While sometimes being perceived with criticisms and suspicions, China has relentlessly pursued the Belt and Road Initiative since 2013. Its strategy is well developed and execution is meticulously carried out, with needed policy and instruments in place to provide full support for the implementation of this ambitious vision. The BRI has already extended to many countries in South, Southeast, Central, and West Asia, all of which, according to China, will play a key role on the two main routes under the BRI: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. In working with these countries, China has, for the most part, managed to avoid entangling itself in regional conflicts. Nevertheless, with the volatility of world politics and economics, there are many risk factors that could affect the success of this initiative. These include a lack of laws governing foreign investments in some countries, international sanctions, the threat of terrorism, and how China treats its Muslim populations, to name a few.

On this panel, I-wei Jennifer Chang will discuss new trends and developments in BRI that have implications for the greater Middle East including Pakistan, Sino-Middle Eastern relations, and China’s growing influence in the region.

Dr. Anchi Hoh will demonstrate how China’s BRI has already taken root in Central Asia and the Middle East, despite initial disinterest and the complications of regional conflicts. To protect its investments in these regions, Hoh shows that China has rolled out meticulous plans simultaneously to pursue security coordination through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, so far successfully defying popular beliefs that it would have to inevitably engage in regional conflicts.
China’s BRI Push in the Greater Middle East

I-wei Jennifer Chang, independent analyst on China-Middle East relations

In recent years, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has dominated the attention of global policymakers who have weighed the costs and benefits of greater economic, financial, and technological connectivity with Beijing and Chinese state-owned companies. Chinese President Xi Jinping’s BRI, proclaimed in 2013, has helped China build its global profile and essentially made it a go-to source for infrastructure construction and financing, economic and technical cooperation, and other forms of assistance. Western capitals have been concerned about Chinese strategic designs and increased Chinese economic and political influence in not only their own countries, but also developing countries spanning the Indo-Pacific region, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, where significant Chinese investment projects are located. The ubiquity of Chinese investment projects in developing countries has implications for local economic development, governance standards, and political stability.

Xi Jinping has invited Middle Eastern governments to take part in BRI, and many Middle Eastern leaders have expressed their support of BRI projects and have sought to deepen economic, military, and technological cooperation with Beijing. China and Middle Eastern countries have signed memorandums of understanding promising participation in BRI. During Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s February 2019 visit to Beijing, both countries reaffirmed the linkages between BRI and Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 plan and signed 35 economic cooperation agreements worth a total of $28 billion.¹ China’s BRI framework is a continuation of its pragmatic, economic-centered policies aimed at forging closer trade and financial ties between China and the Muslim world. At a time when Beijing has come under increased international criticism for holding large populations of Uyghurs in internment camps in Xinjiang, it remains to be seen whether implementation of its BRI projects in Muslim countries will be adversely affected.

China has recently scaled back its investments and financing of some BRI projects, providing room for participation by friendly foreign countries. Saudi Arabia, for example, is ramping up its investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. This paper will discuss new

trends and developments in BRI and their implications for the greater Middle East including Pakistan, Sino-Middle Eastern relations, and China’s growing influence in the region.

**BRI and China’s Security Strategy: the Cases of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf Countries**

Anchi Hoh, Ph.D., Program Specialist, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress‡

China’s Belt and Road Initiative — a grand economic development vision based on President Xi Jinping’s “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” announced in 2013 and subsequently incorporated into the Chinese Communist Party’s constitution in 2018 — aims at connecting the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa through a combination of infrastructure projects and soft-power programs. To date, the BRI has set in motion a series of projects, including interstate railway, gas and oil pipeline constructions; financial investments; telecommunications and cyber data exchanges; and cultural, educational and people-to-people cooperation. Some have been extant prior to the BRI and are now being folded into the initiative; others have been completed since the launch of the initiative; and yet others are being planned or underway.

All of the six land bridges and maritime routes under the BRI extend westward, mostly passing through Central Asia and the Middle East on land or by sea. These two regions are important to the initiative from the perspectives of geopolitics, trade and economy, security, etc. Cooperation with countries in these regions would, according to China’s design, not only secure its domestic energy supplies, but also improve the country’s economy and, in turn, induce political stability in China’s traditionally poorer northwestern region and Xinjiang.

As scholars have pointed out, the BRI faces multiple risks, many among which security-associated. Such risks range from the safety of Chinese labors and construction projects, to political instability and the threats of three evils (i.e. terrorism, extremist and separatism). China

‡ Disclaimer: The opinions expressed here are solely the author’s own and do not represent those of the Library of Congress.
places considerable weight on fights against the three evils in Central Asia and the Middle East as they are not only intertwined with regional conflicts but also tend to spill over and impact adjacent areas reaching as far as Xinjiang. The most recent developments in Xinjiang — first the participation of members of its Uighur community in Middle Eastern terrorist groups and later the arrest and detention of Xinjiang Muslims in overwhelmingly large numbers in reeducation camps — have challenged China domestically and in the international arena.

Drawing upon itself as an exemplar, China holds that the root cause of terrorism mainly lies in economy and that economic advancement would improve social conditions and more effectively address the causes of social unrest. Xi believes that the BRI is a means to bringing peace and prosperity to China as well as the participating countries and regions, particularly Central Asia and the Middle East, two key regions on the BRI’s land and maritime routes. The successful implementation of the BRI, in China’s view, is also a key to the economic and security challenges of Xinjiang. In other words, under the BRI trade and security converge.

The theory that trade and security intertwine is not new. It is believed that this connection is rooted in the mercantilism of the 16th and 17th centuries when western powers sought to explore, expand and secure vital natural resources for national profit. Some of the modern examples are the International Trade Organization (ITO) and the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) that accompanied the Marshall Plan following World War II in the face of the security threat of communism. This paper tries to demonstrate that security has been pursued alongside trade and economic development under the BRI, evident through China’s well-developed foreign policy toward Central Asia and the Middle East. Capitalizing on its long-standing relationships with Third-World developing countries in these regions and its growing influence in international organizations, China has identified and deployed various diplomatic mechanisms in pursuit of its security coordination. These mechanisms include country-to-country bilateral agreements and multilateral platforms, such as the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA); and regional and international

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organizations, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

To gain more understanding of China’s well-rounded BRI security approach, this paper begins by outlining China’s BRI using the Central Asian and Gulf Arab countries as examples, examine these countries’ attitude toward the initiative and security challenges pertaining to geopolitics, and then delve into the diplomatic mechanisms that China uses to accomplish its security coordination in pursuit of the success of the BRI.

BIOGRAPHIES

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*Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in Anchi Hoh’s article are solely of her own and do not represent those of the Library of Congress.*
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