

China's Breakout from Encirclement: Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: China is a country with unique geographic position surrounded by twenty nations big and small (including Taiwan) around its periphery. China's greatest security concern has always been a strategic encirclement – its neighbors aligning with one another or with strong powers such as the United States to isolate China. How does this sense of encirclement influence China's strategic behavior? China's central geographic position between Russia and the United States makes it hard for Beijing to maneuver its foreign policy in the region. Thus, China's current leader came up with the idea of implementing a project, a modern version of the ancient Silk Road, whose specific function is to link countries of the world by the different types of infrastructure. Emerging as a feature of China's so-called peaceful development, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a manifestation of its aspiration for connecting itself to the countries of the great Afro-Eurasian landmass by railroads, highways, shipping routes and communication networks. This article portrays the BRI as Chinese strategy of a breakout from encirclement. It argues that China is employing the BRI to pursue its strategic interests of enhancing its influence in its peripheral areas and extending its strategic reach further beyond its traditional periphery by gaining control over strategically important lands and ports.

Keywords: China, strategy, encirclement, Belt and Road Initiative, security

Executive Summary

“China dream”, “peaceful rise”, and “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” phrases often repeated in China's President Xi's speeches and the country's strategic documents, are the keys for understanding China's contemporary

policy. To explain briefly, China's dream is to become a rich and powerful nation on the global stage, but for this new era it will be done in a peaceful way and this era will be referred to as “the Great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” This new incarnation

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as an economically developed, politically influential, and militarily strong nation has been the dearest wish of Chinese leaders for hundreds of years. To fulfill it, the first and foremost goal is to create an external environment favorable for China's rise.

China, in order to shape a more favorable strategic environment, should avoid being encircled by a rival great power establishing or increasing its nonmilitary and military involvement surrounding China's strategic periphery. This simply means China would not want any great power such as the United States or Russia to become dominant in the regions close to China's borders.

Last century, China encountered strategic encirclements by the United States and the Soviet Union, and the

country was put in enormous danger as it confronted with two global superpowers to limit their influence in its strategic regions. Cold War taught China an important lesson – not to be encircled ever again.

Thus, China strives to secure its strategic position in its immediate region as well as avoid getting stuck in the region of its immediate periphery being besieged by a great power adversary such as the United States or Russia. Therefore, China's current leader came up with the idea of extending China's influence –the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although the BRI appears to be massive infrastructure plan, it certainly meets the China's strategic aims to enhance its influence in its peripheral areas and extend its strategic reach further beyond its traditional periphery.

Strategic Encirclement of China: Lessons Learned from the Cold War The US Encirclement of China During the Cold War

During the early Cold War, China encountered the strategic encirclements by the United States as the country increased its military presence on its southeastern and southern periphery, establishing military bases, and military alliances and deploying troops.

China, not long after it was established, faced the devastating war on its northeastern border. After the Korean War of 1950, the US geared toward containing communism in Asia. As a result, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was surrounded with a ring of military alliances and bases on its southeastern periphery when the United States forged the bilateral security treaties with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia and Taiwan and multilateral treaties such the ANZUS Treaty and the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty

(or SEATO) with the South and Southeast Asian nations throughout 1950s.

China's concerns of the US encirclement was further exacerbated as the US escalation of the war in Vietnam greatly increased in the mid-1960s. Washington deployed ground troops into battle in South Vietnam in March 1965, and after three months, more than 80,000 American troops were stationed in Vietnam.⁴⁰ Beijing feared that the United States was expanding its influence all around China's eastern and southern periphery in Asia to militarily besiege the PRC. The Chinese leader Mao Zedong warned the CCP leaders of a US military encirclement. This encirclement starting with South Korea in the north and continuing to Okinawa, the Philippines, Taiwan and the island of Guam, would

⁴⁰ "Vietnam War," *History*, October 29, 2009, https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history#section_5.

complete with Vietnam in the south.⁴¹ In a *Renmin Ribao* editorial of July 1, 1964, Beijing charged that “the US built military bases around China and organized military blocs of aggression to lay a

military cordon around China to threaten it with war.”⁴² China perceived America's increased military involvement on China's southeastern and southern periphery as threatening to China's security.

The Soviet Encirclement of China

China also worried about the Soviet encirclement by both land and sea after the Sino-Soviet split emerged in the early 1960s. World's two largest communist states that once were allies, turned into adversaries, and even clashed along their border in 1969. The antagonism between the PRC and the USSR continued till the very end of the Cold War.

The Soviets first increased their troop deployments in the Far East, Siberia, and Soviet Central Asia and armed them with more powerful weaponry, to militarily besiege China from its north, northwest, and northeastern frontiers. For example, in 1967, Russia deployed the Scaleboard (SS-12), a tactical nuclear weapon that could hit targets such as transportation centers and big military concentrations, to a range of 725 kilometers within China.⁴³ Soviet divisions deployed along China's northern borders increased from fourteen in 1965 to around thirty-four by 1969.⁴⁴ Moreover, the USSR strengthened its

defense ties with the Mongolian People's Republic, forging a military alliance, providing weapons, establishing military installations and stationing troops in Mongolia. Mongolia and the Soviet Union signed a Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Agreement in 1966. In 1967, Moscow and Ulaanbaatar signed the Agreement on Stationing Soviet Troops in Mongolia.⁴⁵ On its over 8000-kilometer border with China and additional over 4700-kilometer Mongolia-China border, the USSR effectively encircled the PRC by land with its military posture in the Far East, Mongolia, and Soviet Central Asia.

Furthermore, the Soviet Union expanded its naval presence in Asian waters close to China's mainland in the 1970s and Beijing saw this as Moscow's strategy to complete its encirclement by sea. For example, Moscow gained access to Vietnamese naval bases and ports such in Haiphong, and Camh Ranh Bay⁴⁶ as well as Danang.⁴⁷ Moscow used Vietnamese

⁴¹ Xiaobing Li, *The Dragon in the Jungle: The Chinese Army in the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 49.

⁴² *Beijing review*, no 27, July 3, 1964, 8.

⁴³ *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], Directorate of Intelligence, 28 April 1970, 24.

⁴⁴ M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 204.

⁴⁵ Gombosuren Dendevsuren, *Mongol Ulsyn Zevsegt Khüchnii baiguulaltyn tüikh: XX zuun* [History of Mongolian Armed Forces Development: XX Century] (Ulaanbaatar: Arvai Print, 2009), 193.

⁴⁶ From March 1976, Moscow began the construction of refueling and repair facilities for Soviet submarines near Haiphong and agreed to supply Vietnam with submarines and train Vietnamese to operate the vessels. In the same year, Hanoi allowed Moscow to use Camh Ranh Bay as a base to supply oil to the Soviet navy and as one of the main ports to transport weapons and military goods and materials to Vietnam, see Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 92-93.

⁴⁷ Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011), 269.

naval bases and ports to enhance its power projection capability in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Belt and Road Initiative- China`s Breakout from Encirclement?

A significant lesson China learned from its struggle with encirclement from the United States and the Soviet Union in the last century is that China, in order not to be besieged again, should avoid getting stuck in the region of its immediate periphery. China`s central geographic position between Russia and the United States makes it hard for Beijing to maneuver its foreign policy in the region. China, using its traditional strategy of “using ‘barbarians’ to check ‘barbarians’,” on some occasions successfully played the two superpowers against one another.

As a weaker major power sandwiched between two superpowers, China`s major security concern was to escape being militarily besieged by any of the two. Whenever one of the two superpowers became dominant in those regions close to China`s borders, with their powerful military presence, China`s strategic position became greatly weakened. This lesson taught China the need to extend its reach beyond its periphery to escape Russian or American encirclement.

Therefore, China`s current leader came up with the idea of implementing a project, a modern version of the ancient Silk Road, whose specific function is to link countries of the world by the different types of infrastructure. Emerging as a feature of China`s so-called peaceful development, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a manifestation of its aspiration

for connecting itself to the countries of the great Afro-Eurasian landmass by railroads, highways, shipping routes and communication networks. Xi Jinping first proposed a plan for building land infrastructure connectivity, named “Silk Road Economic Belt,” and sea routes, named the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” in 2013. This project, later named the Belt and Road Initiative, today includes more than 100 countries.⁴⁸

The core of the BRI appears to be to gain control over strategically important lands and ports. In other words, China is employing the BRI to pursue its strategic interests of dominating strategically important areas. The critics of the BRI accuse China of purposely targeting the developing or underdeveloped countries with limited capability of paying their debt and convincing them to borrow money by offering infrastructure development in return. When they experience difficulty in paying back their debt, China uses this opportunity to seize the asset, extending its strategic or military reach.⁴⁹ Examples such as China`s lease of Sri Lanka`s port for 99 years or its establishment of a new military base in Djibouti are portrayed as attributes of its strategic interests. China built, for Sri Lankans, a port at Hambantota, that is within the BRI, and then Sri Lanka had to hand it over to China under a favorable lease of 99 years when they couldn`t pay back the debt of over

⁴⁸ As of January 2021, 140 countries have signed agreements with China to participate in the initiative, see Christoph Nedopil, “Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” Green Belt and Road Initiative Center, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://green-bri.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

⁴⁹ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, “Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’,” Chatham House, August 19, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy>.

\$8 billion. Djibouti owed a huge amount of money to China, which is 82% of their external debt, and like Sri Lanka, it gave away a port for China to build a military base.⁵⁰

Another important lesson China learned from strategic encirclement during the Cold War is that its neighbors' having close relationships with the great powers such as the United States and Russia greatly undermines China's strategic position in the region. China appears to be using the BRI as means to establish influence in countries around its periphery. Increasing their economic dependence on China, Beijing presumably expects its neighbors will have less incentive to turn against China by aligning with outside powers such as the United States or Russia. China is heavily investing in

its neighbors, increasing connectivity and interdependence through the Belt and Road Initiative. For example, China has built a railway, which stretches more than 1,000 kilometers from Kunming, China to Vientiane, capital of Laos.⁵¹ Also, Beijing invests \$30 billion help Mongolia to build a Mongolia-Russia-China economic corridor, connecting three countries by new trails of railways and highways.⁵² As a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a collection of projects that are estimated to cost up to \$62 billion, China builds the railways and highways connecting China with the Pakistani port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea.⁵³ The BRI is indeed a modern version of the Chinese strategy of a breakout from encirclement.

Conclusion

China's one of the biggest fears is to be encircled. In the last century, China was concerned about strategic encirclements by both global superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. Moscow and Beijing attempted to encircle China by establishing military alliances, building military bases, and deploying troops and providing weaponry or economic aids to the countries around its periphery. Given this historic experience of the Soviet and American encirclement during the Cold War, Beijing appears to be sensitive towards the presence of great powers on

its periphery, suspecting hostile great powers of conspiring with nations in its neighborhood to tighten a noose around China's neck. The Belt and Road Initiative seems to be a great tool for China to further its strategic goals of strengthening its ties with its neighboring countries to limit the influence of great powers such as the US in its immediate regions. Besides, the BRI serves the Xi's purpose to extend its strategic reach beyond its traditional periphery by gaining access to the strategically important lands and ports.

⁵⁰ George Tabei, "The sad similarity between Sri Lanka, Zambia and now Djibouti exemplifies China's 'debt trap' diplomacy," Business insider, November 09, 2018, <https://www.pulselive.co.ke/bi/politics/politics-the-sad-similarity-between-sri-lanka-zambia-and-now-djibouti-that-best/8kx3drc>.^Z

⁵¹ "China-Laos Railway opens, putting Laos on track from landlocked to land-linked," Xinhua net, December 04, 2021, http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/04/c_1310350562.htm

⁵² Tristan Kenderdine, "Mongolia gets on board with China's Belt and Road Initiative," Eurasianet, July 7, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/mongolia-gets-on-board-with-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>

⁵³ Jacob Mardell, "The BRI in Pakistan: China's flagship economic corridor," MERICS, May 20, 2020, <https://merics.org/en/analysis/bri-pakistan-chinas-flagship-economic-corridor>.

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