

# DIME

## Not just an acronym

by MSgt Matthew L. Higgins

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a complex, multidimensional concept that has drastically changed the global landscape. The vastness of BRI requires the United States to take a holistic view to clearly identify the associated implications and opportunities in this ambitious global strategy designed to cement China as the world's dominant superpower. This initiative is the most ambitious global move that the world has witnessed since the end of World War II. To understand the scope and complexity of Chinese dominated expansion, the United States must adopt a comprehensive national strategy that carefully balances all instruments of national power. A full governmental approach that leverages each requisite government agency in a time and manner that is advantageous to their abilities is required for the United States to successfully draft, implement, and maintain a strategy that enables the country to compete with China and more specifically, the BRI. The United States is lacking a comprehensive, concerted approach, framed by a unifying strategy that leverages all available public and private resources to ensure the Nation remains the dominant global leader while also furthering its strategic goals. The instruments of national power are commonly discussed in professional military education and individually throughout the government apparatus. Many in military circles are familiar with programs, studies, and the theoretical application of diplomacy, information, military, and economic, but a much wider and coordinated implementation is required for the United States to be successful in competing with China and maintaining our superpower status. If China were to replace the United States as the domi-

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nant global authority, the world order as we know it would be replaced by an oppressive, authoritarian communist model where the values of democracy, freedom, equality, justice, and basic human rights would be non-existent.

### Diplomacy

The first and arguably most important instrument to be leveraged in Chinese relations is diplomacy. The United States maintains a robust government that employs experts and agencies that are specialized in every corner of the diplomatic relations world. The United States Department of State (DOS) is the lead agency for carrying out the diplomatic means of the country. The DOS mission is stated as, "The U.S. Department of State leads America's foreign policy through diplomacy, advocacy, and assistance by advancing the interests of the American people, their safety and economic prosperity."<sup>1</sup> Notably, the DOS is only as successful as foreign governments will allow. China poses many diplomatic challenges for the United States; to successfully compete with China, the DOS and other national agencies, such as the Office of the President of the United States of America, should work in concert with one another to deliver a well developed and implemented plan. The Chinese have a long history of not following through with their diplomatic promises, regularly conducting deception operations in lieu of employing legitimate diplomatic means.<sup>2</sup> One fact that plagues America's ability to maintain credibility and assurances is the high

rate of turnover with ambassadors, presidents, and other key diplomats. The current administration's policies can be drastically altered or changed with the appointment of a different diplomat to the post, a newly elected president, or even a change in the national objectives of either of the nations.

Recommendations to effectively utilize the diplomatic arm of the United States Government include: strengthening current alliances and cultivating new alliances that are vital to national interests and strategic goals. Although the United States has adopted more of a hardline stance on certain aspects with our allies, it is crucial for these ties with key allies to be reinvigorated and revitalized. Various agreements that were negotiated with previous administrations have since been renegotiated or withdrawn from because of perceived unequal terms and fairness for the United States. Whereas this may be true in some instances, agreements that are not evenly split with incentives for both sides are still needed to maintain strong unshakable alliances, especially during times of major global change. Examples include trade agreements, defense spending for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty.<sup>3</sup> Each strategic partner should receive an individualized approach to ensure that our collective needs are aligned and in the best interest of both countries. Without solid alliances and agreements, the implementation of BRI projects and stronger bonds with increased reliance on Beijing is more

likely to occur. Our allies and other nations need reassurance that America is in it for the long game and will continue to provide a viable alternative to a Chinese-dominated world order. Offering incentives to other countries promotes advantageous outlooks for partnering with America. Incentives could include favorable trade terms, military partnerships, U.S. sponsored educational programs, joint infrastructure and energy projects, etc. U.S. alliances such as those participating in the Blue Dot Network are crucial to strengthening allied resolve and competing with BRI projects across the globe.<sup>4</sup> Many of the strategic decisions regarding allies and treaties between the United States and other nations have drastically changed during the last three years. Although the reasons for these actions remain ambiguous, the United States should strategically forecast its long-term goals and not rely on near-sighted band-aids that will be pulled by a future administration.

### Information

The use of information as an instrument of national power is one of the most crucial, cost-effective, and practical means of furthering American interests around the world. This includes the military's information operations campaigns but also goes well beyond as it supports policy objectives across all domains simultaneously. To be effective, information needs to be well focused, coordinated, and distributed to three major audiences. First, the American public should be kept informed by transparent government communications and intentions when these do not obstruct or harm national security. In a world that is plagued with propaganda and deliberate disinformation to support personal agendas, it is crucial to educate the public on these monumental issues that put the Nation at risk. Second, our allies and potential allies across the world need to be aware of Chinese intentions and the consequences of poorly or deceptively constructed deals and interactions. Third, informing and educating Chinese citizens on opportunities beyond an intrusive and oppressive communist

world are possible.<sup>5</sup> Information must be shared across all the aforementioned populations, encompassing a rudimentary understanding of China's BRI that would increase understanding, dispel misconceptions, and avoid potential negative consequences.

Additionally, exploiting and debunking Chinese information operations in order to inform the rest of the world on Chinese intentions would shed light on deceptive tactics and China's global dominance goal. Using historical and recent examples of China's duplicitous behavior and hypocritical procedures dealing with crisis situations and political unrest show how a world dominated by China would look for any poten-

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tial adversaries. Examples include the People's Republic of China's (PRC) handling of unrest in Hong Kong, proof of civil rights violations, speech censoring/social engineering, and the incarceration or disappearance of political opponents. Exposing China for who they really are could drastically shape the world's perspective of exactly who they are siding with when entering into agreements and alliances with the People's Republic of China. If done correctly, with collective prosperity as the goal and not to just serve a sole American agenda, this could greatly enhance the propensity for more prosperous and well-informed alliances beyond the BRI deals. The ability of the United States to effectively employ soft power tactics is essential to produce long-term success in the information spectrum. In this context, "Soft power is the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion."<sup>6</sup> The United States has been a long-lasting example of what is possible in a free and dynamic civil society. By improving and reinvigorating this legacy, the

United States can shine through as "the alternative" through practices, policies, and civil liberties that are a possibility for all people in all nations. Educating developing countries on contract negotiations, quality control, fair business practices, and additional items will allow them to analyze and validate contracts and agreements prior to being coerced or persuaded without understanding the entire process or situation.

### Military

The military has already begun a drastic shift to better prepare for the Chinese pacing threat. The notion of United States military supremacy across all domains is no longer valid. During

the past three years, the United States has published multiple documents that highlight the Chinese threat and a renewed focus to orient the country's government agencies in a specific, unified direction. Through the development and distribution of several key documents and strategies including the *2017 National Security Strategy*, *2018 National Defense Strategy*, *2018 National Military Strategy*, and the *2019 DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, activities can be clearly delineated, approached, and solved with a unified effort of all security, intelligence, and defense stakeholders. As stated in the *National Defense Strategy*, "the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition* by revisionist powers."<sup>7</sup> The latest *National Defense Strategy* discusses current analysis of the strategic environment, outlining the DOD's objectives and strategic approach. Individual Services have translated this guidance into personalized approaches that effectively employ the Services while aligning with current and future Service tasks.

The Marine Corps' *Force Design 2030* and *2019 Commandant's Planning Guidance* are shining examples of shaping force objectives and reprioritizing needs. These documents undergird the Marine Corps' strategic vision and strategy for maintaining the Corps as the most competent and ready Service for strategic competition with the PRC. The shifts to further integrate with the Navy are imperative if the Marine Corps is to remain a viable maritime option to combat Chinese military capabilities:

With the shift in our primary focus to great power competition and a renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific region, the current force has shortfalls in capabilities needed to support emerging joint, naval, and Marine Corps operating concepts.<sup>8</sup>

However, much more is needed in order to make fixing these shortfalls in manning, training, and technology a reality. In addition to military cooperation with large defense contractors, this coordination needs to extend further into civilian information technology and cyber defense sectors. The United States already possesses greater capabilities and innovative ideas that are harbored in the private sector. The need for a more streamlined, effective, and less bureaucratic process to shorten the progression from idea or concept to production for new technologies and equipment is paramount. Simply increasing a defense budget and continually allowing government service providers or contractors to exploit the existing system by charging for uncompetitive, astronomically overpriced goods and services must cease.

### Economic

The economic tools that the United States and her allies have at their disposal provide a wide array of options to compete with China's BRI. The biggest advantage that China currently has for promoting and obtaining deals along the BRI is the lack of competition; enormous amounts of money have been invested and continue to be invested in the economies of developing nations. However, without any known or substantial alternatives to ongoing projects and investments, emerging

economies have very few reasons to refuse unfavorable terms and transactions. A 2018 study conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies reported, "The United States is no longer the major player for developing countries when it comes to trade, investments, and financing."<sup>9</sup> This alone leaves many opportunities for Chinese companies and state-owned entities to fill a void and exploit strategic locations and partnerships throughout the world. In 2006, the United States was the principal trading partner for nearly 130 nations. Ten years later, it dropped

economic principles, technology transfers, increased environmental and social safeguards, debt sustainability assessments, quality infrastructure standards, and lifecycle cost assessments. Although some developing countries and their leaders may not fully understand the importance and value to these transactions and concepts, informing them gives them those options. The various U.S. Government departments and agencies need one guiding authority to coordinate all actions to reduce unnecessary redundancy and duplicative efforts. The private sector shares an

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to 76 countries.<sup>10</sup> China capitalizes on these open sources to the full extent possible to support (PRC) interests globally. China has subverted the United States' place and become the top trading partner for 124 countries.<sup>11</sup>

The biggest tenet that is lacking from the United States approach to economically competing with China and BRI projects is the lack of focus. It is almost impossible to thrive without a comprehensive foundational strategy that complementarily aligns and simultaneously employs various tools to increase their effectiveness. The economic arm of the United States is long reaching but still requires full support and coordination with the other instruments of national power to be successful. Simply cutting off ties to China is neither feasible nor practical. The U.S. strategy should focus on current and attainable national strengths and not try to outperform China in Chinese strengths. Although the United States cannot match China in dollars spent or underbid their construction/infrastructure projects, there are many intangible assets America possesses that can make our deals more appealing than BRI proposals. The United States brings transparency, free-market

equal, if not more of a vested interest in supporting global trade agreements. A holistic approach is the key to the economic superiority of the United States and its allies.

### Conclusion

China's BRI and the instruments of U.S. national power are much too complex to be summarized in a single article. The intention of this article is to give the reader a better understanding of what the United States is currently doing in respect to each instrument and various researched recommendations for competing with China. Although some say that the United States may be too late in combating the Chinese BRI threat, this is not conclusive. The threat has been noticed, actions are being taken, and the United States will continue to do what is in the best interest of the Nation and its citizens. The BRI and Chinese/American economic engagement is not a win or lose game. It is about ensuring that the United States remains a global economic and values-based superpower for itself and all nations that deserve fair, equitable, and balanced trade/economic opportunities. However, even the best of

intentions falls short when they are conceived in a vacuum. The United States faces many challenges that although not unique are not present for the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party. The vast amount and depth of state-owned enterprises in all major industries throughout the Chinese economy allows for a centralized control of policies, trading, and customers that is not possible in capitalist economies throughout the rest of the world.<sup>12</sup> The stranglehold that the Chinese government has on its economy, military, businesses, and citizens makes it much easier to focus all actors (national instruments of power) toward a central goal, which at this time is the BRI. A unified, comprehensive strategy that maximizes the United States' vast power must be developed—and more importantly, implemented—to ensure the United States remains capable and effective as the world's dominant superpower and economic powerhouse.

#### Notes

1. Staff, "Mission," United States Department of State, available at <https://www.state.gov>.
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3. Staff, "U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Agreements," *Arms Control Association*, (April 2020), available at <https://www.armscontrol.org>.
4. Staff, "Blue Dot Network," U.S. Department of State, available at <https://www.state.gov/blue-dot-network>.
5. *The Hundred-Year Marathon*.
6. Amit Kumar Gupta, "Soft Power of the United States, China, and India: A Comparative Analysis," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, (Manju Jain, 2013).

7. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: 2018).
8. Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: March 2020).
9. Daniel Runde, Romina Bandura, and Owen Murphy, "Renewing U.S. Economic Engagement with the Developing World," CSIS, (November 2018), available at <https://www.csis.org>.
10. Ibid.
11. Daniel Runde, "A Tale of Two Paths: Divergence in Development," CSIS, (February 2017), available at <https://www.csis.org>.
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