

# 'We Don't Drown our Partners in a Sea of Debt'

## U.S. Policy Responses to China's Belt and Road Initiative

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“‘We don’t drown our partners in a sea of debt’:

U.S. Policy Responses to China’s Belt and Road Initiative

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**Abstract**

Whereas the Obama administration had equivocated, the Trump White House declared its vehement opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This shift went together with the Trump administration’s designation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a strategic competitor and a broader deterioration in bilateral relations. However, as it began to posit alternatives to the BRI, the Trump administration fell back on the policy thinking of the established foreign policy community. In doing this, it tacitly accepted the importance of soft power and the adoption of strategies requiring close cooperation with allies and partners so as to develop regional infrastructural “connectivity” projects. The White House thereby stepped back from the unilateralism, “principled realism,” and reliance upon hard power that had defined Donald J. Trump’s 2015-2016 presidential campaign. Nonetheless U.S. efforts to develop policy alternatives to the BRI were limited, unstable, and variegated. The Trump administration’s actions in other policy arenas often stymied efforts to counter the PRC and initiatives such as the BUILD act and “Prosper Africa” received scant resources. On the basis of this policy pattern, the article argues that policy communities can at times “harness” other, counter-positioned, political currents, but ongoing ideational stresses and abrasion inevitably will characterize the process.

**Keywords**

United States; China; Belt and Road Initiative; policy communities; soft power

Within months of President Donald J. Trump taking office, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) had come to the political forefront alongside declarations that from that point forward the United States would regard the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as “a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors.”<sup>i</sup> The preceding Obama White House, perhaps mindful that its objections to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) had left it relatively isolated as European countries raced to join the body, had offered muted support for the BRI or at least acquiesced in response to its initiation. In September 2015, President Barack Obama stated, for example, that the United States “welcomes China’s growing contributions to financing development and infrastructure in Asia and beyond.”<sup>ii</sup> In contrast, the Trump administration was unequivocal in its opposition to Beijing’s infrastructural development project. The *National Security Strategy* that the White House published in December 2017 represented the BRI as part of a project to reshape the global order and declared that China’s “infrastructure investments and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations.”<sup>iii</sup>

Although U.S. officials made statements such as this from across much of the federal government, it was Vice President Mike Pence who emerged as the Trump administration’s point man on the issue. He not only attacked the BRI, but began at the same time to posit the beginnings of a U.S. policy alternative:

We don’t drown our partners in a sea of debt . . . We don’t coerce or compromise your independence. We do not offer a constricting belt or a one-way road. When you partner with us, we partner with you, and we all prosper.<sup>iv</sup>

The character of the partnership that Pence promised and the U.S. efforts to “contain” the BRI through the development of policy alternatives took shape incrementally and had a limited, patchwork form. They included a commitment to establish multilateral regional infrastructural projects with for example the BUILD act, “Prosper Africa,” and other “connectivity” initiatives countries such as Japan and India would launch, and the

reinvigoration of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” a concept the administration originally understood in terms of maritime security, but also represented in broader “soft power” terms.

The Trump administration structured all these initiatives, despite President Trump’s periodic personal overtures to PRC President Xi Jinping, around an increasingly sharp and pronounced turn against China. It also rested them upon an implied understanding of U.S. strategic interests as being intertwined with those of allies and partners, as well as being intermeshed with processes of economic and political development. As the 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report that the U.S. Department of Defense issued emphasized:

Our vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific recognizes the linkages between economics, governance, and security that are part of the competitive landscape throughout the region, and that economic security is national security. In order to achieve this vision, we will uphold the rule of law, encourage resilience in civil society, and promote transparent governance.<sup>v</sup>

Why and how did the Trump administration fall back, as the wording of the Strategy Report suggests, on “soft power” strategies and multilateralism, rather than follow the unilateralist “hard power” ideas and instincts that had defined the Trump election campaign?

This article argues that the U.S. turn against the BRI, the shift in its understandings of the PRC, and its efforts to work with allies and partners owed much to the established foreign policy or “expert” community “harnessing” the Trump administration’s policy thinking on this particular issue. In simple, polemical terms this is the foreign policy “establishment” or “blob.”<sup>vi</sup> Policy communities, which not only draw in those who serve in government as either political appointees or career civil servants, but also scholars, practitioners foundations, think tanks, and allied groupings, are bound together by “a commonly understood belief system, code of conduct, and established pattern of behavior.”<sup>vii</sup> Studies of decision-making have stressed the part such communities play in for example agenda setting processes and the formulation of policy alternatives.<sup>viii</sup>

Studies of the U.S. foreign policy community suggest that it has five principal

characteristics. First, it has very considerable “gravitational pull,” which is, if one considers decision-making processes on a case-study basis, significantly stronger than, for example, that of public opinion.<sup>ix</sup> Second, it not only secures this influence through the part it plays in agenda-setting, but also through appointments within government and the “revolving door” between government service and think tanks.<sup>x</sup> Third, it is embedded within broader networks. Some accounts emphasize its ties with, and dependence upon, corporate and financial elites.<sup>xi</sup> The last two characteristics require more detailed description.

Fourth, although the community is far from ideationally monolithic and there have been periods when neoliberal or neoconservative visions came to the fore, it has with relatively few exceptions been associated closely with the defining principles of the liberal international order and, within that context, the pivotal obligations upon and responsibilities of the United States. Even when there has been backing for unilateral U.S. action, that backing has been framed through affirmations of faith in the liberal order and its underlying principles. There has been, as a corollary, qualified and sometimes frayed backing for the international institutions emerging after the World War II, such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. This is tied to an abiding faith in markets and free trade. From this perspective, there is a close inter-relationship between the upholding of the liberal order and the preconditions for economic growth. “Ultimately,” a U.S. Department of Defense study contends, “the maintenance of a free and open order sustains regional development because a well-functioning and transparent marketplace incentivizes global commercial investments that outpaces any state’s unique resources.”<sup>xii</sup> Thus despite the differences between “hawks” and “doves” the foreign policy community’s instincts are instinctively “globalist.”<sup>xiii</sup> It follows from this that those states or movements that do not embrace the liberal order necessarily constitute, to a greater or lesser degree, a security threat.<sup>xiv</sup>

Last, if one considers policy towards China, there has been generalized support, albeit with differing degrees of commitment, for a policy based upon the “open door,” integration, and engagement, but one that also took account of the PRC’s growing assertiveness and seeming reluctance to abide by the principles and rules underpinning free markets, liberal internationalism, and the global order.<sup>xv</sup>

These tensions between these sentiments were captured in Robert Zoellick’s 2005 address to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. Those familiar with the speech generally remember it for setting the goal of integrating the PRC into the international order as a “responsible stakeholder.” Zoellick, then deputy secretary of state, also noted, however, China’s mercantilist features, the already burgeoning trade imbalances with the United States, and the scale of Chinese military modernization.<sup>xvi</sup> There was, therefore, a degree of hedging in U.S. policy thinking that became more pronounced in later years. This was not only evident in the collective thinking of the foreign policy community, but also in the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and assertions that United States not only should maintain, but enhance its security relationships in the region.<sup>xvii</sup> Against this background, allies and partners implicitly gained greater importance. For example, much was made of the seeming strategic convergence between U.S. security policy and India’s “Act East” (formerly “Look East”) initiatives that incorporated efforts to build up India’s maritime capabilities in the Indian Ocean.<sup>xviii</sup> In sum, the foreign policy community and successive administrations prior to 2017 subscribed to the premise that there was “a broad, complex relationship [between the United States and China] that has both elements of cooperation and competition.”<sup>xix</sup> Policymaking processes were structured around this dualism.

In contrast to the guiding assumptions of the foreign policy community, in both their neoliberal and neoconservative forms, Trump structured his 2015-2016 presidential election

campaign around conservative populism, economic nationalism, criticisms of the liberal international order, a transactional style, “principled Realism,” and a commitment to what some have described as populist sovereignty.<sup>xx</sup> Trump’s campaign statements not only called for “America First,” but also decried established alliances, repudiated the U.S. role in providing defense and security as public goods, opposed multilateral alliances and partnerships, long-run or open-ended strategic commitments, “nation-building,” and the use of “soft power” to secure leverage. Alongside the promise of disengagement there was an emphasis upon the need to deploy hard power in an overwhelming and dramatic form where the administration deemed U.S. vital interests to be at stake, whilst requiring traditional allies to contribute more and take far greater responsibility for their own defense needs.

Some of this thinking found its way into Trump administration policy during its first few months and continued to inform some policy arenas, in particular trade. The first budget (Fiscal Year 2018) that the incoming administration presented to congress reflected the commitment to “America First” and transactional politics. Titled *America First: A Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again*, it sought to restructure and redirect U.S. commitments away from “soft power.” The budget proposed increasing defense spending dramatically, reflecting the White House’s commitment to “hard power,” whilst tying foreign aid and assistance to “the regions, programs and international organizations that most directly advance U.S. national security and economic interests.”<sup>xxi</sup> The rationale underpinning this was the belief that existing foreign development programs had not been aligned with U.S. national security goals. Furthermore, they had been wasteful, inefficient, and ineffective, and the United States, when compared to other developed countries, had borne a disproportionate burden. Alongside this there appeared to be limited confidence in the U.S. State Department and agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (upon which it sought to impose funding cuts) that long had been associated with the deployment of

“soft” rather than “hard” power. The budget also included the abolition of government agencies, including the U.S. African Development Foundation, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, and the United States Institute of Peace.<sup>xxii</sup>

Amidst all of this, and although an enduring point of reference during 2015 and 2016, the PRC’s place in the overall Trump presidential election campaign narrative and in the administration’s initial months was more partial and limited in character than it might at first appear. On one hand, the PRC gave economic nationalism a focus. As a candidate, Trump repeatedly represented that country as an economic predator threatening U.S. interests, particularly those of manufacturing workers in the American “heartlands.” Furthermore, he employed the trade imbalances with China as a frame through which to confront the weaknesses of establishment politics. Preceding administrations, he argued, had failed, for example, to label China a currency manipulator or impose tariffs on the scale that the PRC’s mercantilism demanded. Trump maintained this line of attack after he took office:

They took advantage of us for many, many years. . . . And I blame us, I don’t blame them. I don’t blame President Xi. I blame all of our presidents, and not just President Obama. You go back a long way. You look at President [Bill] Clinton, [George W.] Bush—everybody. They allowed this to happen, they created a monster.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Nonetheless, at the same time, Beijing’s strategic aims and the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific or the issue of human rights within China secured relatively little attention during the 2015-2016 presidential election campaign.

As 2017 progressed, there was, however, a very pronounced shift in U.S. policy towards that PRC as strategic issues came to merge with economic concerns and, against this background, the BRI. When the first Belt and Road Forum convened in May 2017 the senior White House official for Asia led the U.S. delegation. He announced, although in saying this he may have been reflecting the weakness of overall coordination systems within the



incoming Trump administration rather than pursuing a conscious strategy, that U.S. firms were “ready to participate in belt and road projects” and had “much to offer.” He cited their “long and successful track record in global infrastructure development.” Just two years later in April 2019, however, there were no high-level U.S. observers at the second Belt and Road Forum.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The head of the U.S. Pacific Command caught the shifting mood. The BRI was, he asserted, “a concerted, strategic endeavor by China to gain a foothold and displace the United States and our allies and partners in the region.”<sup>xxv</sup> Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis and Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, as well as Vice President Pence, in different speeches conveyed the message in yet more forceful terms. The charge sheet against the BRI included “debt diplomacy”—the claim that the indebtedness of participating nations was enabling the PRC to expand its military reach. Other allegations were a lack of transparency and claims that the BRI was fostering corruption and high-technology security fears (particularly about the development of digital infrastructure). Administration officials asserted as well that the PRC was securing what the White House regarded as an illegitimate foothold in Europe, for example through understandings with Italy, Greece, and Portugal and cooperation on the basis of the “17+1” arrangements in Eastern and Central Europe. They argued that the fate of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, although the project predated the BRI, amply illustrated the dangers awaiting those countries that embraced the BRI. Because Sri Lanka could not service the debt that it had incurred, it had no choice but to negotiate a debt-for-equity swap with a Chinese state-owned firm. Furthermore, the Trump administration contended that the PRC was seeking greater control across the region because of its increasing dependence upon other nations for energy and raw materials.<sup>xxvi</sup>

A report for the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank aligned with the Trump administration, represented the BRI in terms of Chinese “sharp power.” The country

was, the report asserted, “using its economic influence as an extension of its foreign policy to punish, coerce, or incentivize regional states to align with its agenda.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Whereas the PRC portrayed the BRI in terms of “win-win,” Washington understood the initiative as zero-sum competition.<sup>xxviii</sup> Added to this, there was growing alarm about projects allied to the BRI, such as the Space Silk Road, which centered around advanced satellite capabilities, the digital Silk Road, which appeared to have surveillance and censorship capacities, and the Polar Silk Road that would lay a basis for the building of infrastructure in the Arctic region and the opening of new shipping routes. Above and beyond this, the seemingly high risk, low reward character of many BRI projects bolstered U.S. suspicions that they had a strategic, rather than an economic character.<sup>xxix</sup>

The criticisms were as noted tied to strategic rivalry and the wider stand-off between the United States and the PRC about economic relationships that encompassed the degree of market access that Beijing afforded to Western companies in China, the contractual requirements that the PRC imposed on Western firms for technology transfer, the party-state subsidization of core industries, and Chinese efforts to develop new technology and artificial intelligence outlined in *Made in China 2025*, as well as alleged “intellectual property theft.”<sup>xxx</sup> Within this context, President Trump signed following passage in the U.S. Congress, where the mood also had changed, the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act in October 2018. The law formed part of legislation reauthorizing the Federal Aviation Administration. A headline in the *South China Morning Post* was explicit about its defining purpose—“Trump strikes a blow in U.S.-China struggle with Build act to contain Xi’s Belt and Road.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Two fellows at the Center for Strategic and International Studies described the act as “the most important piece of U.S. soft power legislation in more than a decade.” It sought to rationalize the institutional structures administering U.S. federal government development aid (through the United States international development finance

corporation) so as to extend loans to business ventures engaged, for example, in energy, ports, and water infrastructure projects in developing countries.<sup>xxxii</sup> There was, furthermore, a commitment to address development challenges in cooperation with established U.S. allies, including Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

The BUILD act was largely structured around the use of private sector, rather than public sector resources. As *South China Morning Post* journalist Bhavan Jaipragas explains, “the private sector is the driver of an economy and is responsible for 90 percent of the jobs in developing countries.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> The aim was thus not only to provide alternative sources of funding to contest the BRI, but lead recipient countries away from a growth model structured around a government-directed trajectory. Instead, BUILD sought to coax emerging economies towards market-based development. The act also was based around a leverage model. Initial public sector investment, Trump administration officials believed, would stimulate a much greater amount of private sector investment. There would be “crowding in” effects whereby government spending led to an increase in investment (as opposed to crowding it out). “Official aid donors,” Jaipragas writes, “should use their financial resources strategically to catalyze flows of private capital towards development challenges and build a robust private sector in developing countries.” There was a guiding assumption, he adds, that, given this framework, private firms would grasp the investment opportunities because

there are trillions of infrastructure funding needs where the private sector could become a significant investor. Globally, there are 1.1 billion people without electricity, close to 3 billion without clean cooking facilities, 1 billion without access to safe water, and 2.3 billion have no access to improved sanitation. Through the BUILD Act, these infrastructure challenges can be viewed as opportunities for the United States.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

“Prosper Africa” emerged as a further initiative the United States announced in late 2018. Its formal launch came in mid-2019 in Mozambique. Its publicly stated goals included the

doubling of U.S.-Africa trade, the spurring of growth, and demonstrating “the superior value proposition of transparent markets and private enterprise for driving growth.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

Nonetheless, National Security Advisor John Bolton quickly brought the thinking underlying these policy goals into the open. In a speech to the Heritage Foundation, he framed “Prosper Africa” as a strategic answer to the BRI, other commercial initiatives, and China’s military ambitions:

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 U.S. developmental programs. Such predatory actions are sub-components of broader Chinese strategic initiatives, including “One Belt, One Road”—a plan to develop a series of trade routes leading to and from China with the ultimate goal of advancing Chinese global dominance.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Prosper Africa would bring together existing U.S. government programs and the efforts of sixteen agencies and departments (particularly those focused on business, trade and development), the Trump administration explained, “in a cohesive, coordinated manner.” Furthermore, each U.S. embassy in Africa would establish a Prosper Africa “deal team” that would connect U.S. firms with trade and investment opportunities in Africa, whilst assisting African firms seeking opportunities in U.S. markets.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Development assistance would go hand-in-hand with the pursuit of “modern, comprehensive trade agreements on the continent that ensure fair and reciprocal exchange between the United States and the nations of Africa.” Robert Lighthizer, the U.S. trade representative, framed his plea for free trade agreements in Africa as a way of countering China. “We’re only a few years away from [Africa] being the population center of the world,” he observed, “and if we don’t figure out a way to move them right then China and others are going to move them in the wrong direction.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> There was also support for “improved governance and transparent business practices.” Alongside this there was a commitment to assist “in building the capacity of partner forces and security institutions to provide effective and sustainable security and law enforcement services.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

Nonetheless, both the BUILD Act and “Prosper Africa” lacked the resources that the commitments that the Truman administration had incorporated within them implied.<sup>xl</sup> Those staffing the project, for example, simply were drawn from existing mission staff.<sup>xli</sup> It was furthermore unclear how Prosper Africa could achieve more in terms of U.S.-Africa trade than the trade hubs the U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID] had launched and the Obama administration’s Trade Africa and Doing Business in Africa initiatives. Moreover, significant issues remained unaddressed. Potential investors continued to face structural and economic challenges in many African countries. There were also doubts about the extent to which such a limited level of commitment from U.S. agencies could generate the returns that administration statements envisaged. “If we are so troubled by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), I would like to see what money, real money, the United States government is prepared to put on the table to counter it,” Jonathan Pollack of the Brookings Institution noted. “But I don’t see it, and I don’t think people in the region see it.”<sup>xlii</sup>

At the same time, questions remained about the ties between Prosper Africa and trade policy insofar as the overall direction of U.S. policy remained opaque. Furthermore, there was uncertainty about the extent to which the African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA) precluded or constrained the ability of individual countries from concluding free trade agreements with the United States.<sup>xliii</sup> These questions arose when in March 2020, the Trump administration notified Congress that it would move forward with negotiations to secure an FTA with Kenya. Nonetheless, although this was understood as a way of countering Chinese economic ambitions, the efforts to reach a trade agreement with Kenya highlighted the growing limits to U.S. influence. Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta stressed that an agreement could not restrict his country’s freedom of action. “We don’t want to be forced to choose . . .,” he emphasized, and “want to work with everybody, and we think there is opportunity for everybody.”<sup>xliv</sup>

Alongside initiatives such as “Prosper Africa” and the BUILD Act, the United States sought to join with others and recommitted itself to broadly multilateral efforts through, for example, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).<sup>xlv</sup> Initially, the Japanese had pioneered the FOIP. Japan had a long history of involvement in economic and social infrastructure projects and of providing concessional yen loans to developing countries from the late 1950s onwards. During the first Abe Shinzo government (2006-2007), Keio University Professor Yuichi Hosoya had described the FOIP justly as “an amorphous concept.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Nonetheless, one can identify some features. In contrast with the first version, the second Abe government (from 2012 onwards) pressed the case for a broad vision of the FOIP that rested in large part upon a commitment to extending regional “connectivity” through infrastructural development in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and through projects such as the Bengal Bay Industrial Growth Zone and Mombasa Port. Indeed, infrastructure was one of the three “pillars” upon which FOIP rested in its second form.

Although the United States stressed the ties between its policy goals and those Japan pursued, the Japanese vision of the FOIP was more inclusive in terms of framing than that the White House’s National Security Strategy put forward. The Abe government was reluctant to commit itself to a zero-sum understanding of competition.<sup>xlvii</sup> It sought not to represent the FOIP as a direct challenge to the PRC or to place other nations in a position where they found it necessary to choose between Washington and Beijing. Thus, Japan has sought repeatedly to frame infrastructural issues in terms of cooperation and complementarity with the BRI, rather than competition. Indeed, at one point, Abe Shinzo expressed support for the BRI. Moreover, there have been instances of cooperation between Japan and the PRC such as the construction of the Jakarta-Bandung railway in Indonesia.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Alongside these initiatives and their framing in terms of cooperation, Japan also has placed greater emphasis than the United States on establishing rules that might rein in the

features of the BRI that had attracted the greatest criticism. In June 2016, the G-7 endorsed the Ise-Shima principles that defined “quality infrastructure investment” in terms of projects that rested upon economic efficiency, safety, resilience against natural disasters, and the consideration of environmental and social considerations, while also contributing to local societies and economies.<sup>xlix</sup> Some, however, questioned the likelihood of Chinese compliance. “It seems to me,” one observer wrote, “it’s highly questionable whether the Chinese will in any meaningful sense follow those rules, other than with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).”<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, although there were differences in terms of tone and framing between Japan and the United States, one should not exaggerate the scale of the divide between their approaches to the BRI. Despite the references to cooperation, many of the Japanese projects and initiatives were a direct challenge to Chinese ambitions. Many observers noted the implicit contrast between the “quality infrastructure investment” that Tokyo promoted from 2015 onwards and Chinese infrastructural projects, although it is important to add that the PRC increasingly sought to stress the sustainable character of its projects.<sup>li</sup> Furthermore, Japan concentrated its infrastructural development projects in countries and areas of strategic, or at least potentially strategic, significance where they would counter Chinese efforts tacitly. According to one group of knowledgeable observers,

. . . Japan’s approach has been really smart. Look at places in South and Southeast Asia where the U.S. has big concerns about what China is doing with BRI, such as Cambodia, where there are concerns about a potential Chinese military base. Japan is doing all kinds of infrastructure investment there . . . . There are concerns about the Chinese in Bangladesh, but Japan is helping build ports there too. So, the Japanese are actually in the game in all these places . . . .<sup>lii</sup>

Furthermore, although Japan did not frame the FOIP as a project aimed at reining in Beijing, it was difficult to detach the connections that it drew between security concerns and the development of regional “connectivity.”

Examining the FOIP more closely, its first “pillar” rested on “the rule of law” and “freedom of navigation,” whilst its third “pillar” referred to “strengthening maritime law enforcement,” all of which were widely understood as directed against Chinese forces in the East and South China Seas and anxieties about the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>liii</sup> Moreover, the FOIP overlapped with other initiatives that also appeared to have the BRI and the PRC in their sights. The United States, Japan, India and Australia came together to revive the “Quad,” which they originally had formed in response to the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, but by 2007 had laid a basis for joint naval exercises.<sup>liv</sup> The Quad increasingly tied strategic and military ambitions together with economic development and infrastructural development.

There were other initiatives in parallel with the FOIP. At the end of July 2018, the United States, Japan, and Australia announced the formation of a trilateral partnership that, the Australian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade asserted, would

mobilize investment in projects that drive economic growth, create opportunities, and foster a free, open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific. We share the belief that good investments stem from transparency, open competition, sustainability, adhering to robust global standards, employing the local workforce, and avoiding unsustainable debt burden.<sup>lv</sup>

To bolster this, and underline the administration’s commitment, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pledged \$113 million in new investment directed toward technology, energy, and infrastructure in the “Indo-Pacific” region. In the same year, the United States and its Pacific allies announced that they would build a \$1.7 billion electricity grid in Papua New Guinea. Vice President Pence hailed this as “proof that America and our businesses are investing in this region as never before.”<sup>lvi</sup> There was also an increased focus on such Pacific islands as Fiji and Kiribati, in association with Japanese efforts and Australia’s “Pacific step-up” plan. The PRC offered them assistance with infrastructural projects and appeared to share concerns about the consequences of climate change, although the strategic implications of Chinese



involvement were self-evident.<sup>lvii</sup> The island nations also were becoming significant Chinese trading partners. In 2017, the PRC's trade with them reached \$8.2 billion, a figure nearly five times their trade with the United States and about twice the 2015 figure.<sup>lviii</sup> In response, Trump, in May 2019, invited the presidents of Palau, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia to the White House and further talk ensued about tax concessions to encourage U.S. investment.

Although the concept is nebulous, India had a “strategic partnership” with the United States from 2004 onwards.<sup>lix</sup> It furthermore had long featured in U.S. thinking as a counterweight to China.<sup>lx</sup> However, as noted above, U.S. strategies (and this predated the BRI and the resurrection of the Quad) understood India, as well as Japan, as regional cornerstones. India had an added significance in Washington's eyes because of Chinese promotion of the BRI in Pakistan and Iran.<sup>lxi</sup> The Trump administration's discursive shift from the “Asia-Pacific” to the “Indo-Pacific,” a concept Japan, Taiwan, and Australia already had invoked, represented a further assertion of India's importance, as well as that of the United States.<sup>lxii</sup>

India has been involved through both government action and private effort in an extensive range of infrastructure and “connectivity” projects both within its own borders, but also in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and across Southeast Asia and Africa.<sup>lxiii</sup> The development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the construction of Gwadar Port reinforced its fears about the BRI.<sup>lxiv</sup> Moreover, there has been cooperation between India and Japan. Together with Abe Shinzo, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced establishment of an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) in May 2017 at the same time as the Belt and Road Forum was meeting in Beijing (India did not participate). The AAGC promised “quality infrastructure” and capacity building, as well as “digital and regulatory connectivity” so as to “integrate Africa by establishing strategic linkages with other regions .

. . .”<sup>lxv</sup>

The United States saw India, together with Japan, as a potential proxy in developing infrastructural alternatives to the BRI. India, however, equivocated about being drawn into becoming an American surrogate because it had profound anxieties about Chinese intentions (particularly because in New Delhi's eyes BRI projects incorporating "Pakistan Occupied Kashmir" violated Indian sovereignty) that added to longstanding tensions between the two countries.<sup>lxvi</sup> Thus, while the United States sought to incorporate both countries within the Trilateral Infrastructure Working Group, Narendra Modi's government, after initially participating, later decided not to join.<sup>lxvii</sup> Furthermore, although its intended meaning was generally self-evident, India, like Japan, couched its criticisms of the BRI in very restrained terms. As Modi told the June 2018 Shangri La Dialogue in a formulation that is illustrative of his approach, "we must not only build infrastructure, we must also build bridges of trust [because] these initiatives . . . must promote trade, not strategic competition."<sup>lxviii</sup>

There were parallel hopes within some of the think tanks within the foreign policy community that the European Union would come out in some form of opposition to the BRI and take steps to match or limit its growth.<sup>lxix</sup> There were some moves that Washington welcomed. For example, in 2018, the European Commission unveiled the beginnings of an infrastructure strategy that would lead to greater connectivity between Europe and Asia. It rested upon transportation as well as digital connectivity, the creation of partnerships, and construction of infrastructure. Although the European Union itself did not frame the strategy as a challenge to the BRI, there was an underlying message that tied the development of infrastructural initiatives, as the European Commission admitted, to "the principles of market access and a level playing field, as well as . . . international standards . . ."<sup>lxx</sup>

In late 2019, this commitment began to become institutionalized. The European Union and Japan signed an infrastructure agreement aimed at coordinating transportation, energy, and digital projects between Europe and Asia. The European Union said that a sixty

billion Euro guarantee fund, development banks, and private investment would back the “connectivity” plan. Japanese Prime Minister Abe’s comments as the European Union and Japan concluded the accord conveyed thinly-veiled criticisms of the BRI. “Whether it be a single road or a single port, when the [European Union] and Japan undertake something, we are able to build sustainable, rules-based connectivity from the Indo-Pacific to the Western Balkans and Africa.”<sup>lxxi</sup>

The article has emphasized the scale of the ideational gap between, on one hand, the guiding principles around which the foreign policy community was structured and, on the other hand, the ideas underpinning the Trump presidential election campaign. It also has argued that on taking office, the Trump administration embraced policies such as the BUILD Act that corresponded far more closely with the thinking that held sway in the foreign policy community than with the “hard power” themes of Trump’s 2016 campaign. Why did this happen? How was the established foreign policy community able to “harness” administration thinking? How and why did the White House endorse soft power strategies? First, populism, as observers have noted widely, is a “thin” ideology layered on top of other ideologies. “Trumpism” therefore had no stable or settled sense of political direction and was thus open to others’ redirection of it. Even within the administration there were pronounced strains and a lack of strategic direction. One can attribute this in part to the president’s mercurial personality, but there was also a divide between those who subscribed to unilateral assertions of hard power and those, such as Secretary of the Treasury Steven T. Mnuchin, who were more closely tied to business interests and established forms of Republicanism.

Second, “Trumpism” lacked the personnel and staffing infrastructure at the sub-cabinet level with which it could have shaped policy in a more credible and effective way. While turnover is usual in the U.S. government (there is an annual turnover rate among career senior executive service managers of about eight percent that rises to 9.6 percent during the

first year of a new administration), there were particular challenges staffing the Trump administration.<sup>lxxii</sup> While there were demands that appointees had shown, and would continue to show, personal loyalty to the president, there was a shortage of qualified individuals. As of early March 2018, only 275 of 640 appointees filled key positions.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Within the Pentagon, as of April 2019, both the secretary and deputy secretary of defense, as well as two of seven undersecretaries, were acting or temporary, as were nearly half of all the assistant secretaries, while many deputy assistant secretary positions remained unfilled. Almost half of the posts open to political appointees in the State Department were still empty in November 2018.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

Third, there was acceptance of the changed understandings of the PRC and its global ambitions far beyond the bounds of the foreign policy community and some evidence of a turn against China across much of the public around 2012.<sup>lxxv</sup> This is significant, as G. John Ikenberry notes in considering the reasons why Bretton Woods won acceptance at the conclusion of World War II.

What ultimately mattered in the ratification of the Bretton Woods agreement was not that it was based on the policy ideas advanced by an expert community but, rather, that the policy ideas resonated with the larger political environment. The ideas of the experts ultimately carried the day because they created the conditions for larger political coalitions . . . .<sup>lxxvi</sup>

Nonetheless, although the foreign policy community largely “captured” administration thinking in terms of reactions to the BRI, there was continued tension, friction, and abrasion between the different ideas, understandings, and frames.<sup>lxxvii</sup>

As a consequence, the Trump administration pursued policies unevenly and assigned to them very limited resources resulting in them having a variegated impact. The dependence of initiatives such as the BUILD Act and Prosper Africa upon funding leverage models and the degree of reliance upon the efforts of other nations suggests that they are already subject to corrosion. At points, the Trump administration has had to acknowledge it was not seeking

to compete with the PRC in terms of funding, but simply seeking to promote an alternative development model.<sup>lxxviii</sup> As Secretary of State Pompeo announced an investment in infrastructural development of \$113 million, he implicitly acknowledged its small-scale. “These funds,” he admitted, “represent just a down payment on a new era in U.S. economic commitment to peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.”<sup>lxxix</sup>

Furthermore, the Trump administration itself often seemed to undermine the maintenance of alliances and partnerships. Its demands to Japan and South Korea on trade and cost-sharing so as to fund the stationing of U.S. troops and the uncertain character of policy towards North Korea unsettled the region. As noted above, nations resisted pressures to choose between Washington and Beijing. Even more importantly, Trump’s abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) weakened the capacity of the United States to counter the BRI. Although the remaining countries resurrected the TPP, it would have had greater capacity with U.S. participation to limit the role of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or impose conditions upon China’s involvement in projects and thus be able to rein in the BRI.<sup>lxxx</sup>

This article has argued that the foreign policy community “harnessed” the Trump administration and, as a consequence, embraced policy ideas that were currency within the community, but because of friction and abrasion between different ideational currents, the “connectivity” initiatives and projects that the United States established so as to counter the BRI were limited and fragmentary in character. Three broader conclusions follow from this. First, as this article has argued, it suggests that policy communities in certain settings can exercise significantly greater political leverage than many accounts have indicated. Second, it indicates that more “establishment” forms of thinking at times and in some policy arenas can rein in President Trump’s populist nationalism. Third, because a policy of using “soft power” and close cooperation with allies and partners to restrain the PRC and its initiatives such as the BRI has won backing within the Trump administration and across the aisle in

Congress, it is forming the basis for a new American consensus on how to deal with China. It is therefore unlikely to shift substantially even if particular officeholders change.

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