

# China's Belt and Road Initiative: Geopolitical Dimensions

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# Structure:

1. **Enduring Themes** underpinning Southeast Asia-China interactions
2. **Evolving Factors** driving China's Belt and Road initiative
1. **Emerging Effects** on Asia's geopolitical landscape

# **Enduring themes** underpinning Southeast Asia-China relations:

- \* **Power asymmetry**
- \* **Geographical proximity**
- \* **Big power politics**
  - Primarily U.S.-China competition
- \* **Institutional links** (largely via ASEAN-led regional multilateral forums)
- \* **Economic interdependence**
- \* **Unresolved maritime disputes**

# Factors driving China's "Belt and Road" Initiative

## \* Structural Factors

- Growing pressure of U.S. "rebalancing" to Asia
  - Geopolitical needs to reduce the risks of encirclement

## \* Domestic Imperatives

- CCP elite's needs to balance their pathways of legitimation
  - **Nationalist legitimation:** efforts to project an image of defending China's interests and restoring China's "rightful" historical status
  - **Performance legitimation:** efforts to create conducive conditions for ensuring a continuing economic growth

# China's security-economic nexus and Xi's "Belt and Road" initiative

## Security goals

- \* Preserving CCP's political survival
- \* Defending China's sovereignty & territorial integrity
- \* Reducing the risks of U.S.-led encirclement
- \* Preventing large-scale social unrest
- \* Containing ethnic violence in its Western periphery

## Economic goals

- \* Ensuring China's continued and balanced growth
- \* Promoting economic transformation & supply-side structural reform
- \* Creating demands for production capacity surplus & expanding markets
- \* Narrowing domestic development gap across provinces
- \* RMB internationalization
- \* Capitalizing excess forex reserves
- \* Mitigating resource insecurity

# China's two-pronged approach:

1. Cultivating “a new type of major power relations”
2. Actively pursuing “periphery diplomacy” (with “Belt and Road” initiative as its core)
  - \* The Silk Road Economic Belt
  - \* The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road

Consolidating SCO, establishing AIIB, hosting Xiangshan Forum, CICA, Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) Summit, advocating “new Asian security concept”, etc.

*aimed at transforming Asia's geo-economic landscape as a way to reshape security order over the long run, by leveraging on its relative advantage in terms of geography and a growing ability to provide regional public economic goods via widening regional connectivity*

# An emerging “3<sup>rd</sup> pillar” in Asian architecture?

	Organizing Principles	Power Relations
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Pillar</b> - U.S.-led alliance system	<b>Collective defense</b> - Threat-based	- Asymmetric bilateralism - U.S.-dominated ( <b>U.S. Plus</b> )
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Pillar</b> - ASEAN-led regional multilateralism	<b>Cooperative security</b> - Norms-based (the ASEAN Way)	- Sovereign equality - Institutionally, centered and “led” by small states ( <b>ASEAN Plus</b> )
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Pillar</b> - China-centered regional arrangements & initiatives	<b>“Common destiny”</b> - <u>Remunerative-based</u> , with emphasis on <i>geography</i> (Asia) and <i>identities</i> (“developing countries” with “diverse civilizations” & a common need for development)	- Interdependence - China-centered ( <b>China Plus</b> )

# ASEAN States' Trilemmas

*- Striking a balance across policy tradeoffs*

## \* **Development**

- ❑ Economic benefits crucial for individual ASEAN countries' domestic development (& elites' political relevance)

## \* **Sovereignty & security**

- ❑ Concerns about the potential implications of MSR for their own national sovereignty & security interests

## \* **Strategic position**

- ❑ Fundamentally, about one's own alignment position and long-term strategic maneuverability