

The Relationship between the Belt and Road Initiative and China's Regional Development Strategy: Postprint

Authors: Liu Hui, Liu Weidong

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative represents China's overall strategy for all-round opening-up and constitutes a long-term, top-level national strategy. The "Four Major Plates" constitute China's overall regional development strategy since the "Eleventh Five-Year Plan" period, while the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development and the Yangtze River Economic Belt are new regional development strategies proposed by the central government in recent years. Based on an elucidation of the core connotation and regional impact of the Belt and Road Initiative strategy, this article conducts an in-depth analysis and discussion of the logical relationships and interaction mechanisms between the Belt and Road Initiative construction and the "Four Major Plates" overall regional development strategy, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development Strategy, and the Yangtze River Economic Belt Opening-up and Development Strategy, focusing on aspects such as strategic function, spatial impact, and interaction modes. On this basis, it proposes the priorities for China's regional development strategy against the backdrop of Belt and Road Initiative construction, along with policy recommendations for further improving China's regional development strategy.

Full Text

Study on the Relationship between the Belt and Road Initiative and China's Regional Development Strategies

Liu Hui^{1, 2, 3} • Liu Weidong^{1, 2, 3}

¹Key Laboratory of Regional Sustainable Development Modeling, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China

²Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China

³College of Resources and Environment, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100049, China

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative represents China's overarching strategy for comprehensive opening-up and constitutes a long-term, top-level national strategy. Since the 11th Five-Year Plan period, China's general regional development strategy has been the "Four Major Plates" framework (Western Development, Northeast Revitalization, Central Region Rise, and Eastern Priority Development), while the coordinated development of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei and the Yangtze River Economic Belt are more recent regional strategies proposed by the central government. This paper first elucidates the core connotations and regional impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative, then systematically analyzes and discusses the logical relationships and interaction mechanisms between the Belt and Road Initiative and three major domestic strategies: the Four Major Plates regional development strategy, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development strategy, and the Yangtze River Economic Belt development strategy, focusing on strategic functions, spatial impacts, and modes of interaction. Based on this analysis, the paper proposes priorities for China's regional development strategies under the Belt and Road framework and offers policy recommendations for further refining these strategies.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Yangtze River Economic Belt, Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development, regional development strategy, policy

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The Belt and Road Initiative is a major long-term strategy proposed by the Party Central Committee and the State Council to coordinate domestic and international situations in the new era. It carries profound international and domestic implications, representing an inclusive globalization initiative to promote deeper economic development [1,2], a new model of international regional economic cooperation [3,4], and a crucial measure for implementing comprehensive opening-up and realizing the "Chinese Dream." In China's 13th Five-Year Plan, advancing the Belt and Road Initiative constitutes a key component of opening-up and development. The plan also identifies the "Four Major Plates" (Western Development, Northeast Revitalization, Central Region Rise, and Eastern Priority Development)

as the foundation for expanding new development space, guided by the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development, and the Yangtze River Economic Belt to form vertical and horizontal economic belts along coastlines, rivers, and major transport routes [5].

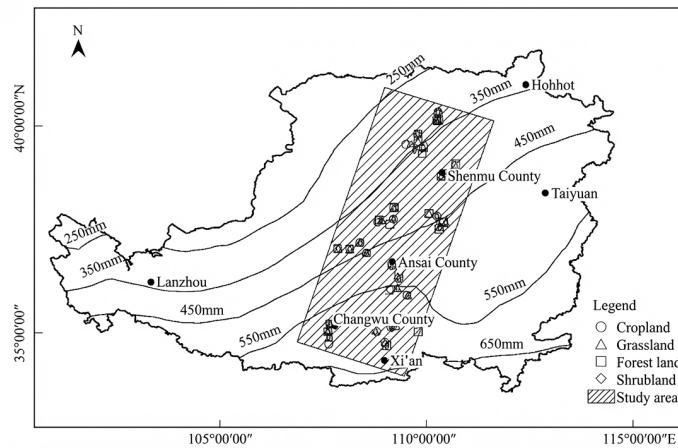


Figure 1: Figure 1

Since its proposal over three years ago, the Belt and Road Initiative has received positive responses from relevant countries along the routes and various domestic regions, attracting high attention and vigorous discussion from international society and academia, and becoming a research hotspot both domestically and abroad. Foreign research has focused primarily on the initiative's connotations [4,6-9] and its impacts on ecological environment and sustainable development [10,11]. Most domestic studies concentrate on analyzing the Belt and Road Initiative's connotations, scope, and strategic significance [3,12-16], as well as connectivity with countries along the routes [17-19], investment and trade [20-24]. A few scholars have examined the initiative's impacts on China's territorial development [25-27] and regional development [28,29].

Existing research reveals two distinct interpretations of the Belt and Road Initiative's strategic positioning. One view considers it a new model of international regional economic cooperation [3,4] and an inclusive globalization initiative [1,2]. Despite its significant regional impacts, it should not be regarded as a regional strategy [3]. Another view (held by a minority) argues that the initiative remains fundamentally a regional strategy rather than a global one, particularly targeting China's western border provinces [30]. These differing academic interpretations have created confusion among the public and local governments about the initiative's nature and have led to misinterpretations by media and international observers. Meanwhile, current Belt and Road implementation emphasizes alignment with development strategies of foreign partner countries, with limited research on how the initiative connects with domestic development strategies. These divergent understandings and lagging academic research have resulted in different perceptions and disagreements among Chinese academia and government departments regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development, the Yangtze River Economic Belt, and

other national strategies at different levels, which is not conducive to the smooth advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative. Therefore, it is urgent to further clarify the core connotations of the Belt and Road Initiative and deeply analyze its relationship with China' s regional development strategies.

1. The Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Development

1.1 Core Connotations of the Belt and Road Initiative

The core connotation of the Belt and Road Initiative is to uphold the “Silk Road Spirit” of “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit,” and to work with partner countries to build an open, inclusive, balanced, and beneficial international regional cooperation framework [31]. Through extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits, the initiative aims to further strengthen friendly exchanges and economic ties with partner countries, achieving shared interests, shared responsibilities, and a shared destiny, thereby promoting reform of the global economic governance system. Consequently, the initiative' s focus lies in China' s cooperative relations with partner countries and numerous cross-border and overseas investment projects. From a strategic perspective, the Belt and Road Initiative is China' s first truly globally-oriented national strategy.

From a spatial perspective, the Belt and Road Initiative encompasses multiple spatial dimensions and cross-scale characteristics [3]. In terms of spatial scope, it traverses the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa, crossing national borders. It is not a closed regional system but rather a global concept. Structurally, although “belt” and “road” appear as linear spatial areas in name, the Belt and Road Initiative is not a simple belt-shaped structure but rather a network structure—an open and inclusive international regional economic cooperation network. In terms of spatial hierarchy, the initiative comprises multiple levels from top to bottom, including international regional cooperation networks, major economic corridors, node cities, and industrial clusters [32]. Therefore, despite having certain regional attributes in space, its essence remains a top-level national strategy for coordinating all-round opening-up.

In terms of strategic content, the Belt and Road Initiative includes not only economic and trade cooperation, infrastructure connectivity, and cultural exchanges between countries, but also financial cooperation, diplomacy, and institutional development. Transportation, oil and gas pipelines, power, and communications infrastructure constitute priority areas, while economic, trade, and industrial cooperation form the focus, people-to-people exchanges provide the foundation, and financial cooperation serves as the guarantee. Thus, the Belt and Road Initiative is not merely an economic concept but a highly abstract and comprehensive concept.

1.2 Regional Impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative is a comprehensive opening-up strategy for China, a national strategy that all regions can participate in, particularly in economic, trade, cultural, and financial fields. Unlike the coastal opening-up strategy of the 1980s, which had clear regional targeting, the opportunities it brings to different regions are essentially the same, making it more “inclusive.” However, because the initiative involves infrastructure connectivity, particularly international land and maritime transport corridors, it contains specific spatial orientations. The “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” proposes six major economic corridors: China-Mongolia-Russia, New Eurasian Land Bridge, China-Central Asia-West Asia, China-Indochina Peninsula, China-Pakistan, and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar [31]

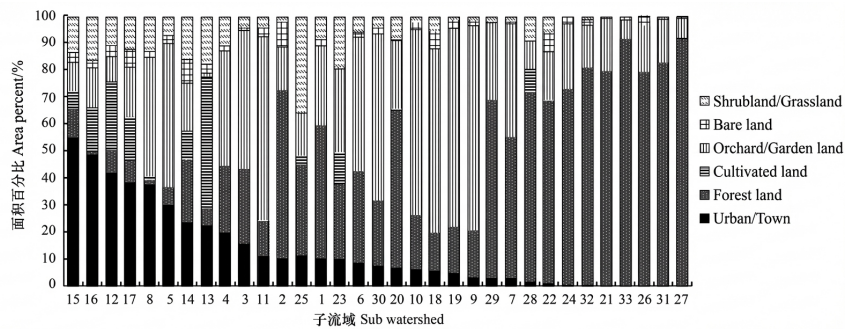


Figure 2: Figure 2

, all with clear spatial orientations whose impacts within China also demonstrate significant regional characteristics, with different corridors affecting different key regions [26].

Overall, the Belt and Road Initiative helps China achieve a more balanced regional development pattern. The New Eurasian Land Bridge and the China-Central Asia-West Asia and China-Pakistan economic corridors will transform the long-standing locational disadvantages of China’s northwestern region in opening-up, accelerating the development of Northwest China, particularly Xinjiang [26]. The China-Indochina Peninsula and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridors will facilitate the opening-up of Southwest China and promote the accelerated development of Yunnan and Guangxi. The China-Mongolia-Russia corridor will inject new impetus into the revitalization of Northeast China by enhancing its opening-up level [26]. Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative provides broader market hinterlands for coastal regions, helping to promote industrial transformation and upgrading and elevate their position in the global division of labor, thereby further enhancing their international competitiveness. Developing closer economic ties and

people-to-people exchanges with partner countries will drive cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen to become more internationally influential metropolitan economic areas, while Chongqing, Xi' an, Zhengzhou, Chengdu, Urumqi, and Wuhan will become new inland highlands for opening-up. Building national key ports and cross-border economic cooperation zones will create new economic growth poles in border areas such as Dongxing, Ruili, Erenhot, Manzhouli, and Suifenhe, promoting overall development level in border regions.

The Belt and Road Initiative also helps drive the axial development and interactive development of the “Four Major Plates,” further strengthening connections and cooperation among them. The China-Mongolia-Russia corridor closely links the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region with Inner Mongolia and Northeast China, promoting collaboration between the Northeast Plate and the coastal region. The New Eurasian Land Bridge connects China' s eastern, central, and western regions, playing an important role in promoting interaction and coordinated development between coastal and inland areas.

2. Relationship between the Belt and Road Initiative and China' s Regional Development Strategies

The Belt and Road Initiative primarily addresses inter-state cooperation, while regional development strategies are institutional arrangements to solve domestic regional imbalances and specific regional development issues [32]. Although both are major national strategies, the former represents China' s global strategy and the banner and main carrier for opening-up and development in the new era [2], while the latter mainly deals with domestic issues concerning inter-regional relations and regional development. Therefore, the Belt and Road Initiative is a more top-level and overarching strategy, whose functions and status far exceed any single domestic regional development strategy and which provides guidance and impetus for regional development strategies, while regional development strategies provide crucial support for the smooth implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative.

2.1 Relationship with the “Four Major Plates” Regional Development Strategy

The “National Economic and Social Development 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010)” explicitly proposed implementing the regional development strategy of advancing Western Development, revitalizing Northeast China' s old industrial bases, promoting the rise of the Central Region, and encouraging the Eastern Region to take the lead in development [33] (hereinafter referred to as the “Four Major Plates”). However, this strategy was formed gradually. Beginning in the 1980s, China implemented coastal opening-up and priority development strategies, followed by the “Western Development” strategy in 1999, the “North-east Revitalization” strategy in 2003, and the “Central Region Rise” strategy in

2006, eventually forming the “Four Major Plates” regional development strategy covering all mainland provinces, with the core objective of narrowing regional disparities and achieving coordinated regional development.

The Belt and Road Initiative promotes coordinated regional development by facilitating inland and westward opening-up. By improving locational conditions in China’s northwestern and southwestern regions, the initiative will enhance the opening-up level of western regions and accelerate their development. Simultaneously, it will promote the formation of new economic growth points and hotspots in inland areas, which is particularly important for revitalizing the currently growth-lacking Northeast region and developing western regions. Moreover, the Belt and Road Initiative helps drive the axial development and interactive development of the “Four Major Plates,” further strengthening connections and cooperation among them.

2.2 Relationship with the Yangtze River Economic Belt Strategy

The Yangtze River Economic Belt spans China’s eastern, central, and western regions, covering 11 provinces and municipalities including Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Chongqing, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou, with both population and GDP exceeding 40% of the national total [34]. In September 2014, the State Council officially issued the “Guiding Opinions on Promoting Yangtze River Economic Belt Development by Relying on the Golden Waterway” (State Document [2014] No. 39), establishing the Yangtze River Economic Belt as an important regional development strategy and a significant measure to promote interactive cooperation and coordinated development among the eastern, central, and western regions of the Yangtze River basin.

The Yangtze River Economic Belt and the Belt and Road Initiative are closely linked in expanding opening-up. The Yangtze River Economic Belt focuses on eastward opening led by the Yangtze River Delta and westward opening centered on Yunnan and other regions, which aligns with the Belt and Road Initiative’s promotion of all-round opening-up via both land and sea. The two strategies are interconnected, complementary, and mutually supportive, forming a new carrier and engine that traverses east-west, connects north-south, links domestic and international markets, and drives the entire country [35]. On one hand, the Belt and Road Initiative will promote close ties between the Yangtze River basin and southwestern border regions and northwestern areas, transforming the Yangtze River Economic Belt into an open cooperation corridor spanning east-west and connecting north-south, creating favorable conditions for all-round opening-up. Starting from Yunnan to connect the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar and China-Indochina Peninsula corridors will deepen opening-up in the upper Yangtze region, including Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan. Through the New Eurasian Land Bridge and the “China-Europe Railway Express,” core cities in the middle and upper Yangtze region such as Chongqing, Chengdu, and Wuhan will become new inland highlands for China’s opening-up. On the other hand, the Yangtze River Economic Belt’s strong economic power and population size

make it an important domestic support for the Belt and Road Initiative and a crucial platform for all-round opening-up and cooperation. Shanghai-centered Yangtze River Delta port cities are the pioneers and main force in building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, while the development of core cities like Chongqing, Chengdu, Wuhan, and Kunming in the middle and upper Yangtze region and the construction of inland open economic highlands constitute not only important economic support for the Silk Road Economic Belt but also essential components of the Belt and Road Initiative' s all-round opening-up.

2.3 Relationship with the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development Strategy

On April 30, 2015, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee reviewed and approved the “Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development Plan Outline,” marking the coordinated development of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei as another major national regional development strategy. The core of this strategy is to achieve differentiated regional functions for Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei through breakthroughs in key areas such as transportation integration, ecological and environmental protection, and industrial upgrading and relocation, orderly relieving Beijing of non-capital functions, adjusting economic structure and spatial structure, promoting coordinated regional development, and expanding space for Beijing' s high-end industrial development, thereby greatly enhancing China' s competitiveness and influence in the world economic system.

The Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative are both distinct and closely connected. They share the mission of promoting regional cooperation and coordinated development and can support each other. On one hand, the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor in the Belt and Road Initiative closely links the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region with Inner Mongolia and Northeast China, undoubtedly providing greater space and broader markets for Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei' s development and opening-up and expanding its driving and radiating effects. On the other hand, the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region will further enhance the international competitiveness of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei urban agglomeration and its functions as an international metropolitan area, providing strong support for the Belt and Road Initiative' s opening-up and cooperation.

3. Policy Recommendations

3.1 The Belt and Road Initiative is a Top-Level National and Global Strategy, While Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei and the Yangtze River Economic Belt are Regional Development Strategies

The Belt and Road Initiative is a major long-term global strategy of China, rooted in domestic development and focused on international cooperation. It is an international regional cooperation initiative directly involving dozens of countries. By contrast, the coordinated development of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei

and the Yangtze River Economic Belt are institutional arrangements to solve domestic regional development problems. Therefore, the Belt and Road Initiative is a more top-level and overarching strategy [2] that must be a “national strategy” rather than a “regional strategy” [3]. Consequently, regional development strategies like Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei and the Yangtze River Economic Belt should not be equated with or considered on par with the Belt and Road Initiative. Of course, because the Belt and Road Initiative involves infrastructure connectivity, particularly international land and maritime transport corridors with specific spatial orientations and scopes, it has significant regional impacts. However, these regional impacts do not make it a national regional development strategy, otherwise it would contradict the initiative’s strategic status and role and could cause concerns among participating countries [32]. Although the Yangtze River Economic Belt and Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development are also called national strategies, they are merely China’s regional development strategies whose implementation must be subordinate to the top-level design of the Belt and Road Initiative and provide necessary support for it.

3.2 The Belt and Road Initiative Requires Organic Connection with Domestic Regional Development Strategies

Centering on the six major land economic corridors and major maritime strategic channels and pivot points under the Belt and Road Initiative, future domestic regional development strategies should pay greater attention to the organic connection between domestic and international regions. Important axes that run north-south, traverse east-west, and link domestic and international markets should be given full play in leading and driving coordinated regional development. Under the Belt and Road framework, Southwest China should, through the Pearl River-Xijiang River Economic Belt and by fully utilizing the China-ASEAN cooperation platform and the China-Indochina Peninsula international economic corridor, deepen cooperation between the Pearl River Delta, Beibu Gulf, and Southwest China, making Guangdong and Guangxi the core areas for China’s opening-up to Southeast Asia, Yunnan a bridgehead for opening-up to South Asia, and forming an important gateway for the organic connection between the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road.” Northwest China should, through the New Eurasian Land Bridge, China-Central Asia-West Asia international corridor, and China-Pakistan corridor, closely integrate its development with westward opening-up, strengthen alignment between Northwest China’s development and the development needs and strategies of Central Asian countries and Pakistan, and enhance the region’s opening-up level. The three Northeastern provinces and Inner Mongolia should, through the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, build an important window for northward opening-up and create new momentum for the development of Northeast China and Inner Mongolia through comprehensive cooperation with Russia’s Far East and Mongolia. As pioneers in building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, China’s eastern coastal regions have long been the main force of China’s

export-oriented economy. By strengthening alignment with development strategies of Maritime Silk Road countries, especially ASEAN countries, and using the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as a cooperation platform, they should deepen all-round cooperation with ASEAN and further enhance their opening-up level and international competitiveness.

3.3 Enhancing the International Competitiveness of the Three Major Urban Agglomerations is Crucial for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Coordinated Development

While implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development, and the Yangtze River Economic Belt, greater attention should be paid to the transformation and upgrading of coastal developed regions to further improve the national regional development strategy. The Yangtze River Economic Belt and Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei cannot represent all of China's regional development strategies. Under the dual pressures of sluggish international economic growth, limited market expansion space, and rising domestic production factor costs, some coastal regions dominated by export-oriented economies have entered a critical period of industrial upgrading and transformation, requiring special attention in China's overall regional development strategy. Particularly, building national competitiveness to address global competition with the three major urban agglomerations of the Yangtze River Delta, Pearl River Delta, and Bohai Rim as the core should become an important component of China's regional development strategy for a considerable period.

The Yangtze River Delta and Bohai Rim are already reflected in the two major national regional development strategies of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development and the Yangtze River Economic Belt. Although the "Vision and Actions" document proposes building the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area in the Pearl River Delta region, this has not yet become an important national regional development strategy. The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area is a strategic hub for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a necessary passage connecting Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and other Belt and Road countries, and the most important strategic pivot for the country's management of the South China Sea. Therefore, the construction of the Greater Bay Area centered on the Pearl River Delta should be elevated to an important national regional development strategy as soon as possible to promote the Pearl River Delta's accelerated development into a world-class urban agglomeration and enhance the country's overall international competitiveness.

3.4 Develop a More Refined National Regional Development Strategy Under the Belt and Road Framework by Combining Administrative Regions with Differentiated Problem Areas

Under the guidance of the Belt and Road national strategy, China should develop a more refined national regional development strategy than the "Four

Major Plates” by combining administrative regions with different types of problem areas. On the basis of the “Four Major Plates,” policy-making units should be refined to establish a national regional development strategy dominated by goal orientation and integrated with problem orientation. With the overall goal of narrowing regional development gaps and promoting coordinated regional development, and with building a moderately prosperous society in all respects as the basic starting point, the national regional development strategy should be adjusted and refined promptly. Precise identification of problem areas should be conducted, with county-level administrative divisions as the basic unit for classifying regional policy zones, and corresponding fiscal, financial, land, population, and resource-environment policies should be formulated according to different zone types. Various approved “national strategies” should be reviewed to identify truly nationally significant zones of various types, and a national regional development strategy should be constructed under the Belt and Road framework and based on more refined zone types to strengthen the integrity and policy targeting of the national regional development strategy.

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Liu Hui is a professor at the Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), and a doctoral supervisor. She served as a consultant to the World Bank (2000-2005) and the Asia

Development Bank (2006-2008), and is a Guest Professor at Northwest University (2009-). Her research focuses on regional studies in China, regional development inequality, and regional development modeling. In recent years, she has directed or participated in numerous research projects, including “The Intention and Impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative,” “The Belt and Road Strategic Planning,” “Construction of Well-off Society in Poverty Regions,” “Regional Development Inequality in China,” “Modeling of Human Geography Process,” and “Major Function Zoning.” She won the Outstanding Science and Technology Achievement Prize of CAS in 2009. E-mail: liuh@igsnr.ac.cn

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