

INGENIOUS INFRASTRUCTURE - CHINA'S ONE BELT ONE ROAD INITIATIVE

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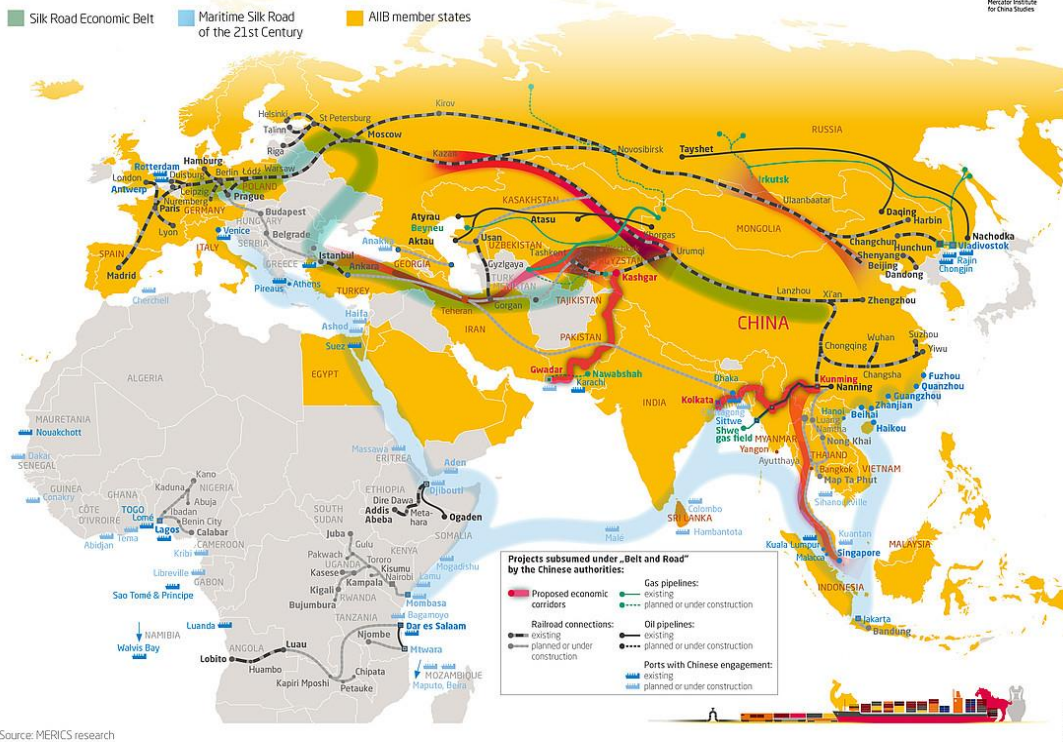
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In 1862, the American Congress approved the Pacific Railway Act to connect the open lands between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean. Completed in 1869, the rail line opened a route through five western states connected with the states served by existing eastern lines, and thus the world's first transcontinental rail network came into being.

Also completed in 1869, the Suez Canal linked the Mediterranean and Red Seas together, allowing passage between the Atlantic and Pacific and linking Europe, Asia, and the Americas without the long route around Africa. Opening the Panama Canal forty-four years later in 2014 connected the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. This cut out the long route around South America. The combination of rail and maritime transport opened avenues for global commerce and trade through the 20th century.

In 2013, some 144 years after completing America's transcontinental railway and the opening of the Suez Canal, China's Xi Jinping created the One Belt One Road initiative, now commonly referred to as OBOR. This ingenious rail and ocean routing will form a web of six corridors connecting some sixty-eight countries, many of them landlocked with little international trade.

China aims to build a global infrastructure network
"Belt and Road" infrastructure projects, planned and completed (March 2017)



The initiative has critics. The challenges of financing, construction, and security are well noted. Effects on the environment, the juggling of regional politics, and the actual efficiency of the initiative's routes are being routinely discussed. And yet, OBOR is a grand vision and a feat of planning and engineering across borders that will alter the economic—and quite likely the political—landscapes of Asia.

OBOR is imagined as being a revival of the ancient Silk Road. With this in mind, the six corridors OBOR will consist of are the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor, the China-Pakistan Corridor, the China-Indochina Peninsular Corridor, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor, and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor.¹ The New Eurasian Land Bridge will consist of a massive railway system stretching from China to Europe, while the five remaining corridors' initiatives include railroads, highways, improved air travel infrastructure, and other improvements to trade and communications technology.²

Development has already begun along the OBOR routes. On Kazakhstan's border with China, the Kazakh government has created the Khorgos-East Gate Special Economic Zone. Khorgos is a new dry port on the OBOR, and management of the project is aiming to turn Khorgos into a "new Dubai" complete with tax exemptions and a place for merchants to shop for new products.³ Things are developing on the other side of the border, too. A similarly-named city, Horgos, is a newly-built city on the Chinese side of the border and will specialize in robot manufacturing with the goal of building and exporting 10,000 robots each year.⁴

The China-Kazakh border is not the only place where OBOR is spurring new city development. A new city called Kobylany is coming to life along the Poland-Belarus border, where there will be a new dry port and free industrial zone.⁵ In China, Lanzhou New Area in Gansu province has been developed and is slowly reviving Lanzhou's ancient reputation as a bustling trade city. The new city of Anaklia in Georgia, the planned Colombo Financial City in Sri Lanka, and the completed-but-underused city of Hambantota on Sri Lanka's southern coast add to the list of new cities along the New Silk Road.⁶

OBOR-related city development has progressed rapidly. In December of 2017, after nearly eight years of losses, Sri Lanka formally handed over control of Hambantota port to a Chinese company, marking the beginning of a 99-year lease and a 1.12 billion USD deal, paid in stages to the Sri Lankan government.⁷ Construction of Anaklia's deep sea port, it is reported, is in "full swing,"⁸ and in December of 2017 it was announced that Chinese company ZPMC would be investing 50 million USD in the port project as part of OBOR.⁹ The port is expected to process 100 million tons of cargo per year by 2025, which would secure its place as Georgia's biggest port.¹⁰ Colombo Financial City, originally planned as a port city, is now being pursued as an International Financial Center under the Colombo International Financial City Project. It is now slated to become a financial hub situated between Singapore and Dubai.¹¹ The port itself, still crucial to the project, includes a substantial amount of land reclamation and is being jointly financed and developed by the Sri Lankan government and Chinese company CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd. It is expected to be fully completed in approximately 25 years.¹²

Some of these new cities—namely Anaklia and Hambantota—are centered around the development of deep sea ports. While Anaklia's deep sea port makes up part of the OBOR land route, the development

of deep sea ports is also crucial to the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century (MSR), the seagoing portion of OBOR. The MSR can be separated into three major routing groups: the Southeast Asian Route, the South Asia and Persian Gulf Route, and the Indian Ocean West Coast Routes, the last of which includes the coast of East Africa.¹³ These sea routes will begin in China's Fujian province and sail all the way to Venice, with stops in Kuala Lumpur, Colombo, Nairobi, and Athens, among others.¹⁴ In fact, China's port projects are rapidly expanding. In Southeast Asia alone, China-funded and China-invested port projects include two different ports in Malaysia, a port in Indonesia,¹⁵ and a seventy-percent stake in an important port in Myanmar.¹⁶ Chinese companies have bought the third-largest port in Turkey and have major interests and involvement in a port project in Pakistan, which is part of the effort to link Pakistan with Western China.¹⁷ Indeed, China now has port holdings in "Greece, Myanmar, Israel, Djibouti, Morocco, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, and around a dozen or so other countries," including some as far across the world as South America.¹⁸

South America, Latin America, and the Caribbean may seem like unlikely participants in the Belt and Road's grand agenda, but recently they have been filling important roles. In May of this year, China agreed to bring OBOR to Trinidad and Tobago and align with the Caribbean nation's development strategies.¹⁹ Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister, Keith Rowley, noted in a meeting with President Xi Jinping that Trinidad and Tobago was important on the ancient Maritime Silk Road, too; Chinese merchants first arrived in 1806.²⁰ Earlier this year, in January, China formally invited Latin America to participate in new OBOR projects and initiatives at a meeting for the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).²¹ After that meeting, only Panama had formally joined the Belt and Road Initiative, but the door was opened for the 33 member countries to participate.²² As far back as 2016, China had plans for a railway between Brazil and Peru,²³ a massive undertaking and an indication that China is looking for the Belt and Road to extend all the way across the globe.

China has also opened a naval base in Djibouti, which would be its first overseas military installation and will play a crucial role in China's vision of a "peaceful and prosperous" Maritime Silk Road.²⁴ The base opened in late July, 2017.²⁵ In January of this year, it was reported that China also has plans for a similar naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan.²⁶ The MSR will help OBOR reach even further than its land routes allow and will involve even more countries in its overall effort.

It is no secret that the creation and development of the OBOR will take an enormous sum of money from both China and the nations involved. It is said that the project will require 1 trillion USD in infrastructure investment.²⁷ The many initiatives planned and already in the works will be financed by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund. The AIIB has provided 1.7 billion USD in loans for nine separate OBOR infrastructure projects, while the Silk Road Fund has already made 4 billion USD in investment and President Xi has promised another 100 billion RMB from China to the Fund. In addition, Xi announced at the Belt and Road Forum that the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China would loan 380 billion RMB to OBOR-involved countries and that China would provide 60 billion RMB to "developing countries and international organizations participating in the Belt and Road."²⁸ Recently, in April of this year, the governor of the People's Bank of China announced that China plans to work with "international organisations, commercial lenders and key financial centres such as Hong Kong and London to diversify funding sources" for OBOR.²⁹ Funding

questions and their answers are necessarily complicated for such an immense affair, but OBOR appears well funded from the outset and on the right track to gain and maximize funds through international cooperation.

While the scope of physical development in OBOR countries is apparent, the economic benefits for countries involved should also be large. A main facet of the initiative is that it will bring a huge increase in connectivity to landlocked nations. The case of Khorgos, Kazakhstan has already been discussed; the city is near the Eurasian Pole of Inaccessibility, meaning it is one of Eurasia's farthest points from an ocean.³⁰ Bringing railways and a dry port to Kazakhstan will aid in the development of this remote land.

Railways are on their way to being built in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Zambia, three countries that also fit in to China's OBOR infrastructure goals. These countries have vast natural resources, namely, tobacco, copper, and fish, that have historically been difficult to move and export due to poor infrastructure. The availability of railway transportation will bring a more cost-effective and efficient way to move cargo and bring profit to the region.³¹ In Zimbabwe, representatives from China Railway Group Limited visited in late March of this year to discuss the building of metro rail lines throughout the country.³² In addition, ground broke on a China-funded, several-hundred kilometer roadway project in Zambia in September of 2017.³³ Another new railway opened in Kenya in 2017, traveling from Mombasa, a port city, to Nairobi, which is far inland. The new train, the Madaraka, or Freedom, Express, makes the journey in half the time it takes by truck and replaces the old and poor-quality "Lunatic Express," built during the era of British colonialism. The railway was ninety percent funded by the China Export-Import Bank, Kenya paid the other ten percent, and there are plans to eventually extend the railway to Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, Burundi, and Ethiopia, bringing connectivity to five more countries.³⁴ Now celebrating its one-year anniversary of passenger and freight service, the Madaraka Express has so far carried approximately 1.3 million passengers between Nairobi and Mombasa.³⁵

A project of this size comes with a myriad of concerns. One of those is about security along OBOR's land and sea routes. There are numerous security cooperation institutions in place across the OBOR regions, but traditional and non-traditional security concerns still exist. One such worry involves land disputes, such as the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other territory and border disputes throughout East, South, and Central Asia. These disputes are seen as negative for stability in Western China. On the ocean, concerns include disputes over the South China Sea, the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, and conflicts over island groups with Vietnam and the Philippines. Without solutions to these issues, cooperation between involved OBOR nations could be compromised.³⁶

Non-traditional security concerns include terrorism on land and piracy on the seas. The OBOR runs through unstable territories with extremist group activity, causing potential danger to both the goods being carried and the Chinese and local workers along the route. Though great strides have been made with regard to piracy, it is still a serious safety concern along the routes of the MSR.³⁷ Both Chinese and global security firms have been eager to sign contracts to protect both the people and the infrastructure along the OBOR, and Pakistan in particular has provided a segment of its armed forces to protect Chinese projects.³⁸

There are, too, environmental worries associated with OBOR projects. Much of the proposed infrastructure would be fossil fuel-dependent, and guidelines on sustainability have not been released.³⁹ There have been major environmental concerns in regard to the proposed high-speed rail between Northern Thailand and Bangkok,⁴⁰ but as of early December, 2017, an environmental impact assessment (EIA) had been conducted and the railway had been approved by Thailand.⁴¹ Recent reports indicate that construction of the new rail project will fully begin in March of 2019.⁴² Concerns over the impact on wildlife accompany the new Freedom Express in Kenya.⁴³

OBOR-involved nations are also considering the potential debt burden to countries who borrowed a great deal from China for infrastructure. An example of this is Kenya, which is 3.2 billion USD in debt to China for the Freedom Express.⁴⁴ The same concern abounds for the 6 billion USD China-Laos railway project.⁴⁵ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) assessed in 2017 that Zambia is at risk for debt distress because of its loans from China.⁴⁶ In Sri Lanka, the government borrowed a huge sum of money from China to build Hambantota port. Now, heavily in debt and unable to pay, the country has had to hand over control of the port to China Merchant Group in exchange for debt relief. Concerns continue, though, that all the new profits from the port are going directly to China instead of aiding Sri Lanka.⁴⁷ In a similar monetary vein, there are serious criticisms of the true efficiency of OBOR's railways. One report notes that Spain is transporting olive oil to China via railway, but the process is tedious and not cost-effective. The oil must be shipped at certain times of the year and be wrapped in thermal blankets in order for the product to survive the journey through extreme cold and/or heat,⁴⁸ making this method incredibly inefficient. It is also argued that perishable goods that must complete their journey quickly and on time will always be transported by air.⁴⁹ Many are skeptical of OBOR's potential for greater efficiency than sea or air travel.

Even amid all the concerns about the One Belt One Road Initiative, it is still arguable that the pros outweigh the cons in this endeavor. For indication of success, one must look no further than the train that runs from Yiwu in Zhejiang Province, China, to Tehran, which cuts the trip down from 45 days to just 14. This is boosting Iran's income and linking Iran to other economies in the region.⁵⁰ Perhaps of even greater import is the train that runs from Yiwu all the way to London, a journey which crosses 12,000 kilometers and nine countries in just 18 days as opposed to the traditional 35.⁵¹ In terms of timeliness, this is a remarkable accomplishment. Of course, this project, too, has attracted criticism; it is said that train transport along this route is between two-thirds and two and a half times more expensive than sea transport, depending on the direction traveled. Beyond that, the train can carry much less than a traditional container ship,⁵² which points toward the previously discussed criticism over the efficiency of OBOR railways.

Regardless of early criticisms, this magnitude of a project is not completed overnight, and in the coming years, more successes like the Yiwu-Tehran railway could come to light and become increasingly cost-effective and efficient. In the meantime, more and more nations are joining the Belt and Road Initiative. Trade talks have begun with Mauritius, and discussions have expanded and continued with Georgia and Pakistan.⁵³ In April of this year, China and Indonesia signed 23.3 billion USD in OBOR contracts,⁵⁴ and construction of a Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway, backed jointly by China and Indonesia, is already underway.⁵⁵ Projects have begun in Brunei,⁵⁶ and in May, Nigeria signed a 6.68 billion USD deal with a

Chinese firm to continue building the Lagos-Kano rail line.⁵⁷ It has been reported that as of the end of April, 2018, “China had built 75 economic and trade cooperation zones along the Belt and Road countries,” and that more than 3,800 companies were involved in these cooperation zones.⁵⁸

OBOR shows no signs of slowing this rapid progress. The One Belt One Road and the Maritime Silk Road are linking major subsections of the world, and they are on their way way to joining the West’s successes as one of the major infrastructure projects of the twenty-first century.

This initial report was researched and written by Tom Ward and Elizabeth Forman of PIM China, Ltd. It is provided courtesy of PIM China, Ltd. www.pimchina.com. For further information on how OBOR may benefit your company write to tomward@pimchina.com

Notes

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