

XI JINPING'S LEADERSHIP AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER THROUGH THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

A LIDERANÇA DE XI JINPING NA MODELAÇÃO DA ORDEM INTERNACIONAL ATRAVÉS DA BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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Abstract

This article examines whether Xi Jinping's leadership in shaping the international order through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aligns with established theoretical concepts of strategic leadership.

Employing a qualitative, inductive approach, categorical and content analyses were conducted using NVivo software, which generated two word cloud diagrams. These diagrams linked 20 conceptual definitions of strategic leadership with Xi Jinping's speeches at the opening ceremonies of the BRI International Cooperation Forums (2017, 2019, and 2023), yielding 11 codes, eight of which were directly applied to the speeches.

The central argument posits that Xi Jinping's leadership aligns with established conceptualisations of strategic leadership, integrating a complex framework of vision, decision making, change management, future viability, influence, results, financial stability, and BRI values. Nevertheless, elements such as cooperation, commitment, and cultural awareness warrant further exploration, potentially informing an expanded definition of strategic leadership or an emergent leadership paradigm beyond the purely strategic.

Keywords: strategic leadership, Xi Jinping, Belt and Road Initiative

Resumo

O presente artigo tem por objetivo analisar em que medida a liderança de Xi Jinping na modelação da ordem internacional, através da Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), se alinha com os conceitos teóricos da liderança estratégica.

How to cite this article: Martins, A., (2026). *Xi Jinping's Leadership and the Reconfiguration of the International Order Through the Belt and Road Initiative*. *Revista de Ciências Militares*, May, XIV(1), 145-164. [https:// www.ium.pt/publist/](https://www.ium.pt/publist/)

Neste estudo qualitativo optou-se por uma abordagem indutiva. A análise categorial e de conteúdo foram realizadas com o auxílio do software NVIVO, que igualmente possibilitou a extração de dois diagramas de palavras. Estes diagramas relacionam-se, respetivamente, com o conjunto formado por 20 definições conceptuais de liderança estratégica e pelos três discursos proferidos por Xi Jinping na cerimónia de abertura de cada um dos três Fóruns Internacionais de Cooperação da Belt and Road Initiative realizados em 2017, 2019 e 2023. Estes diagramas de palavras auxiliaram na criação de onze códigos em que oito deles foram diretamente aplicados àqueles três discursos.

O principal argumento deste estudo destaca que a liderança de Xi Jinping na modelação da ordem internacional se enquadra na definição conceptual de estratégica. Tal é possível se se considerar a perspetiva que se funde numa teia complexa que relaciona a ação estratégica de Xi Jinping com a visão, a tomada de decisão, a gestão da mudança, a viabilidade futura, a influência e resultados, a estabilidade financeira e os valores que caracterizam a Belt and Road Initiative. Não obstante, deverão ser analisados em profundidade elementos como cooperação, compromisso e consciência cultural que poderão ser enquadrados numa nova definição conceptual de liderança estratégica ou numa nova abordagem de liderança que supere a estratégica.

Palavras-chave: *Liderança Estratégica; Xi Jinping; Belt and Road Initiative.*

1. Introduction

This article, titled “Xi Jinping’s role in shaping the international order through the belt and road initiative”, explores a topic covered in the author’s PhD in Military Sciences.

In 2021¹, we argued that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) embodied the Chinese Dream, helping to promote the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) ‘Smart Attractive Leadership’ by aligning the country’s long-term ambitions with 21st-century challenges. I also stated that the BRI could be considered a win-win strategy, as the PRC’s investment would facilitate the development and modernisation of the rail, road, oil pipeline and gas pipeline infrastructure of all countries that voluntarily joined the BRI^{2,3}. While the debt-for-equity trade-offs were well understood, these countries chose to join the BRI of their own free will.

The objective of this study is to analyse whether Xi Jinping’s leadership in shaping the international order through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aligns with strategic leadership theories, and to answer the following research question: Does Xi Jinping’s leadership in shaping the international order through the Belt and Road Initiative align with strategic leadership theories?

¹ See Martins, A. (January 2021). The European resilient response to Chinese intelligent attractive leadership. IUM Actuality, 21.

² The countries analysed in the study are the EU Member States that signed bilateral agreements to join the BRI.

³ See Martins, A. (January 2021). The European resilient response to Chinese intelligent attractive leadership. IUM Actuality, 21.

This study's scope is necessarily narrow, focusing on how the concept of strategic leadership informs China's foreign policy, as reflected in the BRI. Additionally, this study only considers Xi Jinping's opening addresses at the three International Cooperation Forums on the BRI that have been held to date. While Xi Jinping delivered several speeches at these Forums, not all of them are available in English and not all years are represented. Therefore, only the three opening ceremony speeches from 2017⁴, 2019⁵ and 2023⁶ were analysed. There were no speeches in 2021 or 2025 as the forum was not held in those years.

Another relevant consideration is that these speeches were addressed to most of the senior representatives from states and international organisations (IO) who volunteered to join the BRI.

These three speeches reveal certain patterns in Xi Jinping's discourse at each of the three International Cooperation Forums, in a specific context, namely the opening ceremonies. The speeches have been translated into English on the official website. This may constitute a limitation of this study, as the transcription process from Mandarin to English has not been reviewed.

The time frame of this study begins on 14 May 2017 and ends on 18 October 2023, corresponding to the dates of Xi Jinping's first and last speeches, respectively. The first speech, however, mentions 2013, the year that Xi Jinping unveiled the One Belt One Road initiative, which is now commonly known as the BRI. These dates also reflect the findings of a bibliometric study of leadership in the PRC which analysed 145 academic papers. This study revealed a significant increase in the number of articles published between 2013 and 2018.

A review of SCOPUS and other academic databases revealed that the majority of studies on Xi Jinping focus on one or more of the following topics: China's grand strategy and the Chinese Dream; Chinese exceptionalism; foreign policy and the transfer of power; the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its role in China's connectivity strategy. However, few articles discuss Xi Jinping's BRI policy in relation to strategic leadership, making this study both relevant and timely.

We collected twenty definitions of strategic leadership which have informed theoretical thinking and been referenced in numerous academic papers. We discussed the definitions proposed by Rowe (2001), Ireland and Hitt (2005), Guillot (2003), and Crossland, Campbell and Hill (2024) in more detail, as they offered additional insights beyond the idea that strategic leadership involves a team of strategic leaders within an organization.

The study is divided into two main chapters. The first reviews the literature on the concept of strategic leadership and the second describes the research methodology. The second chapter is subdivided into two sub-chapters: the first presents and analyses the findings,

⁴ See Xi Jinping's opening address at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation on 14 May 2017, available from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm.

⁵ See Xi Jinping's opening address at the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation on 26 April 2019, available from <https://china.usc.edu/xi-jinping-keynote-speech-opening-second-belt-and-road-forum-april-26-2019>.

⁶ See Xi Jinping's opening speeches at the third Belt and Road International Cooperation Forum on 18 October 2023, available from <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n101/2023/1018/c124-1175.html>.

while the second considers their implications. The conclusions and recommendations for future studies are presented at the end.

The review itself has limitations, one of which relates to the primary sources. The original speeches by Xi Jinping in Mandarin were not analysed, as only official English translations were consulted. Furthermore, the theoretical concepts included in the literature review were mostly developed by authors in a Western cultural environment. This may limit the applicability of the findings to leaders from non-Western cultures, or prevent the findings from being generalised.

2. Literature review

A review of the literature⁷ indicates that the term ‘strategic leadership’ is frequently used to describe individuals in the highest positions within an organisation. These strategic leaders are characterised by their vision, the authority with which they make decisions, and their influence over the organisation as a whole. However, this concept should not be confused with supervisory leadership⁸, which primarily involves providing guidance, feedback and support (House & Aditya, 1997).

Four other approaches are worthy of mention, as they introduce additional elements to the central concept of a group of strategic leaders and their characteristics. These works include: Rowe (2001), which links visionary leadership to management leadership; Ireland and Hitt (2005), which focuses on change management; Guillot (2003), which also considers

⁷ Some of the most relevant works in this field include: Hambrick, D. C. (2007). Upper echelons theory: An update. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(2), 334–343; DeChurch, L. A., Hiller, N. J., Murase, T., Doty, D., & Salas, E. (2010). Leadership across levels: Levels of leaders and their levels of impact. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21(6), 1069–1085; Hitt, M. A., Haynes, K. T., & Serpa, R. (2010). Strategic leadership for the 21st century. *Business Horizons*, 53(6), 437–444; Hernandez, M., Eberly, M. B., Avolio, B. J., & Johnson, M. D. (2011). The loci and mechanisms of leadership: Exploring a more comprehensive view of leadership theory. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(6), 1165–1185; Serfontein, J., & Hough, J. (2011). Proposed model of the impact of strategic leadership on operational strategy and organisational performance of business organisations in South Africa. *Corporate Ownership & Control*, 8(3), 443–451; Strand, R. (2014). Strategic leadership of corporate sustainability. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 123(4), 687–706; Pitelis, C. N., & Wagner, J. D. (2019). Strategic shared leadership and organizational dynamic capabilities. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(2), 233–242; Samimi, M., Cortes, A. F., Anderson, M. H., & Herrmann, P. (2022). What is strategic leadership? Developing a framework for future research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 33(4), Article 101539; Kebede, D. A., Werke, S. Z., & Kebede, T. A. (2024, October 30). Strategic leadership practices in emerging economies: A systematic review and empirical investigation. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11(1), Article 2416870; Singh, A., & Jha, S. (2024). Strategic leadership and team innovation: A qualitative study from the lens of leader-member exchange. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 73(7), 2254–2283; Worku Lemlemu Ferede, Yalew Endawoke, & Gedif Tessema. (2024, October 23). Effects of strategic leadership on change management: Examining the mediating roles of accountability, knowledge management, and organizational culture in public organizations: A study in Central Gondar, Ethiopia. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11(1), Article 2409154; Zhou, S., Hiller, N. J., Zaccaro, S. J., Campbell, L. N., McCauley, R., Parris, T., & Klimoski, R. J. (2024). The corporate chief of staff: Strategic leadership influence from outside the spotlight. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 31(3), 289–303.

⁸ The following are some of the authors who have addressed the concept of supervisory leadership: House, R. J., & Aditya, R. N. (1997). The social scientific study of leadership: Quo vadis? *Journal of Management*, 23(3), 409–473; Boal, K. B., & Schultz, P. L. (2007). Storytelling, time, and evolution: The role of strategic leadership in complex adaptive systems. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(5), 411–428; Narayanan, V. K., & Zane, L. J. (2009). Inventing a future for strategic leadership: Phenomenal variety and epistemic opportunities. *Journal of Strategy and Management*, 2(4), 380–404; Vera, D., Bonardi, J.-P., Hitt, M. A., & Withers, M. C. (2022, March 31). Extending the boundaries of strategic leadership research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 33(2); Crossland, C., Campbell, J. T., & Hill, A. D. (2024). What is strategic leadership? In Z. Simsek, C. Heavey, & B. C. Fox (Eds.), *Handbook of research on strategic leadership in the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (pp. 2–28). Edward Elgar Publishing.

the strategic environment; as well as Crossland et al. (2024), a relatively recent study that builds on the work of the previous authors.

Ireland and Hitt (2005)⁹ define strategic leadership as a person's ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate changes that will create a viable future for the organization (Ireland & Hitt, 2005, p. 63). More recently, Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskisson (2019) refer to strategic leadership as the ability to anticipate, visualise, maintain flexibility and empower others to create strategic change when necessary. In other words, strategic leadership involves change management (Hitt et al., 2019). It is worth noting that a recent study found that strategic leadership, combined with the variables organizational culture, knowledge management and accountability, has a direct effect on change management (Worku et al., 2024). It involves aligning vision, objectives and actions, motivating employees, cultivating a supportive culture, harnessing knowledge and promoting accountability (Worku et al., 2024).

According to Hitt et al. (2019), strategic leadership is a key factor in organizational success. It consists of six components: *a)* defining the organization's strategic vision; *b)* developing and maintaining the organization's core competencies; *c)* developing human and social capital; *d)* cultivating an effective organisational culture; *e)* promoting ethical practices; and *f)* implementing balanced oversight mechanisms. Leaders should therefore be aware of the following principles: *a)* goal-oriented growth; *b)* knowledge management; *c)* leveraging human capital; *d)* cultivating an effective organisational culture; and *e)* future orientation (Ireland & Hitt, 2005).

Rowe (2001) offers a different perspective on strategic leadership to Ireland and Hitt (2005), emphasising the importance of conscious decisions that consider both the present and the future. Rowe (2001) defines strategic leadership as "the ability to influence others to voluntarily make day-to-day decisions that enhance the long-term viability of the organization, while at the same time maintaining its short-term financial stability" (Rowe, 2001, pp. 81-82). Like Ireland and Hitt (2005), Rowe (2001) acknowledges that strategic leadership encompasses ethical behaviour.

Rowe (2001) identified the ability to influence employees (whether subordinates, peers or superiors) to make voluntary decisions that improve the organization as another characteristic of strategic leadership. This is the most important characteristic of strategic leadership and requires a shared vision of the organization's identity among all its members. Rowe (2001) argues that strategic leadership combines visionary and managerial leadership¹⁰ in a synergistic way, combining a future-oriented vision (long-term viability and risk-taking) with a rational approach to the present (short-term financial stability). This can be summarised as making short-term decisions while considering long-term consequences. Rowe also

⁹ This study is a comparative analysis of the global strategic environment in the transition from the 20th to a 21st century economy driven by globalisation.

¹⁰ According to Rowe (2001), managerial leadership is similar to the concept of transactional leadership.

states that strategic decisions impact the entire organization and its internal and external environments.

Rowe (2001) states that visionary leaders are associated with creativity, innovation, chaos¹¹ and challenging the status quo, whereas managerial leaders are associated with stability and maintaining the status quo. This idea is consistent with that of Boal and Schultz (2007), who argue that strategic leadership strikes a balance between stability and disorder.

Rowe (2001) also compares Kotter's (1990) concepts of leadership and management with those of visionary and managerial leadership. In other words, visionary leaders deal with change¹², whereas managerial leaders deal with complexity. Furthermore, this definition of strategic leadership assumes that leaders understand the strategic process and can manage two types of change: organizational change and changes in the internal and external environments.

Guillot (2003) offers an alternative view of strategic leadership, defining it as "the ability of an experienced, senior leader who has the wisdom and vision to create and execute plans and make consequential decisions in the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous strategic environment" (Guillot, 2003, p. 68). Ho, Lam and Law (2023) agree that strategic leadership can improve organizational performance and enable organizations to compete in volatile and turbulent environments. According to Guillot (2003), however, strategic leadership involves setting goals, selecting optimal courses of action and utilising the most effective methods to develop and implement plans. This requires making informed decisions in different strategic environments and contexts that account for the risks involved. According to Guillot (2003), strategic decisions are influenced by the strategic environment, which consists of four interacting components: *a)* the national security environment, *b)* the internal environment, *c)* the international environment, and *d)* the military environment. Guillot (2003) concludes that strategic leadership requires a transition from what is known to what is possible.

For Crossland et al. (2024), strategic leadership "(...) is the study of the most senior leaders of an organization who have overall decision-making responsibility for the enterprise, and who are involved in activities such as building a shared vision for the organization, managing stakeholders, creating and implementing product-market strategies, and optimizing organizational structures" (Crossland, Campbell, & Hill, 2024, p. 3).

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, inductive approach. NVIVO data analysis software was used to analyse and categorise each of the twenty conceptual definitions of strategic leadership. These definitions were then used to create a word cloud diagram, which generated eleven codes. Seven codes were applied directly and adapted for a content analysis of the three speeches. Although a word cloud was created for all three speeches, the 2017 speech

¹¹ Boal & Schultz (2007) support the idea that chaos is essential for creating change.

¹² Rowe (2001) argues that change is revolutionary rather than evolutionary.

served as a connection between the codes derived from the strategic leadership definitions and the speeches' content.

3.1. Presentation and discussion of findings

A review of literature on strategic leadership and the twenty definitions of strategic leadership identified reveals that the role of Xi Jinping's leadership in shaping the international order through the BRI cannot be adequately captured by a single definition or conceptual framework, as this would oversimplify the analysis. This conclusion is drawn from the diversity of traditional and modern definitions of strategic leadership, which reflect common ground rather than consensus. The twenty definitions of strategic leadership identified between 1996 and 2024 (see Table 1) demonstrate this diversity.

Table 1 – Conceptual definitions of Strategic Leadership

Works	Conceptualisations of Strategic Leadership
Finkelstein, Hambrick, and Cannella (1996) citado por Samimi, Cortes, Anderson, & Herrmann (2022)	"The study of executive leadership from a strategic choice perspective, or more concisely, strategic leadership, focuses on the executives who have overall responsibility for an organization — their characteristics, what they do, how they do it, and particularly, how they affect organizational outcomes. The executives who are the subjects of strategic leadership research can be individuals (e.g., CEOs or division general managers), groups (top management teams), or other governance bodies (e.g., boards of directors)"
House & Aditya (1997, pp. 444 - 445)	"Strategic leadership is directed toward giving purpose, meaning, and guidance to organizations. This is accomplished by the provision of a vision of the organization which has inspirational appeal to members of the organization and to external constituencies on which it is dependent"
Rowe (2001, pp. 81-82)	"Strategic leadership is the ability to influence others to voluntarily make day-to-day decisions that enhance the long-term viability of the organization, while at the same time maintaining its short-term financial stability"
Denis, Lamothe, & Langley (2001, p. 810)	"First, we view strategic leadership as a <i>collective</i> phenomenon to which different individuals can contribute in different ways. Secondly, we view strategic leadership from a <i>processual</i> viewpoint in which the focus is more on the <i>actions</i> of people in leadership positions than on demographics, personality, or cognition. Thirdly, strategic leadership is viewed as a <i>dynamic</i> phenomenon in which participants, roles, and influences evolve over time. Finally, strategic leadership is seen as a <i>supraorganizational</i> phenomenon in which leadership roles and influences on them can extend beyond focal organizational boundaries"
Boal & Hooijberg (2001, p. 515; 540)	"(...) the essence of strategic leadership involves the capacity to learn, the capacity to change, and managerial wisdom" "(...) the cognitive complexity, social intelligence, and behavioral complexity of strategic leaders positively affect the essence of strategic leadership"
Guillot (2003, p. 68)	"Strategic leadership as the ability of an experienced, senior leader who has the wisdom and vision to create and execute plans and make consequential decisions in the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous strategic environment"
Vera & Crossan (2004, p. 223)	"Strategic leadership theory refers to the study of people at the top of the organization"

[Cont.]

Boal (2004) citado por Narayanan & Zane (2009) e por Samimi, Cortes, Anderson, & Herrmann (2022)	“Strategic leadership is a series of decisions and activities, both process-oriented and substantive in nature, through which, over time, the past, the present, and the future of the organization coalesce. Strategic leadership forges a bridge between the past, the present, and the future, by reaffirming core values and identity to ensure continuity and integrity as the organization struggles with known and unknown realities and possibilities. Strategic leadership develops, focuses, and enables an organization's structural, human, and social capital and capabilities to meet real-time opportunities and threats. Finally, strategic leadership makes sense of and gives meaning to environmental turbulence and ambiguity, and provides a vision and road map that allows an organization to evolve and innovate”
Elenkov, Judge, & Wright (2005, p. 666)	“We define strategic leadership as the process of forming a vision for the future, communicating it to subordinates, stimulating and motivating followers, and engaging in strategy-supportive exchanges with peers and subordinates”
Ireland & Hitt (2005, p. 63)	Strategic leadership is “a person's ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate changes that will create a viable future for the organization”
Boal & Schultz (2007, p. 412)	“(…) strategic leadership pushes organizations to the “edge of chaos” and out of stasis; without it no significant change can emerge. Strategic leadership promotes “strange attraction” in organizations, providing balance between the inertia of Weberian-style bureaucracy and anarchy, resulting in the ordered and fluid responsiveness of innovative and creative organization”
Burgelman & Grove (2007, p. 967)	“(…) we propose that strategic leadership — how top management designs the strategy-making process — is the means with which leadership style exerts its influence on corporate longevity”
Finkelstein et al. (2009) citado por Kebede, Werke, & Kebede (2024)	Strategic leadership as the ability of executives to influence the organization's strategic direction and performance through their decisions and actions
Tutar, Altınöz, & Çakıroğlu (2011, p. 1381)	“Strategic leadership is to establish a strategy by properly analyzing the interior and exterior environment in which the organization exists, implementing the right strategy at the right time, evaluating and acting the appropriate behavior suitable for the current environment” “(…) the strategic leadership could be defined as the ability to make a strategic choice” “(…) strategic leadership designates to provide a competitive advantage in the long term and to maintain this advantage as a target. The basic objective of the strategic leadership is to continue its existence in the long term in compliance with the basic objectives of the business”
Serfontein & Hough (2011, p. 443)	“Strategic leadership is therefore the ability of the leaders to create and re-create reasons for the organization's continued existence”
Carter & Greer (2013, p. 2)	“(…) we will view strategic leadership as being concerned with the leadership “of” organizations as opposed to “in” organizations”
Samimi, Cortes, Anderson, & Herrmann (2022, p. 3)	“(…) we define strategic leadership as the functions performed by individuals at the top levels of an organization (CEOs, TMTmembers, Directors, General Managers) that are intended to have strategic consequences for the firm”

which will help make the BRI a *road of innovation* and a road of prosperity. These practices were mentioned as contributing to friendship, mutual development, peace, harmony and a better future.

In 2023, Xi Jinping said that the four pillars of the BRI spirit were an important tool for strengthening *Belt and Road cooperation*.

3.1.2. Financial stability

This code refers to a network of multilateral and national financial institutions, including the China Development Bank, the Export-Import Bank of China and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. It also covers funding mechanisms such as the Silk Road Fund, the Belt and Road Special Lending Scheme, the Multilateral Development Financial Cooperation Centre, the IMF-China Capacity Building Centre and the Silk Road Theme Bonds. All of these institutions and mechanisms have been enhanced over time. Additionally, the PRC has issued the Guiding Principles on Financing the Development of the Belt and Road and published the Debt Sustainability Framework for Participating Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative.

These instruments have funded various projects, programmes, initiatives, forums, conferences and events covering different areas of the BRI.

3.1.3. Influence and results

In light of the focus on action in the PRC in the 2017 speech, the *influence and results code* has been subdivided into three sub-codes.

The first sub-code covers areas in which the PRC has signed cooperation agreements. This includes projects involving hardware connectivity in sectors such as transport, infrastructure and energy, as well as software connectivity in the telecommunications sector. It also covers cooperation plans and projects in areas such as economic development, trade, industry, e-commerce, the green economy and railway freight transport, to name a few.

The second sub-code outlines the PRC's efforts to establish mutually beneficial business partnerships with BRI countries, promoting mutual growth through trade and investment. It also aims to expand market access in order to attract foreign investment and generate prosperity, thereby contributing to the development of the Belt and Road Free Trade Network. In 2017, cooperation agreements were signed with over 30 countries and the China International Import Expo was announced for 2018. In 2019, the PRC announced plans for a new free trade zone including shipping ports. The PRC also described itself as a global factory and global market committed to balanced trade. In 2023, Xi Jinping first mentioned plans to establish e-commerce pilot zones, stating that these plans had already led to the construction of new airports, ports, roads and industrial parks. These investments have helped to develop new economic corridors and new growth indicators that are evolving into new trade routes. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section. It was also announced that the Global Digital Trade Expo would be held annually.

The third sub-code relates to the PRC's cooperation with third countries in the field of innovation. These efforts culminated in the launch of the Belt and Road Science, Technology

and Innovation Cooperation Action Plan (BRSTICAP) in 2017. This plan was subsequently expanded in 2019 and again in 2023. In the first two speeches, the plan included four initiatives: the Science and Technology People-to-People Exchange Initiative; the Joint Laboratory Initiative; the Science Park Cooperation Initiative; and the Technology Transfer Initiative. A fifth initiative, the Global Initiative for Artificial Intelligence Governance, was added in 2023.

Additionally, the PRC has stated its intention to encourage participation in international exchange programmes in all of its speeches. Specifically, in 2017, the PRC announced plans to launch a big data service platform focusing on ecological and environmental protection, and to establish an international coalition on green development. The PRC also pledged to support other countries in addressing climate change. In 2019, it was announced that these plans had been implemented through the Belt and Road Initiative Talents Exchange Programme, and that the exchange programmes would be extended to the cyber sector. Two new areas were added that year: the protection of intellectual property and green development. These were expanded to include infrastructure, energy and transport in 2023. Similarly, in 2019, support was expressed for the development of the BRI International Green Development Coalition; the organization of the BRI Green Innovation Conference; and the implementation of the BRI Green Investment Principles. The organization of the BRI Conference on Science and Technology Exchange was mentioned for the first time in 2023.

3.1.4. Future viability

This code primarily concerns the establishment of a global connectivity network that combines political, commercial, financial, infrastructural and interpersonal dimensions as fundamental to the principle of win-win cooperation. In his 2023 speech, Xi Jinping stated that this global connectivity network was formed by establishing land and sea economic corridors, such as: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor; the New Eurasian Land Bridge; the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor; the new logistics corridor spanning the Eurasian supercontinent and the new international land-sea trade corridor. These include international railway transportation routes such as: the China-Europe railway; the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway; the China-Laos railway; the Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)-Djibouti railway and the Hungary-Serbia railway. They also include the rebuilding of airports and ports, such as Gwadar and Piraeus, as well as oil pipelines and the power grid. In 2023, plans were made to incorporate ports, ships and commercial services into the Maritime Silk Road and to establish the Air Silk Road.

Despite this physical connectivity, the BRI has evolved towards institutional connectivity based on knowledge management and intercultural exchange. The aim is to strengthen the Educational Silk Road and the Health Silk Road respectively. The Educational Silk Road has

provided scholarships to promote educational exchange¹⁴, particularly in tourism¹⁵, the arts¹⁶, theatre¹⁷ and film, among other areas. In 2019, the organization of the International Youth Forum on Creativity and Heritage and the “Chinese Bridge” summer camps was announced. In 2023, the Silk Road Community Building Initiative and the Brightness Action Program were also mentioned.

With regard to the Health Silk Road, Xi Jinping outlined the cooperation that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1.5. Change management

This code refers to the increase in the number of States voluntarily joining the initiative, agreements signed with international organizations and the creation of specific platforms for multilateral cooperation. In 2017, Xi Jinping stated that more than 100 countries had joined. By 2019, this figure had risen to over 150 States and IO, and by 2023, it remained the same for States, but the number of IO had increased to over 30, and more than 20 dedicated platforms for multilateral cooperation had been created.

This code refers to the various expansions of the BRI, including physical and institutional connectivity. The physical network consists of land and sea economic corridors, as well as international shipping routes. The institutional network comprises various projects, initiatives, programmes, forums, conferences and events that have been planned and developed. In 2017, discussions were held regarding the establishment of the Belt and Road Free Trade Network, the Educational Silk Road, the Health Silk Road and the Digital Silk Road. In 2019, the topics discussed included the Clean Silk Road initiative, the creation of the Silk Road of Innovation, the ongoing development of the Digital Silk Road, BRSTICAP and the Silk Road Programme, and the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative Talents Exchange Programme, as well as the Green Silk Road Envoys Programme. In 2023, discussions focused on extending BRSTICAP and the Silk Road Programme. This may have encouraged other States to voluntarily join the BRI.

3.1.6. Vision

The *vision* code was subdivided into two sub-codes.

Regarding the first sub-code, which describes humanity as a community with a shared future, in 2017 Xi Jinping called the BRI the project of the century. Founded on the principle of win-win cooperation, it would benefit everyone involved and be driven by innovative, coordinated, green, open and inclusive development. In 2019, he reiterated the BRI's connection to the past, present and future, relating it to the ongoing process of economic

¹⁴ In 2023, Xi Jinping confirmed the existence of the Scholarship Silk Road Program.

¹⁵ In 2023, Xi Jinping highlighted this area with the establishment of the Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums, the Silk Road International Library Alliance and the International Tourism Alliance of Silk Road Cities.

¹⁶ In 2023, Xi Jinping highlighted this area with the establishment of the Silk Road International Arts Festival.

¹⁷ In 2023, Xi Jinping highlighted this area with the establishment of the Silk Road International League of Theaters.

globalisation, the need to improve the global governance system and people's desire for a better life. A people-centred approach was adopted that year, and this was further developed in 2023. It is grounded in the principle that humanity is a community with a shared future¹⁸, and takes a development-oriented approach centred on cooperation. In his most recent speech, Xi Jinping correlated these two aspects, stating that this (vision of) humanity requires development in order to thrive.

The second sub-code refers to *development*. In 2017, the topic was addressed with the terms global development and shared development, and in 2019 the terms common development, sustainable development and peaceful development were also mentioned. In 2023, these terms were combined for the first time to create the term high-quality development. These terms not only convey commitment, but also emphasise the importance of strengthening that commitment to achieve high-quality results. They also reflect the importance of integrated and targeted efforts.

However, there was a significant increase in the use of the term Belt and Road Cooperation from the first to the second and third speeches. In the author's opinion, this term encompasses the two sub-codes and constitutes the core concept underlying Xi Jinping's leadership approach. In other words, if humanity is to become a community with a shared future, it is essential that all members cooperate with one another in order to promote development.

The Belt and Road Cooperation also encompasses the codes vision and values.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that the event itself is called the International Forum on Belt and Road Cooperation.

3.1.7. Team of high-level executives

This code reflects the shift in focus from Xi Jinping to the joint participation of all High-Level Representatives from the States and IO that voluntarily joined the BRI.

In 2017, Xi Jinping mentioned that he had proposed the creation of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in 2013, initially calling them One Belt One Road, before later renaming them the BRI. In his subsequent speeches, he predominantly used the first-person plural pronoun "we" and the word "together", introducing the slogan "planning together, building together, and benefiting together" in 2023. These terms are intended to encourage the High Representatives of the BRI participating States to commit making "joint efforts" to develop and enhance the project. These terms are also reflected in the titles of the three speeches, as shown in Table 2.

¹⁸ In 2019, Xi Jinping stated that "we remain committed to peaceful development and will endeavor to build a community with a shared future for mankind", and, in 2023, that "We have learned that humankind is a community with a shared future".

Table 2 – Titles of the three speeches delivered by Xi Jinping at the opening ceremonies of the three Belt and Road Initiative International Cooperation Forums

1st Conference - 2017	Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road
2nd Conference - 2019	Working Together to Deliver a Brighter Future For Belt and Road Cooperation
3rd Conference - 2023	Building an Open, Inclusive and Interconnected World for Common Development

However, Xi Jinping has not relinquished the responsibility of being the chief representative of the group of world leaders. In 2023, he stated that “China can only do well when the world is doing well. When China does well, the world will get even better”. This statement also appears to emphasise how the world is interconnected with the PRC, which is seen as the North Star of global development.

3.2. Discussion of findings

Contrary to what the literature review suggests, imply that the BRI is not being led by a team of high-level executives with formal authority. Leadership is instead centralised in Xi Jinping as the High Representative of the PRC, who has the foresight to recognise that developing the BRI requires the involvement of all High Representatives of the States and IO that support it. In other words, Xi Jinping encourages all participants to contribute actively, making it clear that the BRI cannot move forward without them. This could be interpreted a motivational strategy, an essential element of strategic leadership.

In his speeches, Xi Jinping conveys a long-term, future-oriented vision of the BRI by communicating its values and sharing its vision, while also ensuring its financial stability and continuity. He presents the results that have contributed to developing the new global connectivity network and the BRI's success. At the same time, he establishes a connection between the past, present and future by emphasising what has been achieved, what is currently being done and what can be accomplished in all his speeches. Additionally, it can be inferred that, although the codes are distinct, they are also mutually reinforcing and complementary, as illustrated in Figure 3.

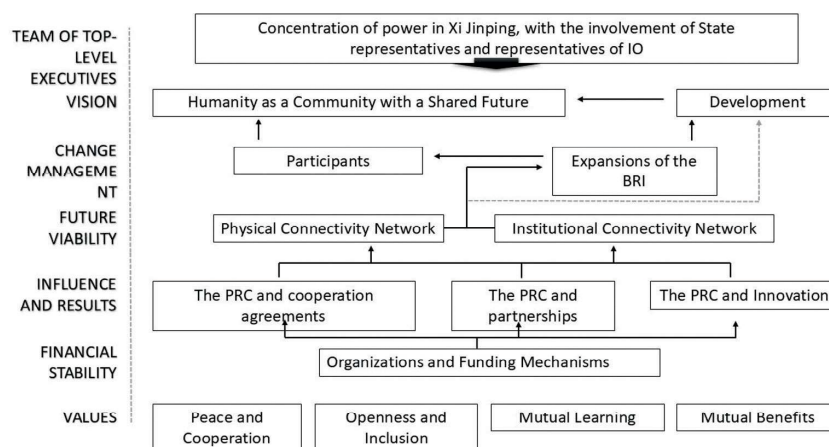


Figure 3 – Diagram showing the codes and sub-codes applied to Xi Jinping’s three speeches

Figure 3 shows that the BRI is founded on values that nurture culture, particularly its “organizational” identity. The value of peace and cooperation expresses respect for the individuality of each participating State and commitment to non-interference in their sovereign affairs. The value of openness and inclusion acknowledges the cultural differences between States but also encourages them to work together to create a new global connectivity network and ensure the sustainability of the BRI. The value of mutual learning, associated with knowledge management and cross-cultural exchange, empowers participants and supports BRI development. The value of mutual benefits focuses on the idea of win-win solutions driven by innovation and prosperity, enabling the BRI to adapt to new demands. These values emphasise that strategic leadership involves the ability to learn, adapt and manage knowledge.

The financial stability of the BRI primarily rests on the institutions and funding mechanisms of the PRC, which have made it possible to develop projects, partnerships and educational and cultural exchange programmes. This is evident in the establishment of new routes and the expansion of the BRI into sectors beyond economics and trade, as well as the voluntary participation of other States and IO. In other words, financial stability drives *influence and results*, as well as *change management*, as argued by Ireland and Hitt (2005) and by Hitt et al. (2019). Together, these components contribute to the viability of the BRI, highlighting that interconnectedness is the result of joint and collective efforts, but also of an integrated vision of humanity as a community with a shared future.

Another relevant aspect highlighted in the literature review is the *influence and results* achieved. This study shows that these are key to the *future viability* of the BRI. Analysis of the speeches confirms the importance of this factor in establishing a new network of connectivity comprising new economic corridors, international shipping routes and infrastructure, including ports and airports.

Equally important is the management of knowledge and culture through the institutional connectivity network. Other activities include organizing conferences, events and forums; signing commitment agreements; communicating action plans, projects and initiatives; and expanding into areas such as artificial intelligence and green development. The increase in these achievements since 2017 implies that the PRC must be able to constantly adapt to new developments, which requires a deep understanding of strategic planning and strategic action.

Although these statements were not included in the analysis, they also emphasise the importance of making decisions that are based on long-term planning that are aligned with the organisational vision. This requires the ability to deal with complexity, since building a community with a shared future will only be possible through the participation, and, more importantly, the cooperation and commitment of all members of the BRI.

Furthermore, the impact of decisions made in 2017 is evident in 2023 and they are likely to produce even better results in the future, given the PRC's ongoing financial capacity. These statements align with Rowe's (2001) definition and support the idea that managerial leadership and visionary leadership can be combined under strategic leadership.

Contrary to what the literature review suggests, cooperation and commitment have been mentioned increasingly often in Xi Jinping's speeches, particularly in relation to the BRI. In other words, cooperation considered fundamental to leadership in the BRI and essential to its development, particularly in a volatile environment. This aligns with Guillot's (2003) perspective on the volatility of the strategic environment. However, it is not possible to break this down into the four elements proposed by Guillot (2023). Furthermore, based solely on the analysed documents, it is not possible to apply the author's framework for strategic leadership to this study. Further studies examining other relevant documents are needed.

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping's speeches emphasise commitment by highlighting the involvement of senior representatives from the States and IO that have joined the BRI, indicating that commitment is vital to his leadership. This combination of cooperation and commitment is reflected in the numerous cooperation agreements mentioned in the speeches and in the references to the Belt and Road Cooperation.

Another relevant aspect is the growing number of States and IO participating in the BRI, which will require cultural awareness to be included, a factor not addressed in the definitions of strategic leadership.

4. Final remarks and recommendations for future studies

Creating new physical and institutional connectivity networks by establishing economic corridors and international shipping routes, developing projects, initiatives and programmes, and organizing forums and events that expand the BRI into other areas and support its development are all steps that contribute to the goal of making humanity a community with a shared future. The BRI's cross-cutting values and the steady increase in the number of States and IO that voluntarily adhere to the initiative are also contributing factors. However, funding, which is (mainly) channelled through institutions and mechanisms controlled by

the PRC, is crucial to the initiative's success. This demonstrates the significant role that Xi Jinping's leadership through the BRI has played in shaping the international order.

However, the assumption that strategic leadership applies only to a team of high-level executives is not applicable to this study, as this would require a broader analysis that would include sources other than just the three speeches examined here.

On the other hand, the concept of strategic leadership as a complex web of interconnected elements, specifically, leaders' actions and vision, decision making, change management, future viability, influence and results, financial stability, and values of the BRI, is relevant to this study. Consequently, Xi Jinping's leadership in shaping the international order through the BRI can be considered an example of strategic leadership. However, further exploration of elements such as cooperation, commitment, and cultural awareness is needed to determine whether they should be included in a conceptual definition of strategic leadership or used to develop a conceptual approach to leadership that goes beyond strategic leadership.

This analysis could be expanded to include the speeches delivered at the opening ceremony of the Fourth International Cooperation Forum on the Belt and Road Initiative. A more comprehensive analysis of all Xi Jinping's speeches on the Belt and Road Initiative could also be included, as these could not be analysed here due to space limitations.

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