

China's Military Expansion Schemes in the Global South Through the Belt and Road Initiative

Jaewoo Choo

This article attempts to unveil some of the less told stories regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). One of them is its historical root in the so-called *Yitiaoxian strategy* (一条线战略) from the 1970's. They share a similar intent and goals in that they were designed to build a strategic deterrence line expanding from China's peripheral regions to Africa and Europe. In the past it was aimed at the Soviet's expansionism and now US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy. The other therefore is its inherent military purposes and goals. Military aspects were added to BRI for two reasons. China's overseas interests has been expanding and the urge to independently protect them was widely recognized by the top level leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. To meet this challenge, a Chinese narrative on building overseas "strategic pivot points (战略支点)" was first undertaken by the Chinese scholarly community before the top leadership overtook in 2014. BRI's military strategy is anchored at Africa and Djibouti in particular. In conclusion, the article contends that for such military reasons China has shown a propensity to exclude partner countries of BRI including base-hosting countries to join the construct of BRI's infrastructure overseas.

Keywords Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路, BRI), *Yitiaoxian strategy* (一条线战略), Strategic pivot points (战略支点), China's principles for overseas military bases, and the difference with US overseas military bases.

INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) marked its tenth anniversary in 2023. In addition to the major accomplishments reported by the Chinese government, allegations have been raised that China is constructing military bases and surveillance facilities in key strategic countries around the world. According to a report published in 2020 by the Asia Society Policy Institute (ASPI), for example, the Chinese government exported its version of the Global Positioning System (GPS) to BRI participating countries, increased military training, and sold weapons. Also, the commercial ports that the Chinese government is

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developing overseas can also be used for military purposes.¹

“Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” is an essential component of China’s “going global” strategy (走出去战略) adopted in 2001.² As a significant platform for China’s participation in global governance, the BRI not only meets the common needs of countries along the routes but also supposedly provides development opportunities for surrounding regions, exerting an increasingly influential guiding role. From this perspective, a critical question arises. How is China planning to achieve this end? Will it rely on military means if necessary? It is thereby essential to rationally assess the geopolitical complexities and security challenges along the BRI routes.

With the deepening of the BRI, China’s overseas interests continue to expand, and issues regarding overseas energy resources, maritime strategic passages, as well as the security of overseas enterprises and personnel, are becoming more prominent. The Chinese military is increasingly deployed overseas to address various security threats and perform diverse tasks. Ensuring the security of Chinese military operations overseas requires safeguarding overseas interests along the BRI routes.

In this context, this article deems it crucial to engage in in-depth discussions on the military aspects of the BRI. For the aforementioned reasons, it has become imperative for China to leverage “strategic pivot points(战略支点),” as the Chinese pundits would like to define it, along key geographic axes to enhance connectivity, extend influence, and radiate capabilities. Therefore, constructing overseas strategic pivot points along the BRI routes is essential to enhance China’s ability to conduct overseas military operations in order to effectively safeguard national overseas interests, and improve China’s overall strategic environment.

China once contemplated a thought of extending a defense line overseas to defend its national security and deter external threats coming from hegemonic powers is nothing new. It has its own historical roots. Like some other Chinese foreign policy and security strategies, the article contends that the military notion of BRI can be inferred from China’s past, and original, strategic thinking in *Yitiaoxian strategy* (一条线战略). It is predicated on the idea that there are a number of instances when modern Chinese strategies have their origins in Mao Zedong’s era of rule, with its successors making up for any shortcomings.

In the 1970’s when *Yitiaoxian strategy* was first introduced, for instance, it failed to present specific military means to meet its purposes. Neither the construct of overseas military bases were attempted nor did the Chinese leadership back then even considered such schemes for economic, political, and military reasons.³ Economically, it could not afford the costs of building overseas military bases, let alone the maintenance of them; politically, it was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution and unable to commit, and militarily its naval and air forces were not sufficient to meet the prerequisites of power

¹ Daniel R. Russel and Blake H. Berger, *Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative* (N.Y.: Asia Society Policy Institute, 2020).

² 金灿荣, “‘走出去’战略十年回顾:成就与挑战”, 『现代国际关系』, 2011年 第8期, pp. 2-4; 辛田, “中国海外利益保护私营化初探”, 『国际展望』, 2016, 第4期, pp. 62-63.

³ David Vine, *Base Nations: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (N.Y.: Metropolitan Books, 2015).

projection to the success of forward-basing.

After having accrued economic and military prowess from the success of open-door policy adapted in 1978, coupled with its ever-expanding overseas national interests, Beijing's commitment to protecting them on its own is ever stronger. And an opportunity has seemingly arisen at the inception of the BRI. Strategic pivot points were designated along the maritime silk road, sharing a similar concept connectivity in the introduction of *yitiaoxian* strategy. The only difference this time is that China now has clearly incorporated the idea of base access, deterrence capacity and consequences, and invested country control—the three primary goals of building military bases abroad.⁴

The paper contends that the introduction of BRI in 2014 answered the flaws of *Yitiaoxian* approach. In the following section, the article therefore highlights the outcomes of the strategic planning meetings that were held by the Chinese military. The results presented the difference between China's overseas military bases and those of the U.S., and therefore China's own principles in operating these bases. The article makes a literature review how these principles have been implemented in pursuit of overseas military bases. Djibouti is the only case in operation since 2017, thereby anchoring Chinese overseas military bases along the BRI. The article concludes with an argument that the reason for China not inviting BRI participating nations to the project is military.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE BRI: AN INFERENCE FROM *YITIAOXIAN STRATEGY* (一条线战略)

At the time of adopting *Yitiaoxian* strategy ('one-line' strategy, 一条线战略) in the 1960's, Chinese security strategy was struggling to make a transition from leaning on the former Soviet Union (苏联一边倒) to a less dependent one. With its defense landscape changing as its political and security conflicts with the Soviet deepened, Beijing defined it a bigger threat to its security than the United States. In short, due to the Soviet Union's pursuit of hegemonism, it directly led to the rupture of Sino-Soviet relations. As a result, not only did China lose a strong ally in countering the United States, but it also faced an additional formidable opponent on the international stage. In order to enhance China's strength in confronting both the American and Soviet hegemonies, Mao Zedong shifted China's diplomatic focus towards Asian, African, and Latin American countries, seeking to form a united front against imperialism and hegemony. Thus, China's diplomacy entered a strategic period of "two-line strategy(两条线战略)" that was both anti-American and anti-Soviet.

Mao Zedong established the basis for the "two-line strategy" on the theory of the "intermediate zone (中间地带)." In August 1946, during an interview with American journalist Anna Louise Strong, Mao Zedong explicitly stated: "Between the United States and the Soviet Union lies an extremely vast zone, where there are many capitalist countries, colonies, and semi-colonial countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The reactionary forces in the United States cannot attack the Soviet Union until they have

⁴ Mira Rapp-Hooper, *Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America's Alliances* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

subdued these countries.”⁵

In the 1950's, Mao Zedong reiterated the concept of the “intermediate zone” when meeting with foreign guests. For instance, during his meeting with the Chairman of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Harry Pollitt, on April 29, 1955, Mao stated, “Among the vast populations in the ‘intermediate zone’ between the United States and the socialist camp, there are 1.4 billion people in Asia and Africa alone, as well as the people of Europe, who are all allies in our opposition to American aggression.”⁶

Here, Mao Zedong essentially regarded the Asian and African countries of the intermediate zone as international allies against American reactionaries and for the maintenance of world peace, indicating a new direction for expanding China's diplomatic scope. In the 1960s, facing pressure from anti-American and anti-Soviet forces, Mao Zedong, based on his insight into the changing international situation, developed the concept of the intermediate zone into two intermediate zones to seek more international allies.

On September 28, 1963, during a Central Work Conference, Mao Zedong explicitly proposed the theory of two intermediate zones: “There are two intermediate zones: one is Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and the other is Europe, including Japan and Canada. Both of these parts are dissatisfied with the United States, and the struggle between them is a struggle of control and counter-control.” Three months later, Mao Zedong reiterated during a conversation with a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Japan, Tōkya Keiichi, that “there are two parts to the intermediate zone: one part refers to the vast economically backward countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and the other part refers to imperialist countries and developed capitalist countries represented by Europe. Both parts oppose American control. In Eastern Europe, there are issues with opposition to Soviet control.”⁷

Against this background, in the 1960s, China's assistance to other countries saw a continuous increase. Starting from 1964, the number of recipient countries grew from the original 20 to 31, reaching 67 by 1971. The amount of assistance also showed an upward trend year by year. In 1967, foreign aid accounted for 4.5% of the national revenue, rising to 7.2% in 1973. The substantial foreign economic aid not only further strained the already economically challenged domestic economy but also increased the burden on China's economy. Additionally, it fostered a sense of dependency on China among some Asian, African, and Latin American countries.⁸

In the 1960s, China pursued a dual diplomatic strategy of “anti-imperialism, anti-revisionism,” simultaneously opposing both the United States and the Soviet Union. This stance placed China under significant pressure from both the Eastern and Western blocs, leading to a challenging position in the international community. By the late 1960s, after two decades of hostility, both China and the United States felt the need to adjust their policies to improve their relationship, thereby thawing Sino-American

⁵ 『毛泽东选集(第4卷)』, (北京: 人民出版社, 1991), p. 193.

⁶ 『毛泽东外交文选』, (北京: 中央文献出版社, 1994), p. 205.

⁷ 『毛泽东文集(第8卷)』, (北京: 人民出版社, 1999), p. 344.

⁸ 陈再生, “毛泽东“两条线”外交战略评析,” 『漳州师范学院学报(哲学社会科学版)』, 2007年 第1期, p.132.

relations.

From China's perspective, significant changes occurred internationally and domestically during the first two decades of its founding. The relationship between China and the Soviet Union shifted from being allies to enemies. During this period, Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated to a severe extent, especially after the *Zhenbao Island*(珍宝岛) incident, where the increased Soviet threat led it to become the primary adversary in the eyes of Chinese leadership. On March 15, 1969, Mao Zedong, during a meeting of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, remarked on the situation in the *Zhenbao Island* area, stating, "Faced with a major enemy, we must mobilize and prepare ourselves. We should take the initiative."⁹

On April 28 of the same year, Mao Zedong, during the First Plenary Session of the Ninth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, stated, "We must be prepared for war," emphasizing that "the main thing is to be mentally prepared." In July 1969, a report titled "Preliminary Assessment of the War Situation" was submitted to Mao Zedong by Ye Jianying and others. In this report, it was pointed out that "the United States and the Soviet Union are both enemies of China on one hand and enemies of each other on the other hand... The Soviet expansion encroaches on American territory, and the struggle between them is constant. The contradictions between China and the Soviet Union are greater than those between China and the United States. The contradictions between the United States and the Soviet Union are greater than those between China and the Soviet Union."¹⁰

Mao Zedong's concerns about war prompted significant adjustments in China's foreign policy, reflected strategically by shifting the focus of national defense from "leaning towards the South(the United States)" to "balancing between the North and the South (the United States and the Soviet Union)." This change had pivotal implications in the entire post-war international relations.

From the perspective of the United States, several factors contributed to a reassessment of its policy towards China. First, it was US' confidence in its long-standing policy of hostility towards China aimed to undermine socialist regimes. However, contrary to expectations, China not only did not collapse but also gained increasing international prominence. Nixon acknowledged that the world was no longer simply bipolar between the United States and the Soviet Union but featured five major power centers: The United States, the Soviet Union, Western Europe, Japan, and China. Western pundits even perceived the formation of a strategic triangle involving the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, suggesting that the policy of containing and isolating China had failed, necessitating a change and adjustment in U.S. policy towards China.

Second, the United States recognized that the Soviet Union had gained the strategic initiative and that the balance of power had shifted unfavorably for the United States. Therefore, improving relations with China was deemed beneficial for both countries. Leveraging China to counterbalance the Soviet Union would strengthen the United States' position in the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. Kissinger explicitly stated, "The greatest benefit

⁹ 李丹慧, "1969年中苏边界冲突: 缘起和结果," 『当代中国研究』, 1996年 第3期, pp. 39-50.

¹⁰ 『邓小平思想年谱』, (北京: 中央文献出版社, 1998), p. 334.

of the proactive action towards China for the United States may be its influence on the Soviet Union.”¹¹ The U.S. government realized that the new China was a country with tremendous potential that had firmly established itself in the international community. It could no longer ignore the existence of the new China as it had in the past. As Nixon put it, “China’s potential is immense, and any sensitive diplomatic policy cannot ignore or refuse to consider it.”¹² Practice proved that this strategic shift was necessary and correct for alleviating the extreme tension faced by China in national security issues, containing Soviet expansionism globally, maintaining world peace, and transitioning the international situation from tension to relaxation.

At the end of the 1960s, significant changes occurred in the international situation. The bipolar standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union began to shift from one where the United States was on the offensive and the Soviet Union was on the defensive to one where the roles were reversed, with the Soviet Union on the offensive. In February 1969, after Nixon came to power, in order to bolster its strength in the rivalry with the Soviet Union, the United States hoped to leverage China’s power to contain the Soviet Union. Faced with this objective reality, Mao Zedong made adjustments to China’s foreign strategy and pursued cooperation with the United States to counter the Soviet Union.

On December 18, 1970, during a conversation with the American writer Edgar Snow, Mao Zedong said, “If Nixon is willing to come, I am willing to talk to him.” In April 1971, Mao Zedong decided to invite the American table tennis team to visit China as a means of “using small balls to push the big one,” successfully implementing ping-pong diplomacy and opening the door to high-level Sino-American talks. In July 1971, Zhou Enlai held secret talks with Henry Kissinger, the special envoy of the President of the United States, in Beijing. Subsequently, after numerous meetings, the two sides reached a consensus on the issue of containing Soviet expansion.

On February 17, 1973, during a conversation with Kissinger, Mao Zedong explicitly put forward the international strategic idea of “*Yitiaoxian*(one-line, 一条线)” to contain the Soviet Union. Mao said, “I talked with a foreign friend, saying that we should establish a horizontal line, which is latitude, including the United States, Japan, China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Europe. The implication is that everyone should unite to jointly counteract the expansionism and hegemonic behavior of the Soviet Union.”

It was not until January 1974, during a meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Miki, that Mao Zedong further refined his international strategic concept by uniting a large number of Asian and African countries around the “*yitiaoxian*” proposed by him, forming a strategic pattern of “*yitiaoxian*” and “one large area(*yidapian*, 一大片).” Deng Xiaoping later provided a more concrete explanation of the concept of “*yitiaoxian*.” He pointed out, “Chairman Mao proposed an international strategy based on the historical conditions at the time... Chairman Mao proposed to establish a strategic line from Japan through Europe to the United States to deal with the challenge from the Soviet Union. Relations between the United States and China improved. Relations between Japan,

¹¹ 曲星, 『中国外交五十年』, (南京: 江苏人民出版社, 2000), pp. 377-378.

¹² 曲星, 『中国外交五十年』, p. 378.

Europe, and China also improved.”¹³ Elevating cooperation with the United States to counter the Soviet Union to a theoretical level was also a diplomatic strategic choice made by China under specific international circumstances.

The essence of this concept was to unite all possible forces in the world, including the United States, to collectively oppose Soviet hegemonism. Undoubtedly, the United States was the most important country in this united front. In this sense, the “*yitiaoxian*” was seen as an expression of cooperation between China and the United States in countering the Soviet Union.

This effectively restrained the serious threat posed by the Soviet Union to China and helped China break free from its previous isolation in the international arena during the 1960s. The “*yitiaoxian, yidapian*” strategy persisted from the early 1970s until 1982. On September 1, 1982, at the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the new era of China’s foreign policy, characterized by “independent and autonomous diplomacy,” was officially established, replacing the “*yitiaoxian, yidapian*” strategy with an “independent and autonomous” diplomatic strategy.

CHINA’S PRINCIPLES FOR OVERSEAS MILITARY BASES

When BRI was introduced in 2013, its economic intent and goals received an overwhelming attention. What went unnoticed was the military aspects of the initiative. A scholarly discourse on the needs to build strategic pivot areas was burgeoning far ahead of the introduction of the initiative.¹⁴ At the time, one of the most famous anecdote came from a renowned international relations professor like Yan Xuetong of Qinghua University when he argued China should consider allying with South Korea.

Soon after the declaration of the BRI in 2013, authorities including the military have held at least two meetings (“5th National Maritime Liberation Defense Operations Conference” and the “Central Economic Operations Conference”) to discuss the military significance within the BRI. The “5th National Maritime Liberation Defense Operations Conference” was particularly chaired directly by Xi Jinping himself. At the conference, the necessity of integrating security interests in politics, military affairs, legislation, economy, and ecology/environment in the context of maritime defense was particularly emphasized.¹⁵ It meant that the geopolitical function of maritime defense should transition from simple administrative change management to safeguarding and expanding national strategic interests. It was also pointed out the need to introduce a diversified and modern defense concept capable of overseeing maritime defense as a whole.¹⁶

¹³ 刘万镇, 李庆贵, 『毛泽东国际交往录』, (北京: 中央党史出版社, 2003), p. 201.

¹⁴ 雷鹏等, “我军海上战略投送能力建设思考,” 『物流科技』, 2010年 第7期, pp. 79-80; 龙兴春, “中国该建海外基地了,” 『国防报』, 2011年 12月 12日; 周琦, 梦昭然, “挑战, 机遇: 解析中国和平崛起的战略支点,” 『湘潭大学学报(哲学社会科学版)』, 2012年 第3期, pp. 133-140.

¹⁵ “习近平接见第五次全国边海防工作会议代表, 李克强张高丽参加”, 『新华社』, 2014年 6月 27日; 刘海泉, “‘一带一路’战略的安全挑战与中国的选择”, 『太平洋学报』, 2015年 第23卷 第2期, pp. 72-79.

¹⁶ 周士永, “‘一带一路’背景下的现代边海防建设”, 『社科纵横』, 2016年 12月, 第31卷 第12期, pp. 16-18.

In the subsequent “Central Economic Operations Conference,” the Chinese Communist Party classified the regions participating in the BRI into three dimensions: core regions (Central Asia), expansion regions (South Asia and East), and radiation regions (Europe), under the purpose of “strategic formulation planning.” Based on this classification, China expanded its maritime defense scope from the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Japan. This interpretation was made in the geographical sense, encompassing China’s overseas interests related to the Belt and Road Initiative in both Eurasia and Africa.¹⁷

Discussions on the correlation between the BRI and military preparedness spread even to the military. The main discourse within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China aimed to justify the construction of forward bases for military operations in BRI regions and to reverse and reestablish the government’s existing views and principles opposing the establishment of overseas military bases. This shift was driven by a new understanding of China’s changing international status. That is, China had transcended regional powers and become a global power, so there was a need to reconsider overseas military bases, further enhancing their necessity and legitimacy.

In the process of reversing the government’s existing position and principles, two key reasons played a crucial role. One was the close relationship between China’s construction of overseas bases and its historical sense of mission as a major power. The other was the need for differentiation from the strategies of other major powers. The differentiation strategy mentioned here can be broadly summarized into the following two points.

First, all of China’s military activities are conducted within the framework of exercising China’s legitimate rights. Unlike the United States, which typically operates military bases separately from civilian facilities, China’s overseas ports and transportation facilities adhere to international law regarding port usage rights and are operated as dual-use civilian-military facilities. Therefore, unlike the U.S., China’s logic is to utilize its rights to legitimately access ports and airfields in foreign territories without infringing on their territorial waters and airspace.

The second point of differentiation is that the Chinese military does not engage in long-term deployment since it only holds usage rights. This reveals a fundamental difference from U.S. overseas military bases. China has defined two situations in which the Chinese military would utilize facilities: firstly, when counter-terrorism and peacekeeping missions are required in BRI regions and neighboring countries.¹⁸ In addition, China has established principles and limitations that must be followed when using transportation facilities within the Belt and Road Initiative. This is to ensure that the PLA avoids unilateralism and arbitrariness while adhering to international principles that China itself upholds in overseas deployments.

Nevertheless, China’s BRI projects have not been able to shake off suspicions regarding the expansion of Chinese overseas military bases. The primary reason for this is that PLA’s military activities in the BRI regions are showing contradictions with

¹⁷ 白永秀, 王颂吉, “丝绸之路的纵深背景与地缘战略”, 『改革』, 2014年 第3期, p. 68.

¹⁸ “姚云竹: 人民军队在‘一带一路’中的战略和作用”, 『祖国网』, 2017년 9月 14日, <http://www.zgzzs.com.cn/index.php/Article/detail/id/9120.html> (accessed on April 2, 2019).

the aforementioned principles. In other words, the presence of the PLA is increasingly felt in these regions. In fact, since 2010, Beijing has pursued military base acquisitions alongside its economic cooperation projects under the BRI. Examples include the transformation of civilian ports into military bases, such as the Djibouti port on the eastern coast of Africa and the Gwadar port in southwest Pakistan. China obtained long-term lease rights for these ports, 99 years for Djibouti and 43 years for Gwadar, due to debt repayment failures by these countries. Furthermore, in August 2017, it began construction of military facilities in Djibouti capable of accommodating 3,000 to 4,000 troops, and in November of the same year, the PLA conducted large-scale military exercises, including the deployment of tank units.

Chinese authorities are silent on the military and security characteristics implicit in the BRI. This is because the anxiety among neighboring countries is increasing in proportion to China's rise. The Chinese government seeks to alleviate these concerns by emphasizing the economic aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, in reality, Beijing is showing signs of stepping into traps of its own making. The premise of the BRI is the openness of communication between China and participating countries. The problem is that meeting this premise inevitably exposes China to non-traditional security threats. Therefore, while the BRI focuses on economic cooperation, there is also a simultaneous reinforcement of military preparedness.

In the realm of non-traditional security, China's primary concern is countering what are commonly referred to as the "three major threats": separatism, terrorism, and extremism. The Chinese government perceives these as the most threatening to China's core interests. However, efforts to suppress their domestic infiltration and activities could potentially conflict with the principle of "freedom of navigation" guaranteed by international maritime law. Consequently, to effectively counter these threats, China has unilaterally modified the principle of freedom of navigation as part of its efforts to improve border management systems.

China has redefined freedom of navigation to mean that ships can freely navigate China's territorial waters and airspace as long as they obtain prior permission from Chinese authorities. However, this principle of freedom of navigation has not yet been applied in the South China Sea and East China Sea.¹⁹ This is because of strong opposition from neighboring countries, including the United States. However, since 2013, there has been substantial control over freedom of navigation in airspace. The result of this control is the establishment of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) by China.²⁰

Meanwhile, ensuring stable and smooth transportation of energy resources is inevitable for safeguarding non-traditional security interests. This requires active participation from the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). By December 2019, the PLAN had completed missions to protect the navigation of over 6,700 domestic and foreign vessels through 34 naval fleets.²¹ Furthermore, as third-party interventions escalate the "great power political game" in areas where China is involved in territorial

¹⁹ 齐皓, "美国南海'航行自由行动'的国内争论及政策逻辑,"『现代国际关系』, 2016年 11期, pp. 21-30.

²⁰ 王崇敏, 邹立刚, "我国在专属经济区建立防空识别区的探讨,"『法学杂志』, 2013年 第1期, pp. 95-99.

²¹ "中国海军护航编队: 11年来护送中外船舶6700余艘次,"『解放军报』, 2019年 12月 24日.

disputes, China's perception of the necessity to protect and defend sovereignty in disputed areas is growing stronger.

In addition to safeguarding China's overseas interests and ensuring smooth transportation of energy resources, the acceleration of China's expansion of overseas military bases is also aimed at enhancing its immediate response capability to effectively protect China's territorial sovereignty in disputed areas. China's overseas military base endeavors began in the South China Sea in 2010. China's efforts to construct maritime military bases manifest in two routes. According to the "Belt and Road Initiative's Route Map" unveiled in 2015, one route extends to the Indian Ocean, while the other heads towards the South Pacific, with their junction being the South China Sea in Southeast Asia.²²

On land, China operates three routes: the Northern Route, the Central Route, and the Southern Route. The so-called "Northern Route" starts from Central Asia and leads to Europe through Russia. The "Central Route" traverses from Central Asia through West Asia to connect with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea by land. Lastly, the "Southern Route" refers to the path leading from South Asia to access the Indian Ocean. The construction routes of maritime military bases are derived from this "Southern Route." In other words, they extend from the South China Sea through to the Indian Ocean via maritime routes, as well as connecting the South China Sea to the South Pacific region.

China's military strategy within the BRI is not merely about the physical expansion for military purposes. It also entails the intention to expand strategic geographic space and deepen related ideologies. For example, China is laying down a dual-track approach through the development of military relations with Pakistan to enhance its deterrence against Afghanistan and India.

In Southwest Asia, China is utilizing its "All-Weather Partnership" with Pakistan actively to firmly uphold its strategic interests in India and Afghanistan. It's a strategy of leveraging the contradictions between India and Pakistan, using India, which is also in conflict with China, as a means of containment. At the same time, it signifies neutralizing India's pressure to counter China's expansion into Southwest Asia. Simultaneously, through cooperation with Pakistan, China aims to expand its strategic security interests in its western regions by jointly combating terrorism within Afghanistan.²³

The Chinese military views the integration of the BRI with its duties as a major power as a commitment to fulfilling its obligations and responsibilities as a major power. The Chinese military is convinced that this concept serves as a response strategy to the United States' and Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). The Chinese military traces the background of the U.S. and Japan's adoption of the IPS since 2010 to China's economic surpassing of Japan. Following the intensification of territorial disputes and conflicts in the South China Sea, which unfolded unfavorably for China due to the rise of the

²² "<推动共建丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路的愿景与行动>全文", 2015年9月15日, http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2015-09/15/content_36591064.htm?f=pad&a=true (accessed on October 2, 2015).

²³ "一带一路在巴基斯坦:具军事色彩?" *Radio Free Asia*, December 21, 2018.

Chinese navy, China derived the IPS to strengthen its deterrence against major powers.²⁴ Therefore, the Chinese military will continue to expand the scope and area of overseas military activities under the pretext of protecting BRI projects and safeguarding overseas interests.

CHINESE DISCOURSE FOR OVERSEAS MILITARY BASES

In March 2017, Defense Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian, when discussing the relationship between PLA and other countries' troops stationed in Djibouti, pointed out that China would handle its relations with other countries' troops based on mutual respect, equality, and consultation, and would respect Djibouti's sovereignty and security. He emphasized that China would seek to engage in international cooperation to jointly maintain regional peace and stability when conditions are ripe.²⁵ Wu Qian's remarks indeed outline the basic principles and direction of China's overseas base construction.

China's scheme is to design these overseas military bases accorded to respective region and country's predicament. In different regions, in other words, the base system should be reasonably arranged and laid out according to specific circumstances. Firstly, overseas bases should be positioned in regions where emerging countries have extensive strategic interests overseas, and where their existing means of maintaining and expanding overseas interests are insufficient to meet new demands. External pressures have compelled emerging countries to prioritize the construction of overseas bases.

In recent years, China initiated the Belt and Road Initiative, making the Indian Ocean a key area for the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. Therefore, China's deployment of overseas bases should prioritize this region. Secondly, within the same base group, there should be three levels: central bases, peripheral bases, and forward bases. This hierarchical structure follows a center-periphery model, with one central base surrounded by several peripheral bases, and forward bases established for handling emergencies with temporary characteristics. Lastly, different base groups should adopt a flat network structure, where bases are deployed in different regions with similar missions and importance levels (with the possibility of mutual substitution). Through multidimensional and stable communication channels, they seamlessly cover the entire area of interest.

China officially has one such an overseas military base in Djibouti, and many are under construction. In the future, when and if completed, they will inevitably be located on the territory of another country. It cannot be a large military base with a significant presence of troops but rather a logistical supply-oriented support base. The optimal development path is to start with economic cooperation while also considering military needs. Such a base can support China's non-war military operations primarily focused on non-traditional security threats (acting as a command and control center and a

²⁴ 赵青海, ““四国同盟”:构想与现实”, 『国际问题研究』, 2007年 6期, pp. 28-32.

²⁵ “2017年3月国防部例行记者会文字实录,” http://www.mod.gov.cn/jzhzt/2017-03/30/content_4777029_7.htm, (accessed on February 20, 2018).

transit hub between peripheral and forward bases) while also promoting local economic development.

China has significant commercial investments in Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port and Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which are respectively the endpoints of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. In November 2016, the Chinese-invested port of Gwadar in Pakistan was officially put into operation. In October 2014, Tanzania, China, and Oman signed a memorandum of cooperation for the construction of the Bagamoyo Port.²⁶ When constructing ports, consideration must be given to their function and mission as military logistical support bases. As conditions ripe, the right to use ports can be obtained through friendly means such as franchise, leasing, co-management, and negotiation to leverage their logistical support functions. Peripheral bases can adopt similar approaches or follow international commercial practices. Temporary bases can be explicitly defined through agreements similar to the Rapid Response Agreements reached between the United States and relevant countries.

The BRI however is not exclusively focused on security and military matters. Neither does it impose requirements on the security situation or military capabilities of countries along the routes. In theory, any country along the BRI routes that has a certain scale in terms of economic and social development, resource and energy availability, geopolitical strategic position, and population size could potentially become a strategic pivot country. However, when analyzing the bilateral relations between some countries along the BRI routes and China, it is evident that these countries have different descriptions of their bilateral relations with China.

Of the BRI participant countries of some 150 as of June 2023, Beijing has concluded various partnership agreements with 30 countries and more than 200 projects.²⁷ They are spread across all key regions along the BRI routes. Generally, countries with higher levels of bilateral relations with China along the BRI routes may be more suitable as strategic pivot countries. In diplomatic practice, countries that prioritize developing and maintaining good relations with China are more likely to consider the BRI as one of the core tasks in their relations with China. For these countries, China should pay particular attention and prioritize them in the construction of overseas strategic pivot countries along the BRI routes.

In addition, some countries and regions along the BRI routes have prominent geopolitical value and strategic significance, significantly influencing China's national and regional strategies. These countries are capable of helping China avoid existing or potential threats in their respective regions and demonstrate a willingness to cooperate. Therefore, they are also well-suited to serve as overseas strategic pivot countries.

Geostrategic characteristics of some of these 23 countries are conceived to be as follows:

1. Pakistan, which borders China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.
2. Cambodia, which serves as the hinterland of the Indochinese Peninsula.

²⁶ “巴加莫约港奠基仪式隆重举行,” <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/i/jyj1/k/201510/20151001138633.shtml>, (accessed on March 1, 2018).

²⁷ 中华人民共和国 国务院新闻办公室, “共建‘一带一路’: 构建人类命运共同体的重大实践,” 2023年 10月, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202310/content_6907994.htm (accessed on November 23, 2023).

3. Myanmar, located on the northeastern coast of the Bay of Bengal and the eastern side of the Indian Peninsula, bordering China's Yunnan Province.
4. Malaysia, which, along with Singapore, controls the Malacca Strait and maritime routes in the South China Sea.
5. Indonesia, positioned at the core of the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits.
6. Sri Lanka and Maldives, strategically located to guard the northern Indian Ocean routes.
7. Djibouti, situated in the Horn of Africa, controlling the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.
8. Kenya and Tanzania, located on the East African plateau and guarding the eastern gateway of Africa.

Table 1. Strategic advantages of some BRI nations.

Nations	Strategic advantages
Cambodia	<p>Holds significant influence within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN);</p> <p>Adopts a neutral stance on the South China Sea issue;</p> <p>Good relations with China, contributing to stabilizing the situation in the South China Sea and safeguarding China's maritime rights and interests;</p> <p>Positioned at the heart of the Indochina Peninsula;</p> <p>Infrastructure like at the Sihanoukville Port, serves as a hub, radiating influence throughout the entire region of mainland Southeast Asia.</p>
Malaysia	<p>Plays a prominent role in ensuring the safety of the maritime routes in the Strait of Malacca;</p> <p>Exerts a certain level of influence in the South China Sea issue and other multilateral affairs within ASEAN.</p>
Indonesia	<p>Situated adjacent to several crucial international maritime passages such as the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait, and the Lombok Strait, making it a vital crossroads between Asia and Oceania, as well as between the Pacific and Indian Oceans;</p> <p>Its strategic location significant to safeguarding the security of maritime routes;</p> <p>As one of the largest country within ASEAN, it holds considerable influence in the ASEAN region.</p>
Myanmar	<p>Located between Southeast Asia and South Asia;</p> <p>Shares a border with China's Yunnan Province, providing a strategic corridor that connects southwestern China to the Indian Ocean;</p> <p>A strategic pathway that allows China's energy resources to bypass the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea route, directly entering and exiting the Indian Ocean;</p> <p>Reduces dependency on the Malacca Strait and helps safeguard maritime passages' security.</p>
Sri Lanka & Maldives	<p>Help guard the northern Indian Ocean shipping routes;</p> <p>Strategic positioning enhances cooperation with countries in South Asia and international organizations in the region.</p>

Nations	Strategic advantages
Pakistan	Bordering China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and adjacent to the Persian Gulf; Holding a significant strategic position; The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is crucial as a vital link connecting China with the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.
Kenya & Tanzania	Located in the East African highlands; Possessing enormous development potential; Excellent cooperation relations with China.
Djibouti	China's first official overseas military base; Anchoring China's key maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

Source: 孙丽燕, “‘一带一路’背景下海外战略支点建设的几点思考,” 『边界与海洋研究』, 第7卷 第6期, 2022年 11月, p. 81.

These countries play crucial roles in regional security and cooperation and have the potential to contribute significantly to China's strategic interests along the “Belt and Road” routes.

China has been prudent in not naming these potential “pivot” bases as overseas military bases so as not to provoke the U.S. and its allies. Rather, it labels them as “overseas support bases,” due to their supply and support functions. Regardless of their naming, China conceives them as natural strategic points abroad. The practical significance of these bases lies in their ability to provide effective logistical support for military forces deployed overseas, ensuring timely supply replenishment and enhancing the capability of overseas military operations, thereby providing strong support for the defense of overseas interests. Internationally, as the international situation evolves and countries' own capabilities grow, it is a widely recognized and common practice for a nation to establish overseas bases to safeguard its overseas interests. For instance, the United States has the largest number of overseas bases, with 374 bases distributed across more than 140 countries and territories, with approximately 300,000 troops stationed overseas.²⁸

As long as actions do not involve occupying other countries' territories or harming their interests under the guise of “hegemonism,” and comply with the requirements of international law, while also contributing to maintaining regional peace and stability, Beijing argues, overseas support bases are legitimate, reasonable, and justified.²⁹ China's overseas support bases serve as crucial assets for protecting overseas interests, safeguarding military operations abroad, providing international public goods, and maintaining regional peace and stability. The first overseas support base of China is located in Djibouti, at the Horn of Africa, along the coast of the Red Sea. This base became operational in August 2017. According to publicly available information,

²⁸ Department of Defense, *Basic Structure Report: FY 2018 Base Line*, 2018, p. 28.

²⁹ 李伯军, “论海外军事基地的国际法律地位问题,” 『湖南科技大学学报(社会科学版)』, 2016年 第4期, pp. 63-69.

Table 2. China's official and potential overseas military bases

Islands/Nations	Overseas bases
Djibouti	Djibouti
Pakistan	Gwadar Port
Bangladesh	Chattogram(Chittagong)
Myanmar	Cocos Islands
Cambodia	苦克莫岛
Thailand	Songkhla Joint Training Base
Sri Lanka	Hambantota
Solomon Islands	Bikachoqcha Island
French Polynesia	The Tuamotu Archipelago
Maug Islands	Diego Garcia Island

Source: 孙丽燕, “‘一带一路’背景下海外战略支点建设的几点思考,” p. 84.

China has built or planned to build a total of 10 overseas support bases (as shown in Table 2). In the future, the construction of overseas support bases should align with the requirements of China's military operations abroad and the safeguarding of overseas interests. It should not overly emphasize scale and quantity but should be comprehensively planned and constructed, taking into account political, economic, cultural, and military aspects.

As the times evolve and the geopolitical landscape changes, the purposes of establishing overseas bases by various countries have expanded from addressing traditional security threats to addressing non-traditional security areas such as counterterrorism, combating piracy, international rescue missions, and more. Correspondingly, the functions of overseas bases have evolved from solely serving military combat functions to serving multiple functions such as peacekeeping, disaster relief, counterterrorism cooperation, protection of expatriates, information gathering, scientific research, and more.³⁰ Under the constraints of international norms, regulations, and public opinion, overseas bases play various positive roles in protecting maritime passages, supporting UN peacekeeping operations, and facilitating international humanitarian relief efforts.

It is important to note that China's establishment of overseas strategic support points differs significantly from the past practices of major powers establishing overseas bases to consolidate their hegemonic status, strengthen military deterrence, and protect immediate interests. China's aim in seeking to establish overseas strategic support points is to safeguard overseas interests, conduct military operations abroad, promote regional peace and stability, and provide international public goods.³¹

³⁰ 孙德刚, “大国海外军事基地部署的条件分析,” 『世界经济与政治』, 2015年 第7期, pp. 40-67.

³¹ 薛桂芳, 郑洁, “中国21世纪海外基地建设的现实需求与风险应对,” 『国际展望』, 2017年 第4期, pp. 104-

Compared to domestic situations, the situation along the Belt and Road is intricate and ever-changing. The tasks assigned to overseas strategic support points are diverse, and the objects requiring safeguarding could be the Chinese Navy venturing abroad, overseas citizens, or Chinese enterprises. The methods of safeguarding could involve delivery support, accompanying support, or localized support, and the safeguarding locations could include at sea, ports, airports, or temporary docks. There are many uncertainties involved. This requires the precise definition of safeguarding tasks for overseas strategic support points, ensuring that safeguarding methods meet the demands, delineating safeguarding areas clearly and scientifically, and ensuring that safeguarding efficiency is maximized, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of overseas strategic support points. From this perspective, the ultimate goal of the construction model of overseas strategic support points is to maximize their safeguarding functions.

One such model is the modular embedded mode. This mode is derived from the logistics management theory of the US military, which suggests that logistics support should be unitized and modularized. The characteristic of modular logistics is that it is easy to combine and flexible. By organizing logistics support units differently, it can provide different functional “components” for military operations. Different modules can be “disassembled” and “assembled” flexibly according to the needs of overseas operations and different safeguarding tasks, similar to assembling building blocks. Multi-functional logistics support units can be drawn and combined as needed.³²

CONCLUSION

China supposedly adheres to a foreign policy of peaceful development. In the future, the construction of Chinese overseas bases should exhibit the following basic characteristics: primarily serving supply and logistical support roles, and operating military and service functions other than combat operations within a strict policy and legal framework.³³

The spatial layout of Chinese overseas bases should primarily focus on key regions involved in the BRI. The number of bases should not be excessive, and their functions and missions must meet China’s needs to address non-traditional security threats and safeguard its overseas interests. In the future, China’s military operations overseas are not expected to be large in scale or intensity. Therefore, the construction of overseas bases “should not overly emphasize scale and quantity but should be based on national interests, considering political, economic, and military factors comprehensively in strategic planning and construction.” While their scale may not be extensive, their

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³² 何斌, 马开权, “美军非战争军事行动后勤应急管理的特点及启示,” 『军事交通学院学报』, 2013年第12期, pp. 77-81.

³³ Christopher D. Yung and Ross Rustici, *Not an Idea We Have to Shun: Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century*, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs Institute for National Strategic Studies, China Strategic Perspectives, No. 7, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, October 2014), p.2.

strategic significance must be robust.³⁴

The deployment focus of Chinese overseas bases is the Indian Ocean region, while India has always considered the Indian Ocean as its traditional sphere of influence and has formulated strategies asserting the Indian Ocean as its own maritime domain. Consequently, China's legitimate actions in constructing overseas bases in the Indian Ocean region may be perceived by India as a challenge. Countries like the United States and France have also established numerous military bases in the Indian Ocean region. The emergence of overseas bases from emerging countries is a new phenomenon for Western countries.

China claims that its strategic behavior to be legitimate, reasonable, and rational, while admittedly some Western nations might suggest otherwise. China's military presence will not only enter but also persist in the Indian Ocean region and anchoring in Africa, alarming the US, its allies and partners. With its growing power, China could become a new "power player" in the Indian Ocean region, potentially disrupting the existing balance of power. As some American scholars have pointed out, in the next decade, China may operate overseas bases and expand its military presence in geopolitical vacuums, which could provoke a series of political, diplomatic, and economic responses from other major powers in the region. Therefore, how to manage relations with other countries that have overseas bases will be a new challenge for emerging countries, like China.

In sum, BRI's inherent military nature discards its original intent and purposes. That is, to invite members of Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank(AIIB) member countries and other foreign partners of BRI. By this very military aspect of base-building can China afford only itself and its enterprises to be the main entity of the BRI projects. Only a portion of labor market of the invested countries may benefit from China's investment. Strategic pivot points are schemed to materialize BRI's so-called "connectivity" and China's once sought *yitiaoxian* strategy. What was missing in the former strategy, i.e. basing access, deterrence capacity, and invested country control, will be in place if and when the construct of the strategic pivot points driven by the BRI is completed. As have seen in <Table-2>, China will be equipped with at least 10 strategic pivot points spanning from South China seas, Indian Ocean, South Pacific and anchoring in the east coast of Africa.

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³⁴ 徐纬地, "中国应积极稳固加强海外军事存在: 关于海外军事存在的再思考," 『国防大学学报』, 2014年第7期, pp. 128-138.

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