

# From Ancient Silk Road to Modern Belt and Road Initiative

## *A Signaling Approach to Trust-Building across Narratives*

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### INTRODUCTION

Narratives help people in making sense of the world (Somers 1994: 606), and in interpreting and understanding the surrounding political realities (Patterson and Monroe 1998: 321). These narratives give people reasons to act (Franzosi 1998), but at the same time act as a ruling tool. From a postcolonial perspective, Datta-Ray (2015) demonstrates how the dominant Western diplomatic narratives suppress and marginalize India in important international affairs, and he thus claims the need for India-oriented (non-Western) narratives in diplomacy. Although China's contemporary foreign policies are not usually interpreted in terms of postcolonial narratives, China faces a similar problem in diplomacy, and thus there is a similar demand for Chinese-oriented narratives.

The problems China faces can be illustrated by attitudes surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched by President Xi in 2013, the BRI is a building block of China's "going out" global strategy (Zhang and Liu 2019).<sup>1</sup> The BRI consists of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), connecting China, Central Asia, and Europe by land, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), linking China with Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe by sea. Within three years of its launch, China's outward direct investment (ODI) reached USD170.11 billion in 7,961 overseas enterprises in 164 countries and regions: an increase of 44.1 percent year to year by 2016 (UNDP 2017: 2). China's ODI flow to the 65 BRI countries was \$14.4 billion in 2017 (Huang and Xia 2018: 2). A specific example includes a pledge

from President Xi on April 2015 of \$46 billion as part of an investment and cooperation agreement during a visit to Pakistan (Andam et al. 2017).

From the Chinese perspective, the BRI will enable China to engage with other fast-emerging Asian markets through bilateral infrastructure, trade, and investment cooperation and allow these Asian countries to tap into China's huge domestic market. The export of "Made in China" goods to these BRI countries will help China export many of its manufactured goods, thus addressing domestic production overcapacity and stimulating domestic economic growth through the upgrading of its industries (Irshad et al. 2016). At the same time, by initiating new economic corridors such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), China has managed to enhance not only economic cooperation but also diplomatic and tactical partnerships between China and the participating countries (Arshad et al. 2016). These Chinese projects could be instrumental to the development of host countries of the BRI region.

However, criticisms about the intention and possible impacts of BRI projects have emerged in host countries and the rest of the world. A report in the *Financial Times* suggests that there are at least 234 BRI projects suffering setbacks because of low social acceptance (Kygne 2018a). For instance, the railway project in Thailand has been put on hold several times due to social protests from Thai citizens. The West also heavily criticizes the BRI for creating a debt burden for developing countries, and some termed BRI as "debt-trap diplomacy" (Johnson 2019). China, however, regards the BRI as a global public good, believing it will bring huge development to the BRI regions. This divergence between how the Chinese and the rest of the world perceive the BRI is worth investigating.

While many scholars have attributed the low social acceptance of BRI to technical issues, other scholars point to the collision between the Chinese and Western narratives as the underlying problem. Failures or slow progress in project management in international investments are not rare in the era of globalization, and do not inevitably have political consequences (Russel and Berger 2019; Yean 2018; Hurley and Portelance 2019; Zhang and Liu 2019; Hafner et al. 2018; Lu et al. 2018; Liu and Lim 2019; Baltensperger and Dadush 2019). Therefore, lack of understanding the signals has been posited as the problem. Nordin and Weissmann (2018: 232) use the term "imaginaries" to define the BRI because it represents possible worlds that are different from the actual world, and the BRI projects are tied to changing the world. Other scholars indicate that BRI's legitimacy, in conjunction with a series of political and economic narratives, and the collision between the Chinese narrative and others, result in the divergence in perceptions of BRI (Blanchard 2018; Callahan 2016; Sidaway and Woon 2017). Yahuda (2013) argues the main challenges for BRI acceptance is that the Chinese government viewed US power as descending and Chinese power as ascending after the financial crisis and saw an opportunity for a stronger presence at the global stage. President Xi's speech at the 19th Party Congress about "moving closer to the center stage"

was interpreted as signaling China's growing ambition, and thus attracted much criticism (for example, see Kynge 2018b; Juan 2018). However, as will be illustrated later, some strategic signals sent via BRI have been better accepted than others via the same channel.

This paper aims to address the question of how trust can be bridged across narratives in International Relations (IR) by linking the notion of strategic signaling with the Chinese concept of "Brightness." Specifically, what factors condition the success of strategic signals for trust-building? It argues that trust in strategic cooperation is the result of a series of signaling and knowledge-building where the signal sender's honesty regarding self-interests and intentions acts as the conditional factor.

Following this introduction, the first section discusses the notions of trust and how the strategic signaling process contributes to trust-building. The next section tests this framework with two case studies. One is the construction of the ancient Silk Road in around 139–114 BCE, when Zhang Qian of the Han Dynasty connected China and Central Asia for the first time. The other is the modern BRI launched in the 2010s. Both cases are regarded as initiatives by China to change the regional order, and both encounter problems originating from different narrative backgrounds. The concluding section explains how the theories of strategic signaling and the notion of brightness could help build trust between China and the rest of the world regarding the BRI project.

### SIGNALING AND TRUST-BUILDING

Trust between two parties can be defined as a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability to the actions of another party, based upon the credibility that the other will perform a particular action that is important to you (Mayer et al. 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998). Trust is an important concept in the field of International Relations, especially in terms of conflict resolution and peace-building processes between countries. It is sometimes regarded as a part of rational decision-making preferences in relation to the external environment (Hollis 1998: 14). Hoffman (2002: 366) defines trust between states as a willingness to take risks on the behavior of others, based on the belief that potential trustees will "do what is right."

Trust-building across narratives is difficult due to the divergence in perception between the senders and the receivers, and to the complexity of decision-making with regard to the interpersonal nature of trust relationships (Booth and Wheeler 2008; Wheeler 2012; Rathbun 2011, 2012). It is an incomplete information game (Kydd 2000), and thus cannot be explained with reference to available information and specific reciprocity alone (Rathbun 2011, 2012). However, trust-building is not impossible between states. Jervis (1976) argues that although misperception occurs far more frequently than is normally realized, the actors can try to

minimize it by trying to see the world the way the other sees it, or by examining the world from varied perspectives.

How is trust built? Signaling theory views trust development as a signaling process. Kydd states that “trust can be established and fostered by small, unilateral cooperative gestures that initiate chains of mutually rewarding behaviour” (2000: 333). These gestures are signals. This theory helps to describe the behaviors of two nations in interactions (Breslin 2018).

Not all signaling processes can generate trust, however. Received signals might lead to incorrect inferences. Senders may be able to deceive receivers by the skillful use of signals; and contextual, reputational beliefs may differ in the extent to which they reflect the true intentions and abilities of senders (Jervis 1976). Decision-makers tend to evaluate to what extent a signal reflects the true intention of the signal senders (Glaser 2010).

Scholars, therefore, place a strong emphasis on the significance of costly signals in broadcasting sincerity in cooperation (Glaser 2010; Larson 1997; Pu 2017, 2019). Costly signals are gestures that involve high cost in a reassurance game. In contrast to cheap signals that can be pulled back easily, players would not send (or at least would hesitate to send) costly signals if they are not sincere in their cooperation (Kydd 2000). Consequently, costly signals modify the expectation of the counterparties and thus enable cooperation (Kydd 2005: 187). For instance, the restrictive membership accession procedures of international institutions follow the logic of costly signaling, as these accession procedures serve as filters that enable the candidate to signal their strong interests (Kydd 2001: 821).

Fearon (1997) distinguishes two types of costly signals that states might use for communication purposes. When players try to communicate willingness of cooperation, they can send signals that “tie their hands” and limit room for maneuver. It increases “the costs of backing down if the would-be challenger actually challenges but otherwise entails no cost if no challenge materializes” (Fearon 1997: 70). When state leaders give public statements, they send “hand-tying” signals by creating audience costs among their domestic political audiences. If they do not stay true to their words, they will suffer from domestic pressures (*ibid.*). The other type of costly signal is the one with sunk costs. Sunk-cost signals are “actions costly for the state to take in the first place but do not affect the relative value of fighting versus acquiescing in a challenge” (*ibid.*). For instance, signal senders may exhibit their sincerity to their potential cooperators by making unilateral political or financial investments first. It will increase their counterparties’ expectation that the signal senders will fulfill their promises, because the previous financial or political investments will be wasted otherwise.

However, there is still no guarantee that signals with high audience costs and sunk costs will always generate trust. BRI is a series of costly signals that involves both high audience costs, considering its important position in China’s foreign policy, and high sunk costs with all the infrastructure investments overseas. Yet,

the BRI projects still suffer from low social acceptance in neighboring countries. This example illustrates how the current strategic signaling theories fail to explain the puzzle of trust-building.

### THE VIRTUE OF “BRIGHTNESS”

The Chinese Pre-Qin masters understood that trust-building between states is difficult. The key to trust-building is to avoid the risk of being deceived. Han Feizi states that for medium-size states, security cooperation with small states may not ensure their own survival, but cooperation with large states risks the chances of being deceived and thereby being controlled (Zhang 2006).<sup>2</sup> In order to reduce the possibility of being deceived and demonstrate their sincerity in cooperation, states in the Spring and Autumn period exchanged their princes (sometimes the crowned princes) as hostages. This kind of action can be regarded as sending costly signals for trust-building. Pre-Qin masters, however, also understood that costly signaling does not always guarantee the success of trust-building.

Zuo Qiumin, the pre-Qin historian who authored *Zuo Zhuan* (左传 also known as *Zuo Shi Chun Qiu* 左氏春秋), recorded a story that the King of Zhou and the Lord of Zheng exchanged their sons as hostages to enhance their bilateral relation; however, the Lord of Zheng still secretly sent troops to seize Zhou's grain. Zuo Qiumin thus commented that “even with princes as hostages, there might not be sincere trust between states. If states dealt with others with brightness, and regulated their own behavior according to ritual norms, the trust would be solid even without hostages” (Guo 2016: 21).<sup>3</sup>

For the ancient Chinese, brightness (明) was an important quality of noble and virtuous men. The ancient Chinese masters such as Xunzi and Guanzi believed that the best kings are kings with the virtue of brightness [明主 or 明君]. Brightness is also the moral requirement for all virtuous men. *Li Ji* (The Book of Rites) stated that the purpose of “Da Xue” (learning to be a virtuous man; see Hu and Zhang 2017) was to understand the meaning of brightness (ibid.).<sup>4</sup> Zhu Xi (朱熹 also known as Zhuzi, one of the most important Confucian scholars of the Song Dynasty) even valued “understanding the meaning of brightness” as the first and most important step of learning (ibid.).

Brightness originally means the light and everything that the light touches; and as a moral quality it requires rulers and virtuous men to be honest as to their intentions and to act in accordance with clear and transparent rules. Mencius indicates that if rulers can clarify the acting rules of their reign, even large states will not want to be their enemies (Liang 2015).<sup>5</sup> With the virtue of brightness, kings can rule their countries well, establish good relations with other countries, and even rule “All Under Heaven” (*Tianxia*). Xunzi states that “[if kings] clarify the intention of non-annexation and treat friends and enemies with credibility, they will win and dominate *Tianxia* as hegemonies” (Zhang 2012).<sup>6</sup>

The notion of brightness opposes the use of tricks and conspiracy in domestic politics and interstate relations. Xunzi states that “if [a large state] deceives its people for benefits, then the people will not be honest with the ruler; if the state deceives friendly states for self-benefit, it would not be able to deter rival states, or be trusted by the friendly states . . . one can filch a state through tricks and conspiracies, but no one will be able to win ‘All Under Heaven’ by these means” (Zhang 2012).<sup>7</sup>

For ancient Chinese masters, acting in bright ways was believed as the key to trust-building in strategic cooperation because it could reduce the other partners’ fears of being deceived. Using the language of modern IR theorists, honesty in relation to self-interest and intentions could enhance the other parties’ confidence in cooperation, because it decreases the uncertainty in the incomplete information game as it is a trust-building process.

This brightness, however, may not be automatically perceived by others. For strategic cooperative purposes, one state’s honesty regarding its self-interest and intentions needs to be transformed into the other parties’ good understanding of this state’s cooperative interests, and this transformation process can be easily disrupted, which is where we find the ancient Chinese masters lacking.

#### SIGNALING WITH “BRIGHTNESS”

In summary of the literature review above, the consensus among modern IR scholars and ancient Chinese masters is that the key to trust-building is to decrease the uncertainties in this incomplete information game, but their emphases in trust-building diverge. For strategic cooperative purposes, the judgment on whether a state will be trustworthy in a potential cooperation depends on two major factors. One is whether the signal sender may exploit others by backing down from cooperation once the proposal is accepted. It is a problem that costly signals can help deal with. The other factor is the concern whether the signaled proposal reflects the true intention of the signal sender. The counterparties need to know that the signal sender does not have a hidden agenda. It is the problem that the ancient Chinese masters were conscious of.

This paper attempts to integrate these two factors in order to formulate a comprehensive understanding of the trust-building process. The proposed model has two major assumptions. First, the existence of mutual interest determines whether there is a need for strategic cooperation. In other words, both parties have the internal drivers to achieve strategic cooperation. Second, the decision-makers are fully rational. They tend to trust their counterparties when they believe the risk of being deceived or being exploited is low enough. They are also able to independently formulate and update their knowledge based on newly gathered information without bias.

This paper proposes that trust-building is a process of signaling and knowledge-building. Only when the signal sent for strategic cooperation fits the receiver’s

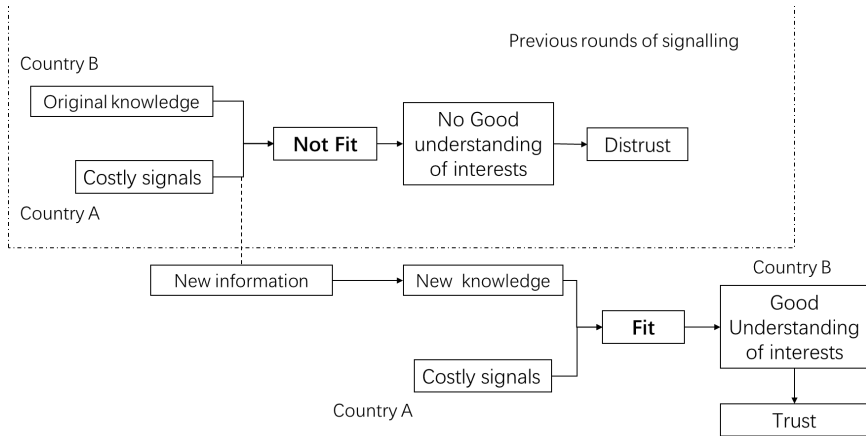


FIGURE 12.1. Trust-building as a process of signaling and knowledge-building.

knowledge about the sender, thus generating a good understanding of the sender's cooperative interests, can the trust-building process end in success. A good understanding of the sender's cooperative interests can be the result of several rounds of signaling, for which the signal sender's honesty regarding self-interest and intention is the necessary condition.

As Figure 12.1 illustrates, Country B would not develop a good understanding of Country A's cooperative interests if A's signal does not fit B's original knowledge about A. This original knowledge could be the product of previous experiences, images, or even stereotypes. If Country B does not have a good understanding of Country A's interests in this proposed strategic cooperation, Country B will not trust Country A and thus decline the proposal. Yet, it may not be the end of the game. Taking the costly signals in this first round as one of the sources of new information, Country B may also gather further information about Country A through various means, such as investigations, negotiations, or personal interactions between state leaders. New information would generate Country B's new knowledge about Country A. If Country A's costly signals fit this newly developed knowledge, Country B would be able to develop good understandings of Country A's interests in cooperation; and the trust can thus be built.

The signal sender's honesty regarding their self-interests and intentions is the necessary condition as to whether the counterparties may generate a good understanding of the sender's cooperative interests. Communication and cognitive theorists point out that people with high cognitive capability can avoid being misguided and make rational choices if they have access to multiple sources of information (Zucker 1977; Zaller 1992; De Vreese and Boogaarden 2005, 2006). This argument suggests that it is difficult to manipulate others' knowledge about a

country, especially in a long-lasting trust-building process, because manipulated information will eventually be corrected by other information sources.

This signaling and knowledge-building process may end in three situations. (1) The signals in the following rounds fit the newly developed knowledge, and Country B's good understanding of Country A's cooperative interests is generated. Trust can thus be built, and strategic cooperation can be achieved. (2) Country B does not trust Country A, and Country A stops sending signals because it has manipulated information to hide the true cooperative interests and intentions in the previous rounds of signaling. The more rounds of signaling it continues to conduct, the more manipulated information will be corrected in the knowledge-building process; hence, the less likelihood that Country B will trust Country A. (3) Country A has been honest about its self-interests and intentions, but Country B's knowledge-building about Country A is still in process. Country A may choose to continue with new rounds of signaling, depending on the payoffs of cooperation and the costs of signaling. If the anticipated payoff is larger than the cost of signaling, the signaling process continues; if not, Country A will choose to stop sending signals. This logic supports Kydd's argument that "signals must be costly, but not too costly" (2000: 340).

Good understanding of the signal sender's cooperative interests has three levels of meaning. First, with good understanding of the sender's cooperative interests, the counterparty would have the confidence that the sender does not have a hidden agenda in the proposed strategic cooperation. If Country A proposes to cooperate with Country B and claims that this cooperation is only for the benefit of Country B, Country B may not trust Country A even after many rounds of costly signaling. In fact, the costlier these signals are, the less trustworthy Country A is in the eye of Country B. Country B would worry that Country A seeks hidden benefits resulting in unknown (and possibly dangerous) losses to Country B. However, if both parties' interests from the cooperation are transparent to each other (at least transparent in the eyes of the other party), trust-building may be relatively easy if they feel confident about their understandings of the other party's interests.

Second, with good understanding of Country A's interest, Country B would have the confidence that Country A would not back out of the collaboration, not only because Country A has sent costly signals (audience cost or sunk cost) but also because Country B understands Country A's opportunity costs in the proposed cooperation. Opportunity cost is an economic concept that expresses the basic relationship between scarcity (of resources) and choices (Buchanan 2017). Unlike audience cost and sunk cost that involve visible inputs, it is mostly unquantifiable (Posnett and Jan 1996). Since resources are scarce relative to needs, decision-makers tend to use resources in ways that can generate beneficial outputs. Opportunity cost is related to future benefits generated by future use of resources including time and labor (Grinols 1991; Bettman et al. 1996). Backing out of a



collaboration with high opportunity cost could lead to the loss of potential benefits that might not be achieved from different uses of the same resources.

Third, a good understanding of Country A's cooperative interests means Country B knows that the interests Country A pursues in the cooperation match Country A's capability. Philippe and Durand (2011) argue that trust about the signal sender may include beliefs about its abilities and intentions. Hall and Yarhi-Milo (2012: 3) similarly indicate that the signals of sincerity that are beyond the signal senders' ability to control are not reliable. If the cooperative goal is beyond what Country B knows about Country A's capability, Country B would worry that Country A is attempting to act as a free rider and thus exploiting Country B in this cooperation. The trust-building would thus be difficult, and cooperation may not be achieved.

## TWO "SILK ROAD" CASES ON TRUST-BUILDING

The Silk Road has never been a specific name for one road. It is a general notion referring to all routes that connected China, Central Asia, the Middle East, the Mediterranean region, and Europe where people exchanged commercial goods, thoughts, technologies, and culture. Although it has existed for more than two thousand years, the name "Silk Road" was first used in 1877 by the German explorer Baron Ferdinand Von Richthofen (Wood 2002). This section examines two empirical cases where China has attempted to build trust across narratives for a change in regional order. Both cases are related to the name "Silk Road." The first case helps to illustrate how the dynamic signaling process and knowledge-building led to the establishment of trust between states with different narrative backgrounds, and the second case helps to demonstrate the conditions of trust-building in the signaling process.

### *Case One: Ancient Silk Road in 139–114 BCE*

Ancient China's connection with Central Asia (the "Western Region" 西域) started in the Han Dynasty (hereafter "the Han") and its earliest credible record (probably the only direct record) is found in the "Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan" in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (also known in Chinese as *Shiji*) written by the official historiographer Sima Qian (also translated as Ssu-Ma Ch'ien) of the Han. (Note: this paper uses Li Hanwen's annotations to *Shiji* as the texts of analysis; see Li 2016.)

The northern nomads had long been a threat to the Chinese kingdoms (Tong 1946, 2006; Beckwith 2009; Liu 2010). In the early period of the Han, the Xiongnu were in a dominant position in east-central Asia, and the Han emperors had to resort to "He'qin" with the Xiongnu (i.e., marrying off the Han emperors' sisters or daughters to the chiefs of the Xiongnu) in order to make peace on their borders. However, this strategy soon lost efficacy. "He'qin" could no longer effectively stop

TABLE 12.1 The three rounds of interaction between the Han and the Central Asian countries/federacies

Target Country	Mutual Interest	Costly Signal	Good Understanding of the Han's Interests	Consequence
1 Yuezhi	Yes	No	No	Failed
2 Wu Sun and others	Yes	Yes	No	Failed
3 Wu Sun and others	Yes	Yes	Yes	Succeeded

the Xiongnu invasion. Emperor Wu's army might defeat the Xiongnu's troops, but they could not stop the Xiongnu from continually invading (Zhang and Liu 2015).<sup>8</sup>

Against this background, the Han needed allies from Central Asia to help in defending against the Xiongnu. It is worth noting here that, although many researchers reveal the importance of connections between ancient China and Central Asia from economic and cultural perspectives, the original motivations of building this connection were strategic and security concerns. The Han needed allies to balance the threats from the Xiongnu, and this strategic objective remained the top priority of the Han's relationship with the Central Asian countries.

Table 12.1 compares the interaction between the Han and the Central Asian countries/federacies for the establishment of strategic alliances. There are three rounds of interaction that can be identified. In the first round, Zhang Qian and his delegation left the Han territory and went west to find the Yuezhi. The Yuezhi were invaded by the Xiongnu, and the king of the Yuezhi was brutally slaughtered. The son of the king hastily led his people away from their homes and waited for opportunities to retaliate. The Han thus regarded the Yuezhi as a potential ally against Xiongnu. However, Zhang Qian was delayed in his arrival in Yuezhi territory, having been captured and held by the Xiongnu. By the time he arrived in Yuezhi territory, the Yuezhi had conquered the Da Xia (the north bank of the Amu Darya, originally a Greek colony before the Yuezhi arrived; see Liu 2010). The Yuezhi declined Zhang Qian's alliance proposal on the pretext of having no interest in retaliation as their new territory was fertile and secure, far from the Xiongnu and even farther from the Han (Li 2016).<sup>9</sup> However, while it might have been true that the Yuezhi were not interested in retaliation, they still had a shared interest with the Han in defending against the Xiongnu. This view is supported by the fact that they eventually sent envoys and built a relationship with the Han later in the third round of negotiations.

In this first round, although the Han and the Yuezhi shared common interests in defending against the Xiongnu, the Yuezhi knew little, if anything, about either the Han's determination to fight against the Xiongnu or the Han's military capability. Zhang Qian's mission to the Yuezhi might not have successfully sent a costly signal. Even though Zhang Qian could prove his identity as an envoy of the Han, it was impossible for the king of the Yuezhi to know the Han's determination and

military capability in fighting the Xiongnu, since Zhang was neither in a formal delegation nor coming with considerable gifts (Li 2016).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the Yuezhi could not possibly formulate a good understanding of the Han's cooperative interest. It was, therefore, no surprise that the king of the Yuezhi refused to make an alliance with the Han to avoid the risk of being deceived.

In the second round of signaling, the Han altered the targeted cooperative partner from the Yuezhi to the Wu Sun. The Wu Sun was an independent federacy before the Xiongnu's invasion. Kunmo, the king of the Wu Sun, struggled to rebuild the Wu Sun's relative independency, but this independency was fragile. Zhang Qian believed that the Han and the Wu Sun shared common interests in strategic terms, because the Han wanted to further establish deterrence against the Xiongnu, while the Wu Sun desired absolute independence from the Xiongnu's control. He further suggested that once the Han made an alliance with the Wu Sun, the Han could thereby build foreign relations with the Da Xia and other Central Asian countries/federacies (Li 2016).<sup>11</sup>

Zhang Qian subsequently went to Central Asia for the second time. The Han sent costly signals to the Central Asian countries and federacies by presenting a large delegation carrying an enormous amount of valuable gifts. *Shiji* records that the delegation consisted of three hundred delegates with six hundred horses; and they brought tens of thousands of cows and sheep, and hundreds of thousands of precious metals and cloths as gifts (Li 2016).<sup>12</sup> When Zhang Qian arrived in the Wu Sun country he sent his associate envoys to other Central Asia countries and federacies such as the Dawan (modern Ferghana in Uzbekistan; see Liu 2010), the Kangju (or translated as Kangkeu, now Tashkent, plus the Chu, Talas, and middle Jaxartes basins), Yuezhi, Da Xia (Darya), and the Anxi (Persia under the rule of the Parthians).

Regardless of the costly signals that the Han sent with the large delegation and precious gifts, Kunmo, the king of the Wu Sun, declined the Han's proposal because he was not sure whether the Han were powerful enough to protect the Wu Sun from the Xiongnu. The *Shiji* records that as "the Wu Sun were far away from the Han, they did not know the Han's capability; the Wu Sun were close to the Xiongnu and had been its dependency for a long period; the Wu Sun nobles all feared the Xiongnu" (Li 2016).<sup>13</sup>

In other words, even with common interests and costly signals, the Wu Sun had not built knowledge about the Han that fit the Han's cooperative signals, and thus could not generate a good understanding of the Han's strategic interests. Therefore, the second round of signaling failed.

In the third round, the Han repeated the signaling process and further presented the Han's economic and military capability to visiting Wu Sun envoys. The "Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan" records that the Wu Sun's envoys witnessed that the Han had a huge population and the country was rich. When they returned, they reported what they had seen to their king. The Wu Sun thereby took the Han's

proposal on strategic cooperation increasingly seriously. In the following year, other Central Asian countries/federacies that Zhang Qian and his delegation had visited all sent envoys to the Han. The Han's foreign relations with these countries/federacies were consequently established in formal ways (Li 2016).<sup>14</sup> Although not by strict definition bilateral military alliances, these foreign relations were of a similar nature. As the "Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan" recorded, the Xiongnu took these actions as betrayal and were furious enough to plan an assault against the Wu Sun (Li 2016).<sup>15</sup> The decisions to establish foreign relations with the Han suggested that the Wu Sun were willing to accept the Han's proposal in changing the regional order in the Central Asia.

The success story of the third round of signaling cannot be separated from the first two rounds. Trust-building is a process of signaling and knowledge-building. If the Han had not sent Zhang Qian to the Yuezhi and the Wu Sun, the Central Asian countries and federacies could not possibly have known about the Han and the Han's cooperative determination, and they would not sent envoys to the Han. Moreover, it was only when the Wu Sun and other Central Asian countries/federacies learned about the Han's economic and military capabilities that they were able to form a good understanding of the Han's strategic interests, and therefore trust-building might succeed.

### *Case Two: BRI Empowering China as a Global Power*

President Xi Jinping first proposed establishing an economic belt across the trans-Eurasian region at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, on September 7, 2013. Nicknamed "the new silk road," the project would affect three billion people in this region, in areas of conventional energy and mineral resources, and encompass collaboration in technology, investment, finance, and services (*Xinhua News* 2013). This message was quickly followed by a second speech in Indonesia on October 3, 2013, on the launch of the MSRI project. This project would focus on China's ASEAN neighbors for common development and prosperity (Xi 2014: 322). Although beginning as a commercial proposal that enables China to engage with other fast-emerging Asian markets, BRI's scale and extent of investment has attracted enormous attention globally.

There were two main trust-building signals delivered by BRI projects, and they are clearly elaborated in President Xi's three-and-half-hour foreign strategies speech on October 18, 2017, at the 19th National Congress of the People's Republic of China. This speech marks significant differences in Xi's presidency from those of his predecessors in terms of projecting China as a global power. The same message is also apparent in the speeches extracted mainly from *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China* (Xi 2014).

The first signal is economic and political proactiveness largely reflected by the concepts of "striving for achievement" and a "community of shared future for mankind." This rhetoric suggests that China has an increasingly influential role in

global economic and political affairs. The BRI project is a continuation of China's "opening up" policy as it supports the expansion of Chinese enterprises abroad to facilitate industrial upgrading at home, paving the way for Chinese outward foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade, and advancing the internationalization of the Chinese currency (Babatunde 2015: 130–31). The importance of the BRI to the Chinese government as a global strategy to take the center stage is undisputed as it was officially enshrined in the 19th National Party Congress (NPC) held in October 2017: the same congress where Xi delivered the above-mentioned speech (Vangeli 2018: 59). The purpose of the BRI is therefore not only to impact the global political economy but also to change the way others relate to and think about the global political economy, their role in it, and their dialogue with China (Vangeli 2018: 59–60). Elizabeth Economy (2010) refers to this foreign policy revolution as a "go out" strategy designed to remake global norms and institutions. This strategy is built on an understanding of the changing nature of authority in the global order, and the way in which alliances can be built to ensure the emergence of a preferred multipolar structure (Breslin 2013).

Another signal that the BRI delivers is military conservativeness, which is mostly reflected by the concepts of a "community of a shared future" and a "new model of international relations." The ancient Silk Road is a symbol of peace among the nations along the road, and China hopes to inherit this symbol in the BRI projects. The notion of "peaceful development" is a cornerstone of China's foreign policies. However, in contrast to Hu Jintao's "peaceful development," Xi's signal of military conservativeness is characterized by a delicate shift from absolute pacifism and the principle of noninterference. Xi's speech at the Central Bureau in 2013 indicates that China advocates dealing with international security issues through dialogue and negotiation, and to solve disputes with mutual trust, mutual understanding, and mutual concession; however, there is a precondition that China's core interests should not be violated (Qian and Liu 2013). Xi's speech at Geneva further suggests that China may undertake interventions in international security crises if necessary. Xi states that "a country cannot have security while others are in turmoil, as threats facing other countries may haunt itself also. When neighbours are in trouble, instead of tightening his own fences, one should extend a helping hand to them . . . All countries should pursue common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security" (Xi 2017a). This shift in international intervention echoes previous criticisms from the West that accuse China of inaction in international peacekeeping and crises settlement.

How have international audiences responded to these two signals? This research examines commentaries on President Xi's speech from all major English news publications in the LexisNexis database, with publishing dates ranging from October 18, 2017 to October 17, 2018 (one year after the speech). There were in total forty-five publications from fourteen countries that present highly relevant comments. This research mainly searches for comments in English, but there were also

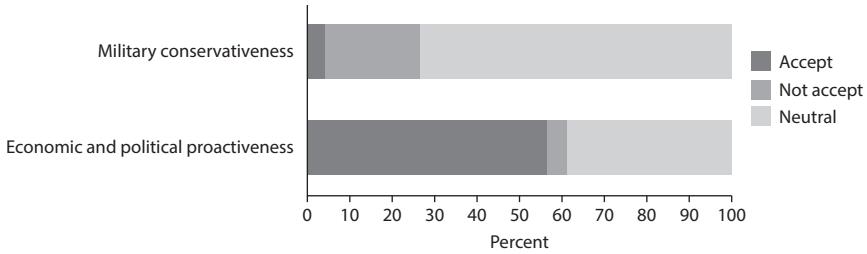


FIGURE 12.2. Audiences' acceptance of the two signals.

a few comments from non-English-speaking countries such as Japan, Thailand, and South Korea included in the analysis. The sampled publications may not fully reflect general public opinion about BRI in these countries, but they help illustrate perceptions and responses to the two signals by global audiences in the given time period.

Figure 12.2 illustrates the acceptance rate of the two signals among the samples. “Accept” here means the signal is accepted as it reflects the true intention of China. The result shows that nearly 60% of the sample agree that China’s signal of economic and political proactiveness reflects China’s true intention, while only less than 5% do not accept. About 38% of the sample do not show a clear position. In comparison, the signal of military conservativeness is less accepted as reflecting China’s true intention. Only less than 5% of the sample accept this signal while more than 20% express a clear stance that they do not believe China will act in accordance with the signal of military conservativeness.

Figure 12.3 shows how the audiences responded differently to the two signals sent by Xi’s speech on October 18, 2017. International audiences may accept a signal truly reflecting China’s intentions, but some of them may not welcome this changing role of China. Fourteen out of 45 samples welcomed China playing an increasing role in international politics, and some of the views were “very positive.” Ten samples express “negative” or “very negative” attitudes. In contrast, international audiences express more negative attitudes toward the signal of “military conservativeness” than that of “economic and political proactiveness.” Only 3 out of 45 samples express positive attitudes to China’s signal of “military conservativeness” while 21 samples express “negative” or “very negative” attitudes.

Table 12.2 compares the trust-building of the two strategic signals that China sends via the BRI. In terms of mutual interests, both China’s “economic proactiveness” and “military conservativeness” fit other countries’ interests. The Asian Development Bank estimates the cost of infrastructure needs for development in the Asia-Pacific region at about USD26 trillion through 2030 (OECD 2019). China’s huge investment in BRI countries’ infrastructure and other projects can substantially contribute to the development of these countries. China also intends to accept more responsibility in global and regional governance, which will also

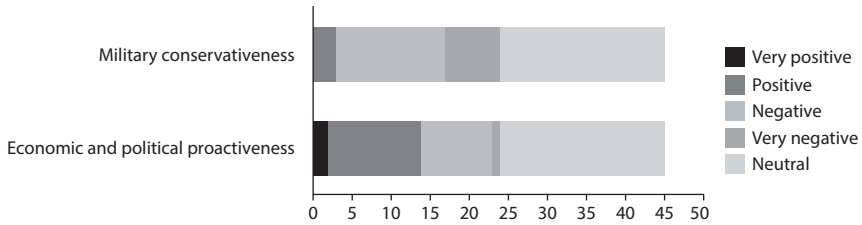


FIGURE 12.3. Audiences' attitudes toward Xi's signals.

TABLE 12.2 Comparing the trust-building of the two signals

	"Economic and political proactiveness"	"Military conservativeness"
<i>Mutual interests</i>	√	√
<i>Costly signals</i>	√	√
<i>Good understanding of interests</i>	Relatively better	Relatively worse
<i>Acceptance (of samples)</i>	Acceptance Rate	Acceptance Rate
<i>Accept</i>	56.8%	4.4%
<i>Neutral rate</i>	38.6%	73.3%
<i>Non-Accept</i>	4.5%	22.2%

benefit BRI countries. China has also stated its intention to remain militarily conservative and has made promises of no military expansion. Xi's speech in 2017 also states that China will provide protection when neighbors are threatened (Xi 2017b). This signal also fits neighboring countries' security interests.

Both "economic and political proactiveness" and "military conservativeness" are costly signals. For the signal of "economic and political proactiveness," Xi Jinping's speech on the 19th Party's Congress of Chinese Communist Party states that "it will be an era that sees China moving closer to centre stage and making greater contributions to mankind" (Xi 2017b). From 2013 to 2018, China has made direct investment for more than \$90 billion in BRI partner countries, and the annual growth rate is 5.2% (*Xinhua News* 2019a). These investments also contain the projects that relate to global governance in climate change, poverty, and marine governance (*Xinhua News* 2019b). These investments are the direct sunk cost of China's signal on economic and political proactiveness.

For the signal of military conservativeness, President Xi and other Chinese leaders have repeatedly stated China's determination of military conservativeness in many speeches internationally and domestically. For instance, Xi made a speech on the seventieth anniversary of the victory of the Anti-Fascist War, promising that China will never seek a hegemonic position or expansion of her power; China

will never impose on other people the tragic experience that China has experienced (Xi 2015). The White Papers of China's National Defense also emphasize that China adopts a defensive strategy (Press Office of Ministry of National Defense of PRC 2011, 2015, 2019). These broadcasting activities attach high audience cost to the signal of "military conservativeness."

Meanwhile, the sunk costs of "military conservativeness" are also visibly high. To reinforce the peaceful role of the BRI and its relevant actors, and to move away from geopolitical and security concerns, China emphasizes that the deployment of military forces overseas is only to deal with nontraditional security challenges along the BRI route such as maritime search-and-rescue missions, piracy, drug trafficking, and environmental risks (Chen et al. 2018). Deploying such defensive measures attaches high sunk costs to the signal of "military conservativeness."

Despite the high audience and sunk costs, these two signals are not well accepted by international audiences. Examining the samples of this research, there is still much skepticism about China's true intentions behind the signals. The vague interest boundaries of China in BRI projects is the major reason. Those commentaries examined above that are negative toward the BRI express their concerns in terms of China's "secret" motivation, such as intentionally creating "debt traps" in order to interfere in other countries' domestic affairs.

However, international audiences still respond differently to these two signals (see figs. 12.2 and 12.3). This paper argues that the signal "economic and politically proactiveness" is more readily accepted than "military conservativeness" because the former signal better fits international audiences' understanding of China's interests than the latter.

International audiences tend to interpret the signal "economic and political proactiveness" as China's quest for increasing economic and political influence internationally. The decline of US international leadership marked by the US withdrawal from several important international treaties and organizations reveals a vacuum in international leadership that worries the world because many believe in the role of great powers in global governance. China's willingness to take on more responsibilities in international affairs, no matter whether it can fulfill the vacuum left by the US or not, is good news for the world. More importantly, international audiences believe that growing international economic and political influence would largely benefit China's grand strategic goal of the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

In contrast, the signal "military conservativeness" is more confusing to international audiences. China's peaceful rising was of mutual interest to China and the rest of world fifteen years ago, but how does it fit the interests of a powerful China tomorrow, where ideological competition seems to be inevitable given China's different path of development? The skepticism expressed in the comments examined above mainly arise from China's increasing military expenditure (Liu et al. 2019), the development of China's overseas military harbors, and



an increasingly muscular stance in the South China Sea, including the denial of international arbitration, the construction of a man-made island, and other new military facilities in this area.

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been focusing on developing "blue water" capabilities to guarantee the security of the BRI (Fanell 2019). The PLAN has also established a broader "security supply chain" with Indian Ocean partners (such as Pakistan and Bangladesh) and Middle Eastern and African countries (Ma 2019), which not only helps improve its operational proficiency but also normalizes its presence in this region (Wuthnow 2017). However, many observe a rapid development of the PLAN along the BRI route, but this increasing role and presence of the PLAN is often intentionally left out of the Chinese official narratives. This lack of transparency increases skepticism about China's motivations.

### CONCLUSION

This paper starts from the puzzle of international audiences' mistrust of China's cooperative signal-sending via the BRI, and it attempts to investigate how trust can be built across different narratives. It illustrates that trust-building is a continuing process of signaling and knowledge-building. With the existence of common interests, only when the signals fit counterparties' knowledge about the signal sender can they develop a good understanding of the signal sender's cooperative interests and thus trust the latter. In this process, the signal sender's "brightness"—being honest regarding their self-interest and cooperative intentions—is the necessary condition to whether the signals can fit others' knowledge.

The two case studies help to demonstrate the dynamic nature of trust-building in this one-way signaling process. In the first case, when Zhang Qian and his delegation went to Wu Sun and other Central Asian countries/federacies, they sent costly signals by bringing a huge amount of gifts that could show the Han's determination in strategic cooperation against the Xiongnu, but the Wu Sun and others decided not to trust the Han. The Wu Sun knew the Han's interests in balancing the threat from the Xiongnu, but they were cautious about cooperating because they did not understand the capability of the Han. The Wu Sun's interests might be seriously harmed if the Han were weak and they wanted to deceive the Wu Sun to gain free-riding benefits. The Wu Sun's new knowledge about Han that fit the Han's cooperative signal was developed in the third round of signaling when Wu Sun sent envoys to the Han, which eventually led to an alliance between the Han and the Wu Sun.

In the second case, China has sent costly signals of cooperation by making huge infrastructure investments in BRI partner countries; however, it has not received the expected trust in return. International audiences of the BRI are aware of China's capabilities, but uncertain about its intentions. How and what benefits can China gain from its huge investments in BRI? This is the question that

international audiences are concerned about. Therefore, what China needs for trust-building is to further clarify its interests and intentions in the BRI projects and to keep sending cooperative signals in order to help the counterparties develop new knowledge about China and China's cooperative interests. Moreover, China needs to be cautious about the "cost" of its signals. If the cost of signals appears higher than what China stands to gain from its investments, international audiences will likely misunderstand China's cooperative interests, leading to distrust.

This paper illustrates that trust in strategic cooperation is the result of a series of signaling and knowledge-building, where the signal sender's "brightness" acts as a conditional factor. While this trust-building process can decrease the risk for cooperating states in trusting the signal sender, it cannot guarantee this trust will never be betrayed; and this betrayal that undermines the credibility of a state would have its consequences. For instance, Emperor Wu of the Han attempted to reshape the regional order in Central Asia by making alliances with the Wu Sun and other Central Asian countries and federacies. However, this alliance was not well honored by the Han later, possibly because the Xiongnu fell apart and thus were no longer a threat to the Han. However, the Han's untrustworthy behavior toward its allies had serious consequences. The Central Asian countries turned against the Han, and the Han had to wage numerous wars with enormous military expenses to keep their western border secure. Subsequently, the Great Han Empire declined in the late years of Emperor Wu's reign.

It is worth noting that this explanatory framework is only valid for a one-way signaling process where the signal sender and receiver are in an asymmetric power relation. In other words, the signal sender worries little about whether the receiver may exploit their strategic cooperation. This analytical framework is also excessively ideal as it takes states as perfect rational actors with high cognitive capability. Yet, failures in strategic calculation are not rare in diplomacy. Datta-Ray's contribution to this volume (chapter 11) presents the good example of India's diplomatic airstrikes against Pakistan in 2019, illustrating how national leaders may fail to calculate in practicing the notion of "defense without offense." Moreover, even with the wisest leaders or diplomats who are completely rational and cognitively capable, there will never be a perfect signaling process that removes all uncertainties in strategic cooperation. Leaders' wisdom is determinative to the success of practicing diplomacy, as Nehru's to No First Use and Credible Minimum Deterrence, or Mrs. Gandhi's to India's nuclear defense.

## NOTES

1. China's "going out" strategy is aimed at encouraging Chinese overseas investment. It began in the early 2000s, when China joined the World Trade Organization. The purpose is to deal with overcapacity in general manufacturing and textile production. After the tax reforms in 2008, the "going out" strategy accelerated. There have since been increasing oversea investments made in manufacturing,

real estate, and information technology, further promoting China's oversea investments. See Zhang and Liu (2019).

2. *Han Feizi* 49, Five Moths. [《韩非子·五蠹》]
3. *Zuo Zhuan*, Hostage Exchange Between Zhou and Zheng, Year Three of Yingong. [《左传·周郑交质·隐公三年》]
4. *Li Ji* 42, Da Xue. [《礼记·大学》]
5. Mencius 2, Gongsun Chou A4. [《孟子·公孙丑上》]
6. *Xunzi* 9, Humane Governance. [《荀子·王制》]
7. *Xunzi* 18, Correcting: A Discussion. [《荀子·正论》]
8. As recorded by *Han Shu* (The History of the Han Dynasty), the Xiongnu invaded the Han's borders twice yearly on average during the early years of Emperor Wu's reign. See *Han Shu* 6, "Records of Emperor Wu."
9. *Shiji* 6, the Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan.
10. The Han delegation to the West was captured by the Xiongnu before they arrived in Yuezhi territory, and Zhang Qian was kept in the Xiongnu's camps for more than ten years before he found an opportunity to escape. He escaped with only two of his retainers, and all the fortune given by the Han Emperor was lost. See *Shiji* 6, the Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan.
11. *Shiji* 6, the Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan.
12. *Shiji* 6, the Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan.
13. *Shiji* 6, the Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan.
14. *Shiji* 6, the Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan.
15. No records, however, exist showing the Xiongnu had implemented any actual assault, probably because of the newly established alliance. See *Shiji* 6, the Ranked Biographies of the Dayuan.

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