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ABSTRACT

This article examines how China sought to externally legitimate the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by means of official rhetoric. The BRI is a notable Chinese policy initiative with a focus on infrastructure provision. It has been gaining traction worldwide but is simultaneously dogged by controversies and contested by a widening array of actors. Departing from the predominant focus on the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the BRI and China, this research focuses on an important yet under-explored aspect: sustained and highly coordinated rhetorical efforts on the part of China with a view to asserting legitimacy for the BRI. Leveraging an analytical framework with fine-grained distinctions between legitimacy types and sources, the study conducted a fully integrated content analysis of 644 Chinese official texts on the BRI. It first identified inductively the set of recurrent legitimacy claims articulated by Chinese officials. A subsequent quantitative analysis showcased how different legitimacy claims featured in the official rhetoric and evolved over time. The findings have practical relevance for China's external communications on the BRI and foreign actors' (counter-)narratives and policy responses to the Chinese initiative.

Introduction

In late 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled proposals for building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, officially aiming to develop infrastructure and improve connectivity in Eurasia and beyond. In English parlance, this was first labelled 'One Belt One Road', but later the name was changed to the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). The BRI has over time become China's most notable foreign policy initiative and a key pillar of China's increasingly active 'global connectivity politics' (Kohlenberg and Godehardt 2021). China held the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in 2017 and the second BRF in 2019, both gathering a respectable slate of foreign delegates and producing an extensive list of deliverables. As of January 2021, China had inked 205 BRI agreements with 171 countries and international organisations (Chinese Ministry of Commerce 2021).

Its growing momentum notwithstanding, the BRI has been dogged by concerns and controversies. Sceptics viewed the initiative as an emblematic example of China's economic statecraft and remained apprehensive about Beijing's hidden agenda, contending China's increased overseas investments in infrastructure such as ports are likely to expand its strategic influence (Li 2020). China's military base in Djibouti was often held up as a cautionary tale. They also aired concerns about the secrecy of lending terms and disregard for prevailing social and environmental safeguards linked to loans doled out by China's state-owned policy and commercial banks (Dollar 2018). In fact, many developed countries of the West, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Japan, have been reticent to endorse the BRI without qualifications. India has continually opposed the scheme, citing concerns about lending standards and the traversal of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a BRI flagship project – of disputed territories between India and Pakistan. More lately, problems with mega BRI projects in countries such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia have sounded alarm bells about the risk of a 'debt-trap' behind China's largesse.

For China, the need to legitimate and promote the BRI was three-fold. First, buy-in from the international community was essential to the BRI's success, yet distrust of the initiative and the Chinese government was running high due to a confluence of normative, economic and strategic concerns. Second, amid the growing backlash against the BRI, a series of initiatives were proposed as alternatives that underscore the imperative to balance development needs with financial and environmental risks, including the 'Partnership for Quality Infrastructure' rolled out by Japan (together with the Asian Development Bank) in 2016, and the 'Blue Dot Network' launched by the US, Japan and Australia in 2018. More recently, two mega infrastructure schemes were announced: 'Build Back Better for the World' by the US and 'Global Gateway' by the EU, both framed as viable BRI alternatives. Third, the implementation of the BRI was plagued by problems. A report noted that 35% of BRI infrastructure projects 'encountered major implementation problems – such as corruption scandals, labor violations, environmental hazards, and public protests' (Malik et al. 2021, 1).

This research examines China's rhetorical legitimation of the BRI. Importantly, legitimation is understood here as the normative process in which actors articulate legitimacy claims to 'justify their identities, interests, practices, or institutional designs' (Reus-Smit 2007, 159), and official rhetoric is seen as 'the framework within which policy and initiatives are developed, explained and legitimated both domestically and internationally' (Strauss 2009, 779). More substantively, the study seeks to identify the legitimacy claims in China's official rhetoric, effectively uncovering the distinct normative grounds on which Beijing crafted the BRI rhetoric. As such, the research question is formulated as follows: How did Chinese officials seek to rhetorically legitimate the BRI to the international community? To address the question, this study collected a total of 644 Chinese official texts on the BRI and analysed their content along the lines of a purpose-built framework of legitimacy.

Before going further, it is necessary to clarify the research's modest scope. First, it focuses exclusively on the rhetorical dimension of legitimation, namely how China employed strategically crafted rhetoric to assert legitimacy for the BRI (for a discussion on how China sought to legitimate the BRI beyond rhetoric, see Deng 2021). Second, this study does not assess the effectiveness of rhetoric legitimation, an aspect already studied elsewhere (Yang and Van Gorp 2021). In other words, it studies the construction of messages rather than the reception thereof.

The reminder of the article proceeds as follows. The first section embeds the research in a wider context with a view to highlighting its relevance. The second section presents a brief overview of the existing legitimacy literature and builds an analytical apparatus substantiated by primary legitimacy types and specific legitimacy sources. The third section describes the collection and analysis of data. The empirical sections articulate the set of BRI-specific legitimacy claims and study their relative salience and evolution. Lastly, some implications of the research are discussed.

Situating the research

As a significant and potentially impactful initiative, the BRI has drawn extensive and sustained attention from policy pundits and scholars. Extant research has largely treated the BRI as a grand strategy of China, debating Beijing's motivations and the potential implications of the initiative for established powers and the incumbent international system (Benabdallah 2019; Cai 2018; Leverett and Wu 2017; Li 2020; Rolland 2017; Wang 2016). Overall, discussions unfold along two dimensions: geopolitical and (geo)economic. The former focuses on China leveraging infrastructure provision for political and strategic ends, while the latter sees the scheme as primarily driven by economic imperatives, such as offloading industrial overcapacity and developing overseas markets for Chinese companies.

A number of scholars have nevertheless challenged the view that the BRI was intended by China as a grand geopolitical manoeuvre or would materialise as such. They have studied the BRI through the prism of bureaucratic politics or state transformation/fragmentation, foregrounding ambiguities of the BRI, rivalries between central government bodies, divergences between authorities at the central and lower levels (Jones and Zeng 2019; Ye 2019; Zeng 2019), and overlaps between the BRI and pre-existing national and sub-national ideas and initiatives (Summers 2016).

A third strand of literature turns to the BRI's impacts on borrowing countries and the mix of benefits and risks attendant on large-scale infrastructure development (Hurley, Morris, and Portelance 2018; Malik et al. 2021; Sutherland et al. 2020). In this regard, the question on whether the BRI is 'debt-trap diplomacy' has engendered considerable debate, with the 'debt-trap' thesis increasingly challenged for overplaying China's intentionality or ability to leverage debt for asset seizure (Acker, Bräutigam, and Huang 2020; Bräutigam 2020; Carmody 2020; Ferchen 2018; Singh 2021).

Lastly, a growing body of case studies have been conducted on mega BRI projects, such as the CPEC, East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia and Letpadaung Copper Mine in Myanmar. Some of these studies bring to light the agency of host countries (Calabrese and Cao 2021). Others point to the limits and challenges in implementing infrastructure projects in environments marred by geopolitical rivalry (Garlick 2018) and complex social and political-institutional dynamics (Chan and Pun 2020; Lim, Chen, and Ji 2021).

The existing BRI scholarship reviewed above highlights concerns about geostrategic calculations of China, adverse impacts of the BRI on host countries, and multifaceted challenges in executing BRI projects on the ground. These concerns partly explain and reflect the ubiquitous distrust of the BRI in foreign political-media circles and magnify the need for legitimation.

The present study examines how China sought to legitimate the BRI internationally by means of rhetoric. In a previous study, Swaine (2015) presented a detailed account of the

views and commentaries on the BRI by Chinese officials, state media and prominent scholars. This research is different in three aspects. First, it goes beyond a recapitulation of the array of views expressed by Chinese elites and dissects (official) rhetoric from the theoretical perspective of legitimation. This not only foregrounds the legitimating intention intrinsic to official rhetoric but also allows a systematic disaggregation of the rhetoric into justifications along the lines of legitimacy sources. A related second point is that this research focuses squarely on official sources and does not consider non-official materials such as scholarly writings. This is warranted by its focus on legitimation, which entails legitimating intention. Third, the extensive period of time (2013–2019) examined allows us to see how China's legitimating rhetoric evolved over time and in response to external criticism.

Analytical framework: legitimacy and legitimation

As a key concept in the social sciences, legitimacy is generally understood as 'the right or entitlement to act' (Reus-Smit 2007, 158). Actors have an incentive to secure voluntary compliance and diffuse support driven by a belief in legitimacy since it is less costly than coercion or material inducement (Matheson 1987, 200). This legitimacy belief emanates from 'the substance of the rule or from the procedure or source by which it was constituted' (Hurd 1999, 381). In a widely cited definition, Suchman (1995, 574) conceives of legitimacy as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate'.

The process of creating, or rather seeking and asserting, legitimacy is legitimation. Essentially, legitimation is about justification, and can be analysed according to the reasons given why an actor or action is legitimate. These reasons constitute legitimacy claims. For the sake of clarity, an analytical distinction is drawn between three related yet distinct terms: legitimacy, legitimation, and legitimacy claim. Legitimacy refers to the quality of being desirable, proper and appropriate; legitimation concerns the normative process whereby actors seek to justify their interests and practices; and the justifications are legitimacy claims (Reus-Smit 2007, 159). Also, it should be stressed that a legitimating act is not the same as successful legitimation, as 'legitimacy claims are not necessarily accepted by legitimacy-granting audiences' (Bexell 2014, 293).

Legitimacy and legitimation are inherently interrelated. As Reus-Smit (2007, 159) puts it, 'actors making legitimacy claims is the lifeblood of the politics of legitimation'. Studying legitimation is to identify the set of claims that invoke types or sources of legitimacy. As regards legitimacy ideal-types, scholars tend to converge on the overarching distinction between input and output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999) or, alternatively, between procedural and performance legitimacy (Tallberg and Zürn 2019).

This study builds on the overall distinction between procedural and performance legitimacy but refines it in two important aspects. First, it synthesises insights from the existing scholarship and identifies potential types of legitimacy beyond procedural and performance legitimacy. Substantively, it incorporates legitimacy tied to its origin (Bodansky 1999, 612) and legitimacy associated with purposes or goals (Lenz and Viola 2017; Steffek 2009, 315; Yang 2021, 1819) in addition to the procedural and performance legitimacy. Second, it refines the overall distinction by disaggregating each of the four legitimacy types into substantive legitimacy sources, thereby allowing a granular empirical mapping of justificatory rhetoric. The rest of this analytical section unpacks the four

legitimacy types into specific sources before discussing those of particular relevance to this study.

Source-based legitimacy

The first type of legitimacy relates to its origin. Until relatively recently, legitimacy was primarily justified by divine right (Matheson 1987, 201), charismatic leadership or tradition (Weber 1991). In modern society, however, political legitimacy depends on consent, namely individuals consenting to the transfer of authority (Binder and Heupel 2015, 240). Premised on the understanding of Bodansky (1999, 612), this study identifies two variants of source-based legitimacy pertaining to the case. First, legitimacy can originate from tradition, history or convention (Matheson 1987; Weber 1991). An institution or action can be legitimated by the fact that it existed before or has existed for a long time. In fact, appealing to the past is a common discursive legitimation strategy whereby actors draw (not necessarily correct) analogies between the past and the present, seeking to rationalise the current form of rule or policy (Van Leeuwen 2007, 96). Second, legitimacy can stem from external recognition. To add an international dimension to Beetham's domestically focused conceptualisation of legitimacy, Holbig (2011, 171) submits recognition by the global community as external equivalent of domestic consent. International recognition holds special import for political regimes sensitive to external pressure and criticism such as China. In fact, showing external validation of China and its success is found to be vital for legitimating purposes (Holbig 2011, 178–179).

Functional legitimacy

The second base for legitimacy relates to functionality, and more specifically being suited to serve a specific purpose. Statements on purposes and goals are frequently used as a benchmark for assessing performance, and consequently, purpose legitimacy is often subsumed under performance legitimacy. Following Steffek (2009) and Lenz and Viola (2017), this study separates purpose from performance. This is necessary for studying legitimation because referring to mission, purposes or goals is common for the sake of legitimation, not least when policy does not produce a desired outcome or its effect has yet to be seen. Functional legitimacy can be unpacked into qualities such as usefulness, uniqueness, novelty and complementarity (Raffaelli and Glynn 2015; Yang and Keukeleire 2019). Three are of particular import to this study. The first is usefulness: the ability to address specific problems. For example, legitimacy of global climate governance, in the absence of democratic participation and control, rests primarily on its role in bringing together different stakeholders to address the problem of climate change (Jagers and Stripple 2003). The second aspect is appropriateness – that is, why a given actor or policy is more appropriate than alternatives to perform specific tasks or solve certain problems (Steffek 2009, 315). For example, owing to its irreplaceable role in global health governance, the World Health Organization is best positioned to coordinate the global response to the coronavirus pandemic.

A third dimension is complementarity. This is particularly important for novel actors or policies. Emphasising complementarity and conformity is conducive to blunting criticism and reducing resistance from actors with a vested interest in defending the status quo. An

emblematic case is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which had to be legitimated vis-à-vis existing actors exemplified by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (Yang and Keukeleire 2019, 940).

Procedural legitimacy

The third type of legitimacy involves procedural fairness in the decision-making process. Procedural legitimacy straddles the ideas of input legitimacy by Scharpf (1999) and through-put legitimacy by Schmidt (2013). While specific qualities of procedural fairness are diverse and partly context dependent, they are frequently linked to democratic standards such as participation, deliberation, transparency and accountability. Yet they may equally pertain to standards beyond democracy, such as legality, efficiency and expert advice (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 592). Among others, three standards are particularly pertinent to this case. The first is openness and inclusiveness in terms of participation. For an international arrangement to be (perceived as) legitimate, it is imperative that no interested parties be arbitrarily divested of the right to get involved. The reason is that participation gives actors involved a sense of ownership, and, conversely, exclusion can lead to a sense of unfairness on the part of the excluded (Bodansky 1999, 617). A second aspect is equality in the decision-making process. Given apparent power asymmetries in global politics, it is important that the weaker parties 'have an input, be heard and influence the process' (Albin 2008, 764). Third, procedural legitimacy rests on transparency and easily accessible information (Buchanan and Keohane 2006, 427), which allows interested parties to see what happens behind closed doors and whether their interests are protected and concerns addressed.

Performance legitimacy

The fourth type is performance legitimacy, namely legitimacy based on output (Scharpf 1999) or success in producing favourable outcomes (Bodansky 1999, 612). Unlike functional legitimacy focusing on declaratory goals, performance legitimacy is concerned with substantive results. It is common that actors rely on actual outcomes or policy effectiveness to legitimate themselves or their policy. Failing to deliver on promises can undermine popular support and legitimacy. Performance is even more important for political systems that are unable to measure up sufficiently to democratic criteria. A number of studies have noted the reliance of the Chinese government on performance indicators such as economic growth, social stability and higher international status as a primary legitimacy source (Holbig 2011; Zhao 2009). Performance can be assessed in different ways and indicators vary depending on the context. For an actor or action, performance primarily concerns its effectiveness in terms of solving problems and achieving desired outcomes. In addition to actual results, this research draws out two additional elements. The first is whether and to what extent common standards and practices are respected. This is relevant to the present study because China generally does not subscribe to the global norms for social and environmental safeguards, yet many projects proposed under the rubric of the BRI carry significant social and environmental risks. The (mis)alignment with international norms when implementing projects is thus a relevant performance indicator. Lastly, it makes sense to include 'prospects'. After all, it is a logical corollary to assess prospects based on actual results.

Taken together, the four legitimacy types (source-based, functional, procedural, performance) and the substantive legitimacy sources constitute the building blocks for China to construct its legitimating rhetoric on the BRI. They were invoked in the justifications advanced by Chinese officials with a view to asserting the *raison d'être* of the scheme and translating it into a 'positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable, necessary, or otherwise acceptable action' (Vaara 2014, 503).

Equally, legitimation and delegitimation are parallel processes. Contrary to legitimation as a process of establishing and asserting legitimacy, delegitimation refers to the practices that challenge and undermine legitimacy (Bexell 2014, 293). In fact, legitimation is frequently motivated by delegitimating practices. The need for legitimation is acute in the face of external criticism or in times of crisis when the legitimacy of an actor or action is questioned. In response to criticism, legitimating agents, in tandem with positive self-presentation, often try to discredit critics and their claims (negative other-presentation). To get a better understanding of China's BRI legitimation, it is equally useful to look at the dynamics between legitimation and delegitimation.

Data and method

The purpose-built data set comprises a total of 644 texts, collected from the website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) (www.fmprc.gov.cn). The rationale for focusing on the communications of the MFA is two-fold. First, the study looks at China's official rhetoric on the BRI, and the MFA has been the lead governmental body for communicating and promoting the BRI internationally. A second and more practical consideration is that the MFA website not only has all the key texts on the BRI but more importantly, boasts a considerable number of MFA press conference transcripts with spokespersons responding directly to BRI-related questions, and articles authored by senior Chinese diplomats to promote the BRI in countries where they were posted.

The exclusive focus on data from the MFA begs the question why other official sources were not included, given that the Ministry of Commerce and the National Development and Reform Commission equally played a main role in the BRI's design and implementation, and that intra-governmental divergences were observed (Jones and Zeng 2019). Potential rivalry between different governmental entities notwithstanding, it did not materialise into a notable difference in the key talking points in their BRI communications. This was confirmed by a preliminary comparison of the BRI rhetoric among the the three governmental bodies. As such, it can be reasonably argued that the communications of the MFA are representative of Chinese official rhetoric in the BRI case.

The starting point for data collection is September 2013, when President Xi publicly unveiled the Silk Road Economic Belt proposal. December 2019 was chosen as the end point to include the substantial amount of legitimating rhetoric generated around the second BRF. Initially, all texts on the MFA website containing a reference to the BRI during this period of time were collected. Given the amorphous design of the BRI and its notable status as the hallmark policy of President Xi, referring to the initiative was a commonplace in Chinese official rhetoric. As such, it was imperative to filter the collected data. The overriding criterion for including a text is whether it discusses the BRI substantively. This means only those texts with a primary focus on the BRI or substantive discussion of it were retained, whereas those

making only a passing reference were excluded. The texts included generally come in three types: speeches of Chinese officials, articles in foreign media authored by Chinese diplomats, and transcripts of MFA press conferences and briefings.

The data set is unevenly distributed. While the texts span from September 2013 to December 2019, they are concentrated overwhelmingly around three time points: March 2015, May 2017 and April 2019. The first time point relates to the publication of the BRI Action Plan; the second and the third relate to China's hosting of the two BRFs, both drawing extensive international attention and leading to intense effort by Beijing to promote the initiative. Such an uneven distribution showcases that although there were sustained legitimating efforts on the part of China, their intensity varied over time. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the data set.

The method chosen for analysing the textual data is a two-step, fully integrated content analysis, which 'combines quantitative, qualitative, manual, and computer-assisted content analyses within a single research project' and is 'better suited for handling more complex issues that cannot be adequately addressed through the partial content analyses' (Pashakhanlou 2017, 448). Substantively, this research started with an inductive, qualitative analysis geared towards identifying and organising the themes in the data based on the elements of the analytical framework. This was then followed by a deductive, quantitative analysis that coded the data along the lines of the themes identified to measure them quantitatively. Such an integrated content analysis is (most) appropriate for this study because its overarching aim is to ferret out the substantive justifications (ie legitimacy claims) constituting China's official rhetoric and uncover the patterns by means of frequency distributions.

More specifically, data analysis proceeded in four steps. First, all the text excerpts discussing the different aspects of the BRI were collected during a preliminary reading. Several thematic categories were identified: historical and contemporary conjunctures, its scope and substance, guidelines, achievements, and prospects. Second, excerpts collected during the first step were sorted and categorised as per the different sources of legitimacy discussed above. This resulted in an array of BRI-specific legitimacy claims, further substantiated by a number of typical statements. Third, to test the operational definition of legitimacy claims, a pilot phase was conducted during which two researchers coded 65 texts (10%) randomly chosen from the data set. Differences were resolved via discussions. In the process, the codebook (*Appendix*) and definition of each indicator were refined. After obtaining satisfactory inter-coder reliability (kappa value above 0.75), each text was coded on the BRI-specific legitimacy claims (Table 2) and checked in terms of whether it engaged in delegitimation.

Table 1. Distribution of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-focused official texts over time.

Year	Texts in absolute numbers
2013	4
2014	31
2015	87
2016	46
2017	222
2018	107
2019	147

Table 2. Chinese officials' legitimacy claims on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Legitimacy type	Legitimacy source	BRI-specific legitimacy claim
Source-based	Tradition/history	BRI did not come out of nowhere but has roots in the ancient Silk routes; it carries on the Silk Road tradition.
	External recognition	BRI has secured extensive participation/support from foreign governments and international organisations; high turnout at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperations (BRFs) is a vote of confidence and approval.
Functional	Usefulness	BRI is designed to improve connectivity, foster common development, and promote regional cooperation; it provides business opportunities.
	Appropriateness	BRI, thanks to its unique characteristics, is well placed to tackle pressing issues and serves as an antidote to protectionism, anti-globalisation, nationalism and unilateralism.
	Complementarity	BRI complements the extant institutional architecture at the international level and policy initiatives of other countries.
Procedural	Openness	BRI is not an exclusive club but open to all; it is not confined to Eurasia but open to countries worldwide.
	Equality	BRI is to be based on equality, and all participating parties shall have an equal say in decision-making.
	Transparency	BRI is transparent; project planning and implementation will be done under broad daylight.
Performance	Actual outcome	BRI has made strong headway in the five key areas of connectivity since its inception.
	Lending standards	BRI complies with international high standards and best practices in social and environmental safeguards, public procurement and debt sustainability.
	Prospects	BRI, based on what it has achieved to date, will likely enjoy great prospects.

Asserting legitimacy for the BRI: 11 legitimacy claims

This part presents the 11 legitimacy claims on the BRI that resulted from the contextualisation of legitimacy types/sources on the initiative. The qualitative step constitutes the first part of empirical findings and serves as a stepping stone to a quantitative step aiming to ascertain the relative salience and evolution of individual legitimacy claims. Typical examples of each legitimacy claim are provided at the end of the discussion on that legitimacy type.

BRI: 'rooted in history, well-received externally'

Source-based legitimacy in the BRI context pertains to two aspects: its historical root and external reception. First, the BRI was presented as a continuation and further development of the ancient Silk Road that connected Asia, Europe and Africa. This sort of historical reference 'translates the past aura of wealth and cross-border connectivity to the present conjuncture' (Sum 2019, 534). The BRI, as often proclaimed, is akin to its historic counterpart by bringing together nations and civilisations; the Silk Road tradition of 'peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, mutual benefit' was invoked as a guiding principle for the BRI. In addition, the inclusion of countries and regions beyond the original design was rationalised by appealing to history. For example, some countries in Africa and America were included supposedly for their 'historical connection' to the maritime Silk Road or being a 'natural extension' of it. Second, the BRI was touted as a project that garnered broad external approval. The participation of states and

international organisations in the BRI by signing a cooperation agreement was frequently shown as evidence of validation. The same goes for repeated referencing to the turnout at the BRFs.

> [W]hy does China propose the Belt and Road Initiative? History is the best teacher […]. The ancient silk routes opened the window for friendly exchanges among the countries, making tremendous contributions to the progress and development of human beings. (Lu 2018)

> Africa has a natural and historical connection with the Initiative. In 15th century, Chinese admiral Zheng He led a fleet of 300 ships to Africa, which has planted friendship seeds in the hearts of both Chinese and African people since then. (Chao 2017)

> The Second BRF has attracted over 6000 foreign guests from 150 countries and 92 international organizations. Leaders from 38 countries, China included, and heads of the UN [United Nations] and the IMF [International Monetary Fund] attended the Leaders' Roundtable Summit. This is the vote of confidence and approval they have cast to the BRI. (Chinese MFA 2019a)

BRI: 'offer investments, promote globalisation and liberalisation, complement existing initiatives'

Functional legitimacy here relates to the goals, unique features and complementarity of the BRI. The first is the BRI's stated mission of improving infrastructure and (inter)regional connectivity. It was hailed as 'project of the century' that provides a much-needed global public good – infrastructure investment – and in so doing, fosters development and economic growth. Beyond infrastructure, it aims to strengthen policy coordination, trade-finance facilitation and social-cultural exchanges among countries, with the ultimate goal of building a road of 'peace, prosperity, openness, innovation, civilization' and a 'community of shared destiny' (Xi 2017). Second, the Chinese plan was cast as a project with distinct characteristics. The BRI was shown as an effort to share China's development experience of privileging infrastructure to stimulate economic growth, a Chinese solution to the multiplicity of challenges attendant on globalisation and interdependence, and an antithesis to unpalatable alternatives such as the protectionist moves exemplified by the Trump administration. Third, the BRI was shown as a complement to national development strategies or regional integration projects of other countries. For example, it was said that the BRI would dovetail with the EU Investment Plan, UK Northern Powerhouse Plan, and Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, among others.

> 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. (Chinese MFA 2015)

> The Initiative provides a solution with Chinese wisdom for the global economy to recover and promote a just and reasonable global governance system. (Song 2017)

> The pursuit of Belt and Road Initiative is not meant to reinvent the wheel. Rather, it aims to complement the development strategies of countries involved by leveraging their comparative strengths. (Xi 2017)

BRI: 'open to all, based on equality, transparent'

Procedural legitimacy here concerns three principles that are said to guide the planning and implementation of the BRI: openness, equality and transparency. First, the BRI was presented as an open and inclusive platform. It is open not only to Eurasian countries along the Belt and Road, but to far-flung nations falling outside of the ancient Silk Road. Second, the BRI was said to be based on equality and mutual respect. This manifests in the 'golden rules' for BRI cooperation: extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefit (*gongshang*, *gongjian*, *gongxiang*). Equally, the two BRFs were framed as an example of all interested parties working in concert on equal terms, and the joint communiqué was framed as an international consensus for how to drive forward cooperation. The key message is that no single country (namely China) dominates decision-making, and all participants have a say. An oft-used metaphor is that the BRI is not a 'solo show' but a 'symphony'. Third, it was said that BRI deals would not be shrouded in secrecy but carried out with transparency.

> The Belt and Road is open to all friends. Wherever they are from, Asia, Europe, Africa, or the Americas, they all can be partners in building the Belt and Road. (Jiang 2018)

> In pursuing this initiative, we will act according to the principle of wide consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits […]. If I may use a musical metaphor, it is not China's solo, but a symphony performed by all relevant countries. (Wang 2015)

> The planning and implementation of BRI projects have been discussed by the participants in the open […]. There is no backroom deal; everything is transparent. (Wang 2018)

BRI: 'impressive progress, high standards, promising prospects'

Performance legitimacy here refers to three related aspects used for gauging performance: actual outcome, lending standards and prospects. The first aspect dwells on the progress the BRI had made and the pace at which it had moved forward. This can be an assessment of either the BRI overall or individual projects, which was often carried out in the five 'connectivities' to show the headway the BRI had made in realising its stated goals. The second aspect concerns standards, touching on such matters as social-environmental safeguards, public procurement and debt sustainability. It was stated that China and its local partners had adopted and would continue to follow international norms when executing BRI projects. The last is prospects. In view of the progress the BRI had made, the argument goes, there is reason to believe it will have great prospects.

> In the past six years, China's trade with the BRI countries totaled US$6.5 trillion, and direct investment exceeded US$90 billion. (Wu 2019)

> BRI projects are high-quality, high-standard [… it] follows international rules and market principles and emphasizes the importance of economic and environmental sustainability. (Zhang 2018)

> This Initiative has produced fruitful results over the past four years, because it represents the trend of the times and serves the people's interests. Such an Initiative will have broad prospects. (Liu 2018)

Relative salience and evolution of legitimacy claims

After fleshing out the substantive legitimacy claims, this study performed a deductive, quantitative analysis to examine how they were used by Chinese officials. Key findings shown below are based on the results of a coding process whereby each text was coded categorically along the lines of the 11 legitimacy claims and the (non-)use of delegitimating claims.

Finding 1: usefulness, external recognition, equal decision-making and actual outcome as dominant claims

The first finding on the relative importance of legitimacy claims is shown in Figure 1. The most conspicuous is the relative comprehensiveness of China's official rhetoric, as evidenced by the reference to the wide range of legitimacy sources. Judging by numerical representation, Chinese officials grounded the BRI's legitimacy mostly in benefits, external approval, equality and actual results. Out of the 644 texts analysed, 96% referred to the objectives of the BRI and benefits it provides, followed by the reference to the broad external approval the initiative had secured (79%), collective decision-making based on equality (71%), and substantive outcomes the BRI had achieved (68%).

The prevalent reference to the BRI's usefulness is notable but arguably little surprising. After all, the BRI was proposed to narrow the widely recognised gaps in infrastructure investment and improve connectivity. It is thus expected that Chinese officials would make prevalent reference to the wide array of expected benefits brought by infrastructure building. As a logical corollary, substantive progress made under the BRI was often used as evidence for the initiative's rapid transformation from a proposal to reality and its ability to deliver. By contrast, the salience of claims about external recognition and equality merits somewhat further explanation.
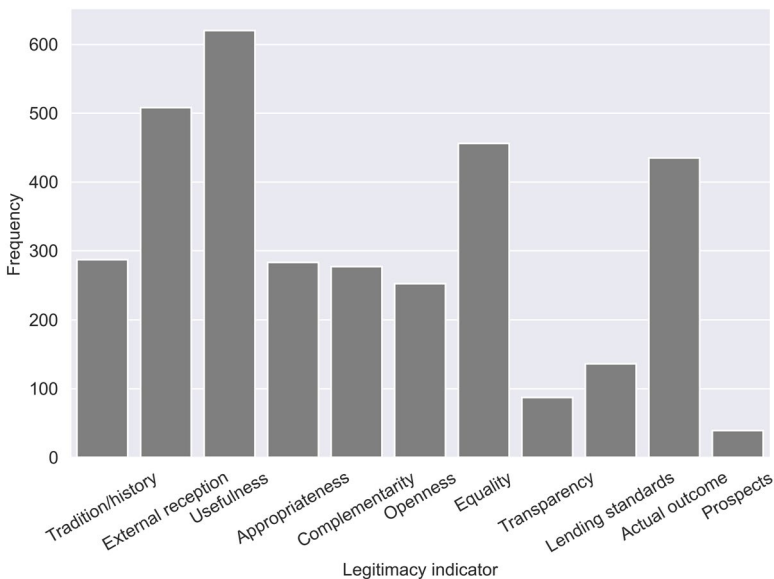

Figure 1. Frequency of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) legitimacy claims.

First, as stated earlier, approval by third parties such as heads of state and representatives of international organisations of Chinese actions and successes is a mainstay in Chinese official rhetoric (Holbig 2011). The BRI is no exception, for which external support was highly sought after. For example, China actively pushed in the UN system for the inclusion of the BRI as 'China's solution' to global development (Deng 2021, 741–742). Also, given that the BRI was relatively recent and short on specifics, participation by third parties was frequently cited to buttress other claims such as the initiative being mutually beneficial and promising. As said here,

> Just think about it. How could the initiative [BRI] have won so extensive response and support if it were not in keeping with the trend of the times, not for the benefits of people of countries around the globe or short of vigorous vitality and bright prospects? (Chinese MFA 2018a)

Further, external approval was used to deflect criticism. While refuting a claim by former US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo about the BRI causing debt problems, a Chinese MFA spokesperson pointed to the international backing for the initiative: 'If the BRI indeed comes with shackles, like he [Pompeo] said, why are so many countries and international organizations actively participating in and supporting it?' (Chinese MFA 2019b). In this light, reference to external approval for the BRI was partly prompted by increasing suspicion– or, rather, the lack of unanimous support in the international community.

Second, the relative prominence of the claim about equality can be partly accounted for by Beijing's sustained emphasis on the 'golden rules' for BRI cooperation: wide consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. In fact, the Chinese government sought to mainstream these principles by, for example, incorporating them as overarching principles guiding China's global governance strategy (Wei 2020, 426). Repeated reference to equality can also be seen as a response to recurrent criticism levelled at the BRI and China. For example, some viewed the BRI as part of Chinese economic statecraft – it 'is not really about commerce but is about China's strategic dominance' (Bräutigam 2020, 5). Such concern was exacerbated by the predominant position China enjoys bilaterally over BRI 'partners'. Together, they heightened the need for Beijing to dispel concerns about China dictating terms and leveraging infrastructure investment in developing countries for strategic interests. The following excerpt is a typical statement from Chinese officials:

> BRI follows the principle of wide consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits […]. We do not intend to compel others to follow our orders or build our own backyard garden, still less to seek the sphere of influence. Rather, we reach out to our partners in a spirit of mutual respect, mutual trust, and mutual benefit. (Zhang 2018)

As regards the relative salience of claims in the legitimating rhetoric, what is de-emphasised, selectively presented or completely left out is just as important. In contrast to the dominant claims, scant mention of commonly referenced legitimacy sources such as transparent decision-making and respect for international standards (particularly prior to the substantial global backlash against the BRI, see Finding 2) becomes rather conspicuous. This is problematic from the perspective of legitimation. The issue of secrecy, in particular, was a recurrent charge at the BRI, which adversely affected its international buy-in. As stated in a recent AidData policy report (Malik et al. 2021, 6), 'Beijing's reluctance to disclose detailed information about its overseas development finance portfolio has made it difficult for LMICs [low-income and middle-income countries] to objectively weigh the costs and benefits of BRI participation'. When China did mention the alignment of BRI projects with high standards, it focused almost

exclusively on the dimension of lending (social-environmental safeguards, debt sustainability) and left out other development finance norms in areas such as export credits and debt relief – subjects of relevance when discussing the implications of China as a global creditor (Acker, Bräutigam, and Huang 2020). It should also be noted that the term 'international standards' is contested, and China's reference to compliance with high standards sometimes includes a call for incorporating the Chinese experience and improving the existing norms.

Further, legitimacy claims (as justifications) are invariably positively framed and exclude unpleasant and negative elements. This act of exclusion makes it desirable, and in some cases, imperative to uncover what is left unsaid. For example, the claim about the ancient Silk Road being peaceful and beneficial is contradicted by historical facts that link war, violence and death with it (Frankopan 2015); the emphasis on broad external support for the BRI needs to be juxtaposed with the continued reticence of heavyweight nations represented by the Group of Seven (barring Italy) and the increasing backlash in countries that initially embraced the plan; statements about equality are challenged by the huge power asymmetry between China and host countries; and assertions about rapid progress and promising prospects are undercut by the growing global pushback.

Finding 2: dominant claims remaining dominant, notable rhetorical shift from appeal to history to reference to external approval and actual outcome

The second finding concerns the evolution of China's BRI rhetoric on the 11 legitimacy claims (2014–2019). Figure 2 presents the results. Three insights emerge therefrom. First,
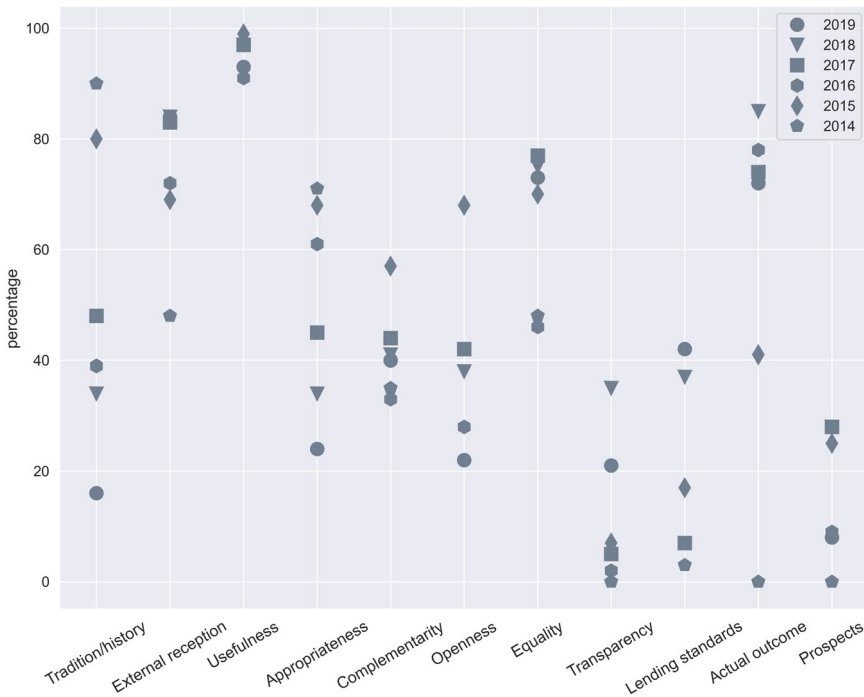

Figure 2. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) legitimacy claims over time (2014–2019).

the prominence of the four dominant claims identified above was consistent as of 2016, as illustrated by the respective peaks. This further bears out Finding 1 and highlights the salience of the four claims as key building blocks of the legitimating rhetoric. Second, early on Chinese officials were prone to referring to the ancient Silk Road history as a source of inspiration for the BRI and the initiative as 'China's solution' to problems confronting the global community, as shown by the noticeably higher number of references along the lines of 'history' and 'appropriateness' at the early stage (2014–2015). This was useful in according the BRI a sense of familiarity and China an image of 'responsible great power'. As the BRI unfolded (2016–2019), historical reference became less important, and by contrast, referring to the participation of third countries in the BRI, the approval of international organisations, and the actual achievements in the five areas of connectivity gained more ground. Such a shift is understandable given that the BRI was increasingly known (thus no need for historical reference to render it familiar) and actual projects started to materialise.

Third, as of 2018 there was a subtle but noticeable change in the number of references to transparency and lending standards. From 2013 to 2017, the number of claims on the two indicators was almost negligible, despite the considerable number of BRI-related official texts in 2015 and 2017 (see Table 2). But this changed after a series of mega BRI projects encountered serious implementation problems and the Chinese initiative was met with increasing suspicion by both initial enthusiasts and persistent holdouts. Chinese state-owned banks and contractors involved in the financing or implementation of BRI projects were accused of being involved in illicit dealings (Hillman 2019), and the BRI was dismissed as 'debt-trap diplomacy' that saddled financially vulnerable nations with white-elephant projects and unsustainable debt levels (Bräutigam 2020). As stated by Bolton (2018), former US National Security Advisor,

> China uses bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands. Its investment ventures are riddled with corruption and do not meet the same environmental or ethical standards as US developmental programs.

Facing the series of setbacks and increased risk of global opprobrium, Beijing started to finesse BRI rhetoric by emphasising the commitment to responsible lending, culminating in the keynote speech of President Xi and the release of the BRI Debt Sustainability Framework during the second BRF.

Finding 3: legitimation of BRI proper prevails over delegitimation of others

A parallel and often indispensable part of legitimation is to counter competing arguments and delegitimate critics (Vaara 2014). While trying to establish legitimacy for the BRI and defend it against criticisms, China's justificatory rhetoric in many instances pointed to the 'weakness' in the claims put forward by BRI critics and reframed fear-inducing geopolitical or geoeconomic analogies of the BRI (eg 'Chinese Marshall Plan') with hope-inspiring positive imaginaries (eg 'community of shared destiny', 'win–win'; Sum 2019, 536–537). For example, Chinese officials had to constantly refute arguments about the sinister motivations behind the BRI and stress the plan is not about geopolitical influence but of a win–win nature. As the Chinese ambassador to the UK stated:
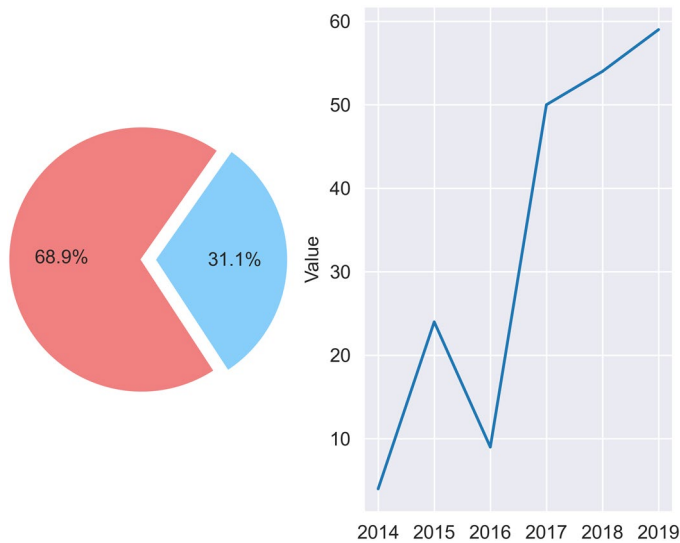
Figure 3. Legitimation vs delegitimation.

> Some people regard BRI as China's version of the Marshall Plan. They see it as a geopolitical tool and even dissuade other countries from taking part in BRI by every possible means. BRI is a new concept, but these people choose to look at it through the old prism of the Cold War. (Liu 2019)

In some cases, the rhetoric revolved mostly around delegitimation and comprised essentially *ad hominem* arguments lambasting the 'bias', 'irrationality' and 'misinformation' of BRI critics. In response to a comment by a senior US official on the BRI's potential harm, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson dismissed him as 'a loose tongue' making 'irresponsible remarks with tinted glasses' (Chinese MFA 2018b). Given the presence of delegitimating claims in China's BRI rhetoric, it is helpful to assess the role of delegitimation relative to that of legitimation.

As shown in Figure 3 (left), about 70% of the texts did not contain any form of delegitimation. This evinces that legitimation of the BRI per se constitutes the cornerstone of China's justificatory rhetoric, rather than the delegitimation of critics and countering of competing claims. That said, Figure 3 (right) showcases that delegitimating claims became increasingly frequent beginning in 2017, as evidenced by the increasing number of articles that sought to counter recurrent charges at the BRI and China. This can be attributed to a concomitant increase in the intensity of international suspicion and criticism (see Yang and Van Gorp 2021).

Conclusion

This research started by pointing out the compelling need for China to legitimate the BRI externally, an aspect under-explored in the existing literature. It sought to fill part of the lacuna by studying China's legitimation of the BRI via official rhetoric. To that end, it built an analytical framework of legitimacy, with four primary types of legitimacy unpacked into 11 substantive sources of legitimacy. A two-step content analysis along the lines of the

framework revealed how China articulated the case for the BRI's legitimacy by uncovering the array of legitimacy claims embedded in its official rhetoric and their relative salience and evolution.

The analysis laid bare some important aspects of BRI rhetorical legitimation by Chinese officials. First, the uneven distribution of data evinces that there were highly visible and coordinated Chinese efforts to promote the BRI around the publication of the BRI Action Plan and the organisation of BRFs. Second, China's legitimating rhetoric was fairly comprehensive, building on an array of legitimacy sources and straddling the past, present and future. Third, to assert legitimacy for the BRI, Chinese officials were inclined to highlight BRI's usefulness and benefits, the external participation it secured, its equal decision-making, and real outcomes. Moreover, with the BRI moving forward, there was a shift in China's rhetorical emphasis, away from appeals to the ancient Silk Road and towards references to external participation and actual progress; growing attention was also paid to transparency and lending standards amid increasing international criticism. Lastly, China focused its efforts on portraying the BRI in a positive light rather than delegitimating others and countering rival claims. As criticisms started to mount, however, delegitimating arguments became more frequent.

This research has practical relevance. Given the enormous resources China has invested, the BRI is clearly here to stay. As such, it is important for third parties to understand China's 'sales pitch' so as to come up with an effective policy response or, at the very least, build a viable counternarrative. For now, China's official BRI narrative has been countered primarily by criticisms of China conducting 'debt-trap diplomacy', which see the BRI as unidirectional and dominated by political-strategic calculations. Yet such criticisms, as stated above, have been questioned for being politically convenient and not squaring with the reality. As aptly said by a veteran analyst of China's role in international development, 'the story of Chinese lending is far more complicated, interesting and potentially developmental than it is currently portrayed' (Bräutigam 2020, 12). In fact, the debt distress in some countries had little to do with Chinese lending, or at least was not intended by Beijing (Bräutigam 2020). Chinese development finance 'seems more demand-driven, by which countries are willing to borrow, than supply-driven by a Chinese master plan' (Dollar 2018, 289). Relatedly, sizeable amounts of Chinese investment go to risky environments, and some turned out to be a 'lending trap' for China, as was the case with troubled Venezuela.

In this light, a more balanced account would involve airing concerns on the impacts of BRI investments on the host countries' debt sustainability (Carmody 2020) and institutional fragility (Sutherland et al. 2020), all the while recognising the developmental potential of the BRI, the agency exercised by the borrowing countries to align the initiative with their own objectives (Calabrese and Cao 2021), and the risk of unscrupulous lending for China (Ferchen 2018). As regards policy response, many major powers have thus far cited concerns over standards and debt implications to shun the BRI, and attempted to come up with alternatives by stressing the need for 'quality infrastructure'. Such emphasis is apposite given some BRI deals were lambasted for secrecy and corruption. Yet these alternatives remain fragmented and symbolic. To become viable alternatives, they need to be endowed with necessary resources. For China, sustained and coordinated efforts to promote the BRI notwithstanding, scant attention to the issues of transparency and lending standards at early stages was problematic for the purpose of legitimation. This was partly addressed after the BRI was met with a series of setbacks and a barrage of criticisms. To further promote the BRI's

international legitimacy, China, in tandem with rhetorical emphasis on following global norms, needs to work harder to ensure the rhetoric is matched by actions of Chinese actors on the ground.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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Appendix

Coding scheme for Chinese official rhetoric on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Does the text contain reference to the following ideas?
    Yes – 1; No – 0

Source-based legitimacy

History/tradition:

- Ancient Silk Road brought together and benefitted different nations, continents and civilisations
- BRI carries forward the Silk Road tradition, namely peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, mutual benefit
- Countries situated outside Eurasian landmass are natural extensions owing to their historical connection to ancient Silk routes

External reception:

- An increasing number of foreign countries and international organisations have signed agreements with China to jointly develop the BRI
- High turnout of foreign leaders/officials and heads of international organisations at the Belt and Road Forum 2017 and 2019

Functional legitimacy

Usefulness and tangible benefits:

- BRI aims to provide much-needed finance for infrastructure and improve connectivity
- BRI opens up business opportunities for countries and companies and represents an opportunity for other countries to benefit from China's fast development
- BRI creates jobs, accelerates growth, facilitates regional integration and trade liberalisation

Appropriateness:

- BRI embodies a Chinese approach to development
- BRI is a solution displaying Chinese wisdom or characteristics
- BRI counters protectionism, nationalism and unilateralism

Complementarity:

- BRI supports the development plans of other countries and complements their national policy initiatives, including, inter alia, the Eurasian Economic Union of Russia, Master Plan on ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] Connectivity, Bright Road initiative of Kazakhstan, Middle Corridor Initiative of Turkey, Development Road initiative of Mongolia, Northern Powerhouse initiative of the UK, Amber Road initiative of Poland, and Investment Plan of the EU

- BRI complements and reinforces the existing international economic system

Procedural legitimacy

Open, inclusive and voluntary participation:

- BRI focuses on Asia, Europe and Africa, but is open to all other countries. All countries from Asia, Europe, Africa or the Americas can be BRI cooperation partners

Equal and collective decision-making:

- Countries join BRI of their own volition; China does not impose
- BRI cooperation is based on extensive consultation and joint contribution
- Every participant has an equal say in the design and implementation of BRI projects
- The Belt and Road Forum is a platform for all interested parties to come together and discuss guidelines for BRI cooperation

Transparency:

- BRI deals will be carried out under broad daylight; there are no backroom deals

Performance legitimacy

Actual results:

- BRI has rapidly transformed from an abstract vision into reality
- BRI has made impressive progress in the five areas of connectivity (ie policy, infrastructure, trade investment, finance, people-to-people)

Lending standards:

- BRI aligns with international standards, norms and best practices (eg financial and environmental sustainability, public procurement, social and labour protections)

Prospects:

- BRI will have broad and promising prospects

De-legitimation

- Discredit BRI critics (eg unreliable, biased, prone to baseless slandering, spreading disinformation)
- Counter criticisms against BRI (eg BRI as 'debt-trap diplomacy', 'predatory economics', 'China's Marshall Plan', 'neo-colonialism', 'one-way traffic', BRI projects cutting corners on international standards)