴ “The World Bank in Djibouti: Overview,” World Bank, October 1, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/djibouti/overview>, (accessed 15 February 2021).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ David Styan, “China’s Maritime Silk Road and Small States: Lessons from the Case of Djibouti,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 122 (July 10, 2019): 191–206.

there are no independent media outlets and the government restricts broadband internet to limit social media usage.⁵⁷ The local populace has much to criticize as most of the profits from Chinese investment go to the elites connected to the ports while the rest of the population is left out.⁵⁸ While critics see China leveraging a like-minded authoritarian, President Guelleh benefits from vast experience dealing with external powers and leveraging Djibouti's strategic location.

In power since 1999, Guelleh understands the strategic opportunities Djibouti offers to external actors and leverages this understanding in negotiations. In 2014, the US renegotiated its lease agreements and paid double the previous rate potentially due to known Russian and Chinese interest in also basing forces in Djibouti.⁵⁹ Guelleh also appears to understand his current position with respect to China. To better manage the situation in Djibouti's favor, Guelleh has renegotiated loans with China, consulted the International Monetary Fund to manage Djiboutian debt, limited planned infrastructure projects, and sought to attract other investors and project contractors from countries like Saudi Arabia and France.⁶⁰ Seeking other investors and closing deals are not the same though. As of January 2021, Djibouti closed a \$3bn deal with China Merchants Group to

⁵⁷ "Djibouti: One Exile Radio Station, Nothing Else," Reporters Without Borders, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/djibouti>.

⁵⁸ Zach Vertin, "Great Power Rivalry in the Red Sea: China's Experiment in Djibouti and Implications for the United States," *GLOBAL CHINA*, June 2020, 12.

⁵⁹ Lauren Ploch Blanchard and Sarah R Collins, "Djibouti," In Focus (Congressional Research Service, September 4, 2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11303>, (accessed 15 February 2021).

⁶⁰ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "African Agency and Chinese Power: The Case of Djibouti," Policy Insights (Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, October 2020), <https://saiaa.org.za/research/african-agency-and-chinese-power-the-case-of-djibouti/>.

expand the Djibouti City port.⁶¹ Even as Djibouti looks to diversify, China retains considerable leverage because of the extent of its existing loans and port operations.

⁶¹ “China Merchants Signs Deal for \$3bn Expansion of Djibouti City Port,” Global Construction Review, January 8, 2021, <http://www.globalconstructionreview.com/news/china-merchants-signs-deal-3bn-expansion-djibouti/>, (accessed 16 February 2021).

Chapter Five – Analysis and Options

In fact, the neglect or misjudgment of population-centric considerations in U.S. strategic calculations is easily documented. Time and again, the U.S. has undertaken to engage in conflict without fully considering the physical, cultural, and social environments that comprise what some have called the “human domain”.

“Strategic Landpower” – Odierno, Amos, McRaven¹

The case studies in the previous chapter, while representing only a tiny fraction of BRI projects, highlight some commonalities in China’s approach to BRI and how partner countries react. The cases presented here also clearly show some unique circumstances in each country that China had to navigate. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti did not join BRI due to Chinese coercion alone, they had their own goals and strategies in mind and retained agency in deciding to participate. However, China did use a range of influence mechanisms to induce participation and retention. For at least the cases studied here, China’s economic power and existing relationships seems to have been the key factors in initially attracting the countries to join BRI. Once joined, China’s other influence mechanism may have induced them to stay the course.

China has clear economic and strategic drivers for BRI and so do the countries that participate. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti were strategic investments for China along key sea lines of communication. The three countries also had their own unique reasons to participate in BRI though there are also some key commonalities. Critically, each country had, and still has, massive development needs and sought external investors

¹ James F. Amos, William H. McRaven, and Raymond T. Odierno, “Strategic Landpower: Winning the Clash of Wills,” accessed November 10, 2020, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/2075515/strategic-landpower-white-paper.pdf>.

to meet those needs. China offered convenience by bundling loans and construction contracts together at competitive cost and without demands for domestic reforms. This combination proved especially attractive in these three cases as each had tried and found other investors either uninterested or with terms requiring reform measures the countries did not want to undertake. For Sri Lanka and Pakistan, they also saw participation in BRI as a way to gain additional access to the Chinese market, the largest in the world by some measures.²

While China certainly uses coercive influence to encourage BRI participation, its sheer economic size, willingness to invest, and willingness to keep terms opaque attracts countries such as the three studied here. Despite being the heads of democratic governments, the leaders of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti all have autocratic tendencies and the associated desire to control information within their countries. Freedom House's latest data describes Djibouti as 'Not Free,' and both Sri Lanka and Pakistan as only 'Partially Free.'³ In these cases, China's shielding of the terms of investment from public scrutiny matched the desires of the countries' leaders. Opaque terms facilitate elite capture through funding for vanity projects, political donations, and other forms of graft which were evident in at least the cases of Sri Lanka and Pakistan, but also suspected in Djibouti. The main concern in the Western world with this approach is that China undermines the already weak democratic institutions in these countries and may enable China to pull them closer to its own orbit and further from other democracies.

² "GDP, PPP (Constant 2017 International \$)," The World Bank, accessed February 15, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.KD?name_desc=true.

³ "Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy," Freedom House, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>.

China did use softer forms of influence in each of the studied cases as well. China established Confucius Institutes in both Pakistan and Sri Lanka to spread cultural good will.⁴ China cultivated media in Pakistan and Sri Lanka through journalist training, partnerships with local new outlets, and cooperative associations.⁵ In coordination with the governments in each case, China also sought assistance in repressing any criticism or negative commentaries about BRI. The research available does not make clear whether or not these soft power approaches were instrumental in gaining initial access or for maintaining access once BRI investments had already begun. Simply considering China's continued emphasis on these mechanisms, it seems they are providing at least modest returns on China's investment in them.

The Djibouti case differed from Pakistan and Sri Lanka in important ways. China, due to historical support, has been called an all-weather friend to Pakistan and Sri Lanka. China assisted both countries in long running conflicts, Pakistan's ongoing territorial disputes with India and Sri Lanka's civil war against Tamil separatists. Djibouti had no such history with China. Djibouti offered China a unique opportunity because it was both an important strategic location and it already hosted a number of other nation's militaries. Djibouti also had a strategic development vision that almost perfectly matched China's Port, Park, City model derived from China's own experience developing Shenzhen. Unfortunately, due to the lack of transparency inherent in both the BRI and Djibouti's internal affairs, direct indicators of the types of Chinese influence

⁴ "Confucius Institutes Around the World - 2020," May 26, 2015, <https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html>, (accessed 23 January 2021).

⁵ "China's Red Carpet Trap for Sri Lankan Media," Bilaterals.org, February 11, 2020, <https://www.bilaterals.org/?china-s-red-carpet-trap-for-sri>, (accessed 16 February 2021).

used are hard to determine. One key event serves as a likely indicator of at least some level of Chinese influence - the changing in the management of Djibouti's Doraleh Container Terminal (DCT) port. Shortly after signing the deal for China's PLA logistics base, Djibouti abruptly nationalized the DCT, ended its long-term port operations contract with Dubai's DP World, and hired on China Merchants Port Holdings Company to run the port.⁶ DP World successfully disputed the move in international courts, but China Merchants continues port operations at DCT despite the ruling. Based on this unusual move, it appears China may have had some influence over how Djibouti operates its ports which handle most of the cargo for the various military posts in Djibouti.⁷

China continues to adapt its BRI practices as the global economic environment changes and as they gain experience in development. According to the Rhodium Group, BRI investments have slowed over the last four years due to a number of issues including Chinese banks re-evaluating loans, Chinese banks seeking to reduce their own debt burdens, and push back from participating countries.⁸ The first issue comes as countries struggle to manage their debt burdens for projects such as Gwadar and Hambantota that have not provided the planned economic returns. The COVID-19 pandemic-induced economic slowdown has also reduced countries' ability to repay loans and increased loan renegotiation requests. Because of high-profile missteps such as Hambantota, which precipitated the debt-trap diplomacy allegations, countries are more wary of Chinese lending and development practices. Wariness though, has not completely stopped interest

⁶ "China Is Making Substantial Investment in Ports and Pipelines Worldwide," *The Economist*, February 6, 2020, <https://www-economist-com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/special-report/2020/02/06/china-is-making-substantial-investment-in-ports-and-pipelines-worldwide>, (accessed 17 February 2021).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Matthew Mingey and Agatha Kratz, "China's Belt and Road: Down but Not Out," Rhodium Group, January 4, 2021, <https://rhg.com/research/bri-down-out/>, (accessed 7 February 2021).

in BRI. Sri Lanka's President Rajapaksa continues to seek Chinese investment to meet his administrations development goals as do Prime Minister Kahn in Pakistan and President Guelleh in Djibouti. China has adapted to these changes with Xi Jinping calling in 2019 for increased sustainability and quality of projects, and additional measures to improve competitiveness.⁹

Response Options

The unique circumstances in each country require tailored responses. General catch phrases like 'debt-trap diplomacy' may cause nations to take pause, and certainly provide news-worthy soundbites, but ignore the agency that individual countries exercise by participating in the BRI. Any framework for US response therefore should focus first on understanding and then on developing individual approaches for countries where it wishes to contest Chinese influence. A critical part of any approach must include viable alternatives to BRI. These alternatives do not need to include BRI-level investments but rather should include improved management and transparency of all development investments. The Blue Dot Network (BDN), announced in November 2017, serves as one possible alternative. The BDN brings together the US, Australia, and Japan in an initiative to provide certification for high quality infrastructure projects to entice greater investment.¹⁰ To truly have an impact though, the new US administration must refresh the BDN as the initiative appears to have lost momentum since its unveiling. The US should also consider reframing its relations with China, as other countries do not want to

⁹ Brenda Goh and Cate Cadell, "China's Xi Says Belt and Road Must Be Green, Sustainable," Reuters, April 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-idUSKCN1S104I>, (accessed 17 February 2021).

¹⁰ Matthew P. Goodman, Daniel F. Runde, and Jonathan E. Hillman, "Connecting the Blue Dots," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 26, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/connecting-blue-dots>, (accessed 5 April 2021).

get caught in a competition between the US and China. Many countries need investment from both and will look to gain the best terms for their own objectives. Regardless of the exact mechanism the US chooses to pursue it must take a holistic approach that includes all elements of national power.

As the US develops approaches to competition with China, it must reassess organizational structures and capabilities at multiple levels to compete effectively. At the strategic and operational levels, the US government must develop new organizational structures to coordinate and synchronize the various agencies and departments toward effective competition. From a military perspective, Special Operations Forces (SOF) have unique core capabilities they can adapt to support the US whole-of-government approach to competition with China. SOF should play an important, albeit supporting, role in this new approach. After spending almost twenty years focused on counterterrorism and direct action, SOF will have to adopt new methods to best support the nation's efforts against China.

As far as existing strategic-level guidance on competition, the 2017 National Security Strategy clearly states US concerns with China's use of "economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda."¹¹ David Maxwell and others have described China's activities as a form of political warfare in which China seeks political and economic influence as well as dominance in multinational institutions to serve its own

¹¹ "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, (accessed 3 January 2021), 46.

objectives.¹² It is also important to note here that other than their actions in the South China Sea, the majority of China's concerning behavior involves non-military activities such as BRI. As David Kilcullen argues, China may be broadening its definition of war beyond traditional western notions. This could place the US and its allies at risk of what he calls "conceptual envelopment" where the US either fails to adequately respond to what are intended as warlike actions or where US competitive actions are perceived by China as warlike provocations.¹³ In this environment, the US must find a balanced approach that avoids escalation while still responding unequivocally to China's transgressions.

US defense strategy offers a response but contains an apparent disconnect within its operational approach regarding competition. The National Defense Strategy of 2018 recognizes "long-term strategic competition requires the seamless integration of multiple elements of national power – diplomacy, information, economics, finance, intelligence, law enforcement, and military."¹⁴ The strategy's approach seeks to "expand the competitive space" and states the department must: be strategically predictable, but operationally unpredictable; integrate with the interagency; counter coercion and subversion; and foster a competitive mindset.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the strategy then develops three lines of effort that do nothing to accomplish the strategic approach. The three lines of effort are: build a more lethal force, strengthen alliances and attract new partners, and

¹² David Maxwell, "China's Political Warfare Strategy Takes Hit from Coronavirus," *Washington Examiner*, February 27, 2020, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/chinas-political-warfare-strategy-takes-hit-from-coronavirus?_amp=true, (accessed 3 January 2021).

¹³ David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 175.

¹⁴ Jim Mattis, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy" (Department of Defense), accessed November 11, 2020, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>, (accessed 11 November 2020), 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

reform the department for greater performance and affordability.¹⁶ The first two lines of effort are appropriate for deterring competitors from conventional conflict but do nothing to integrate the elements of national power to effectively compete below the level of armed conflict. And the third line of effort, while a noble cause, simply focuses on the eternal struggle to efficiently manage a large bureaucracy.

The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning (JCIC) seems like it might offer a conceptual framework for the integration of the elements of national power for the global competition which the NDS describes. The JCIC states the solution to conducting globally integrated operations across the competition continuum consists of integrated campaigning which it defines as:

Joint Force and interorganizational partner efforts to enable the achievement and maintenance of policy aims by integrating military activities and aligning non-military activities of sufficient scope, scale, simultaneity, and duration across multiple domains. The Joint Force integrates among staff elements and Service components within a command, among different CCMDs, and within the DoD, while also aligning with interorganizational and multi-national partners.¹⁷

The JCIC repeatedly states this need to align the Joint Force with its interorganizational partners. Curiously the JCIC also states, “there are limited means to achieve integration across the elements of national power,” and later adds the statement that “organizational boundaries often make full integration of elements of national power an unachievable goal.”¹⁸ While the JCIC acknowledges that the Joint Force will assume a supporting role

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning” (The Joint Staff, March 16, 2018), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concept_integrated_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257, (accessed 14 April 2021), 6.

¹⁸ Ibid 4, 14.

in competition and therefore emphasizes alignment with interorganizational partners, it ultimately offers no means to realize the integration which it claims is necessary though apparently too difficult to accomplish.

New Structures to Focus Capabilities

Twenty years ago, the US faced a similar problem trying to integrate the various interagency capabilities to counter terrorism after the attacks on September 11, 2001. To bring the necessary interagency capabilities together for a coherent approach to terrorism, the US created the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). NCTC's mandate includes producing analysis, maintaining databases, sharing information, and conducting strategic-level planning.¹⁹

The US government should establish a competition-focused entity similar to NCTC. A competition-focused center of the same stature would conduct comparable functions for US competition with China and other actors. Additionally, a Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) subordinate to the center, focused specifically on China, and also under civilian leadership could coordinate and synchronize operational-level US competitive efforts against China specifically. Other JIATFs could focus on other competitors as necessary.

The JCIC states the first step in designing integrated campaigns requires understanding “the operational environment through the lens of the competition continuum.”²⁰ The JIATF concept facilitates developing this understanding. The three

¹⁹ “National Counterterrorism Center: History,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, accessed January 3, 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/nctc-who-we-are/history>.

²⁰ Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning” (The Joint Staff, March 16, 2018), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concept_integrated_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257, (accessed 14 April 2021), 6.

cases studied here each had unique circumstances that inclined the concerned countries to participate in BRI. Developing this understanding requires both presence and analysis, and the JIATF can only support the latter in most instances. The best vehicle for developing country-level understanding is the US embassy country team that forms the smallest whole-of-government entity within a country to fully evaluate the circumstances of BRI participation. The members of the country team come from diverse departments and agencies of the US government, live among the population of the concerned country, and develop expertise over the length of their tours and careers. While the functional expertise exists, most embassies will likely lack sufficient analytical support to put all the pieces together to develop a successful counter to Chinese influence.

The JIATF, with sufficient interagency support, can provide that needed analytical support. SOF, in particular, have developed robust capabilities in intelligence analysis and are experienced at working in interagency environments. SOF can also provide planners to help translate the civilian leadership's vision into actionable objectives and requirements for all the agencies and departments represented within the JIATF. In this way, the embassy country team becomes what Martin Hála calls a "knowledge hub" and the JIATF handles cross-border collaboration across embassies "to track. . . entities, compare local variants of their global tactics, and identify general patterns. . . ." ²¹ Beyond these higher-level functions within the JIATF, SOF must also develop new tactical approaches to further support competition.

²¹ Hála, Martin, "A New Invisible Hand: Authoritarian Corrosive Capital and the Repurposing of Democracy," Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience Series (National Endowment for Democracy and International Forum for Democratic Studies, March 2020), <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/New-Invisible-Hand-Authoritarian-Corrosive-Capital-Repurposing-Democracy-Hala.pdf>, (accessed 17 February 2021).

A New SOF Approach

In the counterterrorism fight of the last two decades, SOF adopted the Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate (F3EAD) targeting methodology. SOF will need to find a different approach in competition. F3EAD is not designed for the competitive environment and trying to adapt it will likely elicit strong interagency criticism due its association with kinetic operations. This said, SOF still needs an effective framework for competition. The rough elements of any potential new framework for the competitive environment should include the following components: access to the area of concern; assessment of the situation; analysis of desired outcomes, potential actions, and associated risks; taking action to reach desired outcomes, and re-assessment – or in a more military-friendly form – an Access, Assess, Analyze, Act, Re-assess (A4R) cycle. SOF can play a tailored role in each of the framework components in a particular area but the overall framework must also integrate joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) capabilities and personnel. The JIATF itself, at the operational level, can enact the other three steps from the JCIC after understanding the operational environment: design and construct the campaign, employ the integrated force, and assess and adapt the campaign.²²

SOF can leverage many of their core capabilities and adapt others to succeed in this framework. Strategic reconnaissance, civil affairs, information support operations, and foreign internal defense (FID) are all readily transferable to competition. Strategic

²² Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning” (The Joint Staff, March 16, 2018), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concept_integrated_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257, (accessed 14 April 2021), 6.

reconnaissance and FID equate well to what Tim Nichols refers to as “getting information” and “working with others” respectively.²³ SOF with strategic reconnaissance skillsets can provide ground-level information to feed assessments that uncover competitor actions and determine appropriate responses. Civil affairs can also feed assessments by identifying key influencers and their relationships as they conduct what they call civil reconnaissance. Taking action could include FID missions to train partner nations to guard against subversive activity by China. Military information support operations can provide critical capability and capacity in developing strategic messaging to support US objectives and counter adversary narratives in the information environment.²⁴ The ability to utilize the core capabilities mentioned so far requires some level of access to the areas of concern. SOF expertise in FID, security force assistance, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and humanitarian assistance can all be used as means to provide access through training or assistance missions with partners.

Beyond accessing, assessing, and analyzing areas of interest; the actions taken under this framework will most likely come in the form of informational, economic, or political measures to counter China’s coercive activities. Informational actions could include exposure of plans, actions, or information that are detrimental to China; amplification of local narratives critical of China; and dissemination of US and partner preferred narratives. To successfully implement informational actions, the US must

²³ Tim Nichols, “Sending Special Operations Forces into the Great-Power Competition” *Small Wars Journal*, August 2, 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/sending-special-operations-forces-great-power-competition>, (accessed 3 January 2021).

²⁴ Kaley Scholl, “The Use of US Special Operation Forces in Great Power Competition: Imposing Costs on Chinese Gray Zone Operations,” *Small Wars Journal*, December 7, 2020, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/use-us-special-operation-forces-great-power-competition-imposing-costs-chinese-gray-zone?fbclid=IwAR2SNK0w3XyDXB6B7-wr-Gr1uUNuMqnP1XB5e2yD_A4Ubyjg1IqGYd2Z9Rg, (accessed 2 January 2021).

become adept at more quickly calling out China's coercive behavior and unveiling its opaque practices where possible. Diplomatic actions could include bilateral or multilateral resolutions, support to opposition political groups critical of China, and withdraw of US support. Economic actions could include sanctions, tariffs, export controls, import restrictions, and measures to prosecute intellectual property theft.²⁵ Since much of China's influence is related to its investments in specific countries, the US should also consider loans, grants, and private investment incentives in some locations to offer alternative funding mechanisms to governments in need. Finally, peripheral military actions to develop and strengthen relationships could include partner training, exercises, and foreign military sales.

Within the United States Special Operations Command's (SOCOM) stable of capabilities, its unconventional warfare (UW) capabilities provide the best fit for the A4R activities needed in competition below armed conflict. Joint doctrine defines UW as "activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power. . ."²⁶ As Kevin Bilms noted, this capability is better termed "support to resistance" in the context of competition as it properly places the focus on assisting others in resisting the influence of external powers.²⁷ Using this definition, China's coercive practices make it an "occupying power" and the UW

²⁵ Elizabeth Rosenberg, Peter Harrell, and Ashley Feng, "A New Arsenal for Competition" (Center for New American Security, April 24, 2020), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/a-new-arsenal-for-competition>, (accessed 5 January 2021).

²⁶ Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms" (The Joint Staff, January 2021), <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf?ver=idnWjT-PxzWCi3IHTV1-xQ%3d%3d>, (accessed 5 April 2021).

²⁷ Kevin Bilms, "What's in a Name? Reimagining Irregular Warfare Activities for Competition," War on the Rocks, January 15, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/whats-in-a-name-reimagining-irregular-warfare-activities-for-competition/>, (accessed 5 April 2021).

capabilities would help foreign governments, working through the JIATF and relevant country teams, to resist Chinese influence. In some instances, where the US determines the benefits are worth the risk, UW capabilities could also support opposition political factions within a nation that need support in resisting Chinese coercion. This could be necessary in instances where a ruling regime has become so tied to China that it is unable or unwilling to resist further Chinese coercion.

The United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), in particular, has extensive UW capability within its 1st Special Forces Command (1st SFC) that can be readily applied to competition. 1st SFC includes Special Forces, Civil Affairs, and Psychological Operations units; and actively promotes the integration of these capabilities within Cross-Functional Teams (CFTs).²⁸ As mentioned previously civil affairs and military information support operations should play a prominent role in SOF support to competition. With this in mind, SOCOM should prioritize employment of 1st SFC's CFTs in competition by integrating them into a China-focused JIATF and seeking the authorities they will need to apply their capabilities in the competitive environment.

To effectively compete with China, the US must make changes at multiple levels. At the strategic level the US needs a competition-focused entity that can coordinate information, policy, and action across all departments and agencies. At the operational and tactical levels, SOF has much to offer by adapting its existing core capabilities to competition through a new operational paradigm that emphasizes comprehensive understanding and prioritizes non-military actions. In the required whole-of-government

²⁸ "A Vision for 2021 and Beyond" (1st Special Forces Command (Airborne)), accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.soc.mil/USASFC/Documents/1sfc-vision-2021-beyond.pdf>.

approach, SOF must get comfortable in a supporting role. The rest of the government also needs to become comfortable accepting SOF support where they have unique expertise and capacity. These changes, taken together, will allow the US to harness existing capabilities in new ways to successfully compete with China.

Chapter Six – Conclusion

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in all its forms, poses risk to continued US influence in Asia, Africa, and Europe if not addressed appropriately. The risk of overreaction is just as problematic of not reacting at all. In its approach to managing China's influence, including through its BRI, the US needs to adopt a stance that supports each country's development needs. The US should help these countries make the most of Chinese investment instead of simply attempting to obstruct it.

A critical component for US success will be its ability to attract partners. Numerous think tank strategies produced to influence the incoming administration's policies all agree on the US' need for partners. To gain these partners, the US must present attractive alternatives to China. No country wants to become caught in a competition between China and the US. They would prefer to have good relations with both in ways that best serve their specific goals. With this in mind, the US should avoid overreacting by attempting to obstruct or block countries from participating in initiatives such as BRI. Rather, the US should work to build forums that support countries that need development by helping them create realistic plans and providing transparent and competitive processes to solicit both funding and contracts.

The cases presented here from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti highlighted different circumstances in each country that led to their respective participation in the BRI. These cases also highlighted how each country exercised agency in choosing to participate. Any approach the US takes must start with developing an understanding of each countries' unique situation. That country-by-country understanding must build up to

regional and global understanding of how Chinese influences induce BRI participation and maintain it once established.

Any US response must be part of a holistic strategy toward China and should not treat the BRI in isolation from other Chinese activities. Taking a lesson from its whole of government approach to counterterrorism, the US should develop a Center focused on competition with subordinate Joint Interagency Task Forces for each specific competitor nation. Civilians should lead these entities but with support from the military for logistics, information technology, intelligence, analysis, and planning. Special Operations Forces (SOF) have particular expertise in both interagency operations and in understanding complex networks such as those China has created for competing with the US. SOF should use this expertise to support the competition effort.

SOF must make important changes to best support an approach such as the one proposed here. The various SOF tribes have become too similar because of their collective focus on counterterrorism and direct action. SOCOM should work to differentiate the tribes by re-issuing guidance letters to each component command emphasizing their respective missions. The Army's 1st Special Forces Command, in particular, has capabilities that align well with competition. Civil Affairs, Military Information Support Operations, and Special Forces bring unique expertise and experience, and these capabilities should be re-aligned to focus on competition with China and other competitors.

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