

China's digital diplomacy on Twitter: The multiple reactions to the Belt and Road Initiative

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journals.sagepub.com/home/gmc**Maximiliano Facundo Vila Seoane** 

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Abstract

This article examines three aspects of China's digital diplomacy efforts about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Twitter between February 9th 2019 to January 3rd 2020. First, it explores the frequency and geographical distribution of tweets about the BRI. Second, it scrutinises the main topics discussed in such tweets. Finally, it describes the actors producing BRI content. Results show that Chinese digital diplomacy has been proactive on Twitter, driven by the posting practices of its main international broadcasting organisations and BRI partners. As such, China's digital diplomacy is becoming more relational. However, the open nature of Twitter also paves the way to numerous counter narratives disseminated by other users critical of the BRI, namely, Western media, think tanks, academics, and citizens, who undermine the stories that China aims to convey. These criticisms expose the limits of China's digital diplomacy and of the sensationalist reporting of its alleged direct effects on audiences.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, China, digital diplomacy, topic modelling, Twitter

Introduction

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese state has embraced a more assertive foreign policy (Yan, 2014), which does not only focus on economic growth as in the past, but also more on shaping global governance structures. The best example of

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this new era is the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to increase China's connectivity with Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America through infrastructure projects.¹ The BRI has become a unifying concept for China's foreign policies. In 2017, it was even incorporated into the Communist Party Constitution. Considering its salience, it is actively supported by public diplomacy campaigns. Indeed, President Xi Jinping has urged Chinese actors to increase efforts to 'tell China's stories well' to foreign audiences (Xi, 2017), a trend which has intensified since the beginning of the so-called Trade War with the USA. Since then, several Chinese diplomats and embassies have begun opening accounts in Western social media to challenge an increase of critical narratives of their country. Even though the hypodermic needle model of communication, the idea that media content produces direct effects, has long been discredited in communication research, it still looms large on the analysis and reporting of critics of China's public and digital diplomacy efforts. Indeed, analysts and Western media mistrust and denounce China's media campaigns as assertive, portraying them as blatant propaganda efforts aimed at co-opting foreign elites and at reshaping the global informational order more in favour of China's interests (Brady, 2018; Brandt and Schafer, 2020; Lim and Bergin, 2018; Nadège, 2019).

These concerns are not new. Researchers have already made important contributions that shed light on the aims and limits of Chinese public diplomacy, its soft power (d'Hooghe, 2005; Edney, 2012; Hartig, 2016; Jirik, 2016; Mingjiang, 2008; Thussu et al., 2017; Wang, 2011a), and its reception in different regions (Armony, 2012; Wu, 2016; Zhang and Wu, 2017). This article contributes to this research stream, in particular to the nascent literature that explores China's digital diplomacy (Huang and Wang, 2020; Madrid-Morales, 2017; Zhao and Wang, 2019), which so far has examined the dissemination of narratives in Western social media by Chinese diplomats and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Yet, little attention has been given to the ways in which social media users engage and react to China's digital diplomacy in such platforms. These are important media to investigate, since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cannot deploy the same type of information control tactics that it uses behind the Great Firewall (Rawnsley, 2015; Roberts, 2018), offering affordances to users to support or question China's narratives. Thus, its analysis may contribute to the more nuanced readings of China's public diplomacy efforts (Hartig, 2020), in this case on social media.

Given the importance that China assigns to the BRI, this article makes a contribution in this regard by examining three aspects of the initiative on Twitter between February 9th 2019 to January 3rd 2020. First, it explores the frequency and geographical distribution of tweets related to the BRI. Second, it scrutinises the main topics discussed in such tweets. Finally, it describes the main networks of actors producing BRI content. Results show that Chinese digital diplomacy has been increasing on Twitter, driven by the posting practices of its main international broadcasting organisations and BRI partners. As such, China's digital diplomacy is becoming more relational in promoting the BRI, outperforming previous, top-down, and unidirectional communicational practices. However, although some actors may be telling China's stories well, the open nature of Twitter also paves the way to numerous counter narratives disseminated by other users critical of the BRI, namely, Western media, think tanks, academics, and citizens, among others, who undermine the stories that China aims to convey. These criticisms expose the limits of China's digital diplomacy and of the sensationalist reporting of an alleged direct effect of its propaganda.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section details the concept of digital diplomacy, followed by a section on the methods employed. The results section analyses the digital diplomacy about the BRI on Twitter, examining the total number of tweets and its geographical distribution, the main topics covered, and the contrasting types of narratives that users' communities hold on the BRI. The paper concludes by discussing the main implications of these findings and by outlining the additional challenges posed by the pandemic to China's digital diplomacy.

From public to digital diplomacy

Understanding contemporary discussions on digital diplomacy requires acknowledgement of the relation between public diplomacy and soft power. Although its meaning has varied in time, public diplomacy basically refers to the multiple ways in which international actors – originally the state – communicate with foreign publics (Ayhan, 2019; Snow and Cull, 2020). The most traditional definition is state-centric, focused on how diplomats and embassies may shape the opinion of foreign publics. In this line, Cull (2008) asserts that public diplomacy involves five state activities, namely, listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting, which is particularly important, since it is transversal to the other four categories. Yet, state-centric perspectives have been questioned by the New Public Diplomacy, which accepts non-state actors as well, rejects a clear-cut division between national and foreign publics, highlights the importance of dialogue and of building credibility and long-term trust for such efforts to bear fruit, and stresses a transition towards multiple types of relations between publics and public diplomacy efforts (Melissen, 2005; Pamment, 2013). For instance, Zaharna and Uysal (2016) detail how state social media campaigns can establish different types of relations with audiences, encompassing positive, negative or no relation at all. Therefore, the focus is no longer on the messages of public diplomacy campaigns, but also on the multiple types of relations that audiences may establish with such narratives.

These conceptual nuances matter, because public diplomacy is perceived as an important instrument of soft power (Melissen, 2005), an idea popularised by Joseph Nye Jr that foregrounds the face of power in which '[. . .] one country gets other countries to want what it wants' (Nye, 1990: 166). Thus, influence by attraction and persuasion is preferred over the coercive use of hard power, such as military and economic resources. Besides, soft power has been particularly influential in China, where it has largely followed Nye's definition. Indeed, many authors agree that China's public diplomacy aims to improve the country's image abroad (d'Hooghe, 2005; Wang, 2008, 2011a; Zhao, 2015). However, the interpretation of soft power in China has also incorporated new dimensions, such as national media playing a key role to counter-attack a perceived disproportionate global influence of Western media, and their role in spreading malicious narratives about the country (d'Hooghe, 2005; Edney, 2012; Mingjiang, 2008; Zhao, 2013, 2015). Complementarily, domestic aims also matter in China's soft power conceptualisation, such as building national cohesion or showing to national audiences the foreign support of China's model (Edney, 2012; Mingjiang, 2008; Zhao, 2015). Despite these efforts, several authors have described the significant weaknesses of China's public diplomacy (Creemers, 2015; d'Hooghe, 2005; Hartig, 2016, 2020; Wang, 2011a; Zhao, 2013),

namely, the fact that its state-led or state-controlled efforts are perceived as propaganda or are ignored by foreign audiences in liberal-democracies, the lack of trust caused by the hiding of information during crises, such as with SARS, or that its initiatives lack the relational dimension central to soft power, among others.

The ongoing process of digitalisation has paved the way to the concept of digital diplomacy, which is transforming the practice of public diplomacy. In a restricted way, digital diplomacy is defined as the use of information and communication technology by state and non-state actors for public diplomacy (Bjola and Holmes, 2015: 207), while a broader definition understands that the '[...] digitalization of public diplomacy has been a long-term process in which digital technologies, digital publics and digital initiatives have all impacted the conduct of public diplomacy' (Manor, 2019: 66). Indeed, while social media may be the most evident source pressuring ministries of foreign affairs to change how they conduct some of their public diplomacy practices, new emerging technologies, may further transform them soon. Nonetheless, given the widespread use of social media, contemporary research on digital diplomacy still mainly focuses on initiatives in these platforms. For instance, researchers have investigated the type of networks that publish on foreign policy (Zeitsoff et al., 2015), the issues discussed in social media (Park et al., 2019), how diplomats, ministries of foreign affairs and other non-state actors use new digital tools (Bjola and Holmes, 2015; Bjola and Pamment, 2019; Spry, 2018), and the relations that digital diplomacy campaigns establish with audiences (Sevin and Ingenhoff, 2018), among others. Conversely, digital diplomacy has a negative side, which includes the use of disinformation campaigns, bots and trolls, astroturfing, and other techniques to achieve wicked objectives by state and non-state actors alike (Bjola and Pamment, 2019).

Against this backdrop of changing practices for public diplomacy, China has also been expanding its digital diplomacy campaigns in Western social media. Yet, except for a few exceptions (Huang and Wang, 2020; Madrid-Morales, 2017; Zhao and Wang, 2019), far less is known on such actions and its reception by digital publics. Inspired by the digital diplomacy contributions stressing the relationality between social media campaigns and its publics (Sevin and Ingenhoff, 2018; Zaharna and Uysal, 2016), the next sections of the article examine the relations between the digital diplomacy of Chinese actors on Twitter about the BRI, scrutinising how other users link and reply to such narratives.

Methodology

The article employs a mixed methods approach, because it is the best way to complement the shortcomings that quantitative and qualitative methods have in analysing social media data (Schneiker et al., 2019). This involved gathering quantitative information about tweets, and qualitatively coding and interpreting them under the light of the existing literature and personal contextual knowledge to answer the research questions on China's digital diplomacy. The data collection procedure involved gathering tweets from February 9th 2019 to January 3rd 2020, based on a mixture of keywords ('Belt and Road' and 'New Silk Road') and hashtags (#BeltAndRoad, #BRI, #NewSilkRoad and #OBOR). Most of them were selected, because they were frequently

employed by Chinese official accounts pushing BRI narratives. The only exception was New Silk Road and #NewSilkRoad, which refers to the term that foreigners sometimes erroneously give to the BRI. The data collection was implemented via R using the *rtweet* package (Kearney, 2017), which collects tweets from Twitter's REST API. In total, the researcher collected 143,935 unique tweets. The usual limitations to the analysis of social media data apply (Tufekci, 2014). First, Twitter's REST API provides only a sample of the tweets published during the last 6-9 days that match the query. Second, even if the whole data had been gathered, it is known not to be necessarily representative of a whole population. Thus, by no means can the results be used to make inferences of populations beyond those using Twitter. The gathered corpus of tweets was analysed to answer the following three research questions.

RQ 1: How frequent and geographically widespread has the spread of tweets about the BRI been?

The first part of this question is answered by measuring the frequency of tweets per day during the analysed period, whereas the second by mapping the geographical distribution of these tweets that provided coordinates for geolocation (1.32% out of the total). Thereby, this information permits assessing the effort and reach of China's digital diplomacy of attempting to shape global narratives about the BRI on Twitter.

RQ 2: What are the main topics discussed in the corpus of English tweets about the BRI?

Within the scope of this article, I have limited the analysis of topics to those tweets that were written in English, because they accounted for most of the corpus. Besides, given the centrality of English as a lingua franca, they are the most appropriate ones to shed light on the global conversations on the BRI. Thereupon, for scrutinising the topics in these tweets, the article employs topic modelling, which is a useful methodology in the field of computational social science and digital humanities to detect patterns in large amount of texts (Blei, 2012; DiMaggio et al., 2013; Park et al., 2019). In a nutshell, it is an unsupervised learning method that detects patterns of co-occurrence of words in a corpus, the so-called topics, which are not necessarily linked to theoretical concepts, rather they can be frames, issues or even writing styles (Jacobi et al., 2016). Methodologically, the data preprocessing involved, tokenisation, converting all tweets to lower case, removing punctuation and other special characters, removing English stopwords, excluding the search terms to retrieve tweets, and lemmatisation. Finally, the researcher implemented topic modelling with the free software Mallet (McCallum, 2002). Taking into account that the method depends on the analyst's selection of the number of topics to detect in the corpus and other hyperparameters (Brookes and McEnery, 2019), it is advisable to run the model with different parameters looking for a good balance between granularity and interpretability of topics (Graham et al., 2012). Considering these criteria, Mallet was run with a varying number of topics (5,10-15,20,25,30), and after assessing them, the model with 12 topics was finally chosen for analysis.

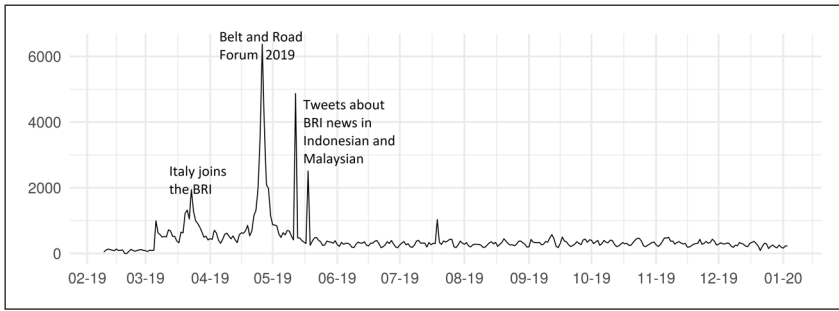


Figure 1. Frequency of BRI tweets aggregated using 1-day intervals.

Source: Data collected from Twitter's REST API via rtweet.

RQ 3: How do the main networks of actors relate to BRI narratives?

Answering this question requires, first, the examination of the main state and non-state actors involved in the principal networks telling BRI stories. Indeed, Chinese actors are not necessarily the only ones telling stories about the BRI. Other states and diverse types of non-state actors endorse, comment, and challenge Chinese stories about the BRI. Hence, it is important to know the structure of the networks producing such content. Thus, the article employs network analysis to reveal the main communities of users retweeting content of the BRI. The underlying assumption is that a retweet is a measure of the influence of a user, since the more retweets a user's tweet gets, the more people that its communication reached (Kumar et al., 2014). In practice, this was achieved by using R to convert the database of tweets into a graph, which was then imported to Gephi to apply the Louvain community detection algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008). After discovering retweet communities in the corpus, the content of the top 10 most retweeted users in each community was examined and coded to describe and interpret the main themes they used in covering the BRI. Thereby, this approach reveals both quantitative information about the networks and qualitative information of their narratives about the BRI.

Results

The following subsections examine the results to the three research questions.

Total number of tweets and geolocation

Figure 1 shows the frequency of unique BRI tweets gathered during almost 10 months of data collection. Most were published in English (82.48%), followed by Indonesian (6.26%), Italian (1.97%), Spanish (0.96%), French (0.87%), Urdu (0.69%) and German (0.60%). The graphic suggests the BRI is far from being influential in the Twittersphere, after all, any popular Netflix series or a soccer match generate more content in 1 day than what was gathered for this research. Having said that, Figure 1 does have interesting patterns. From February to May 2019, on average, the dataset has approx. 4200 tweets per week, indicating a more intense production of content near the Belt and Road Forum

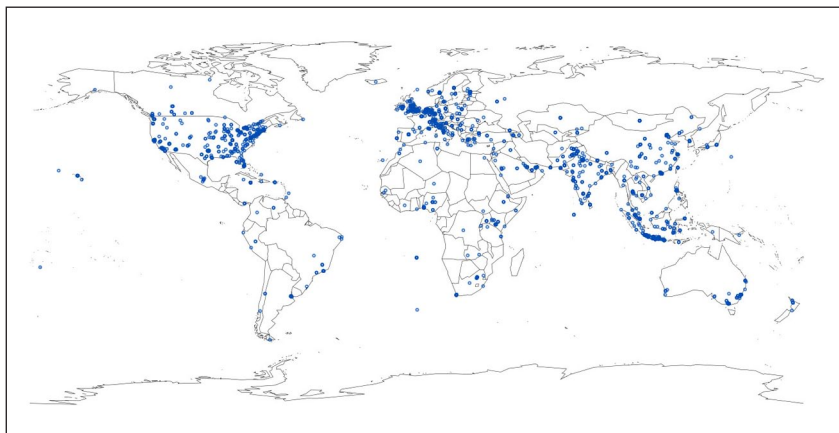


Figure 2. Geographic location of BRI tweets.

Source: Data collected from Twitter's REST API via rtweet.

(BRF). From June 2019 onwards, the average number of tweets related to the BRI declined to approx. 2800 per week, though it remained in a stable pattern. Figure 1 also shows four main spikes, which are either related to key events or polemic coverage of the BRI. For example, the first smaller spike in March coincides with the news that Italy joined the BRI, a major milestone given that it was the first G7 country to join it. But it also coincides with news alleging that Pakistan diverted money dedicated to BRI projects to other ends. The second and largest spike coincides with the BRF 2019, which took place between 25 and 27 April. This political event, which attracted presidents and thousands of delegates from across the world, was widely covered by the international media, and hence, by Twitter's users, illustrating the importance of event diplomacy to China in order to disseminate its narratives in contemporary hybrid media. The remaining two spikes represent tweets in Indonesian and Malaysian that are related to national discussions on BRI news, namely, the sharing of an old article by CNN Indonesia (2018) that quotes mainly critical sources, whom cast doubt on the debt sustainability incurred by BRI projects recipient countries.

As regards the geolocation of tweets, considering that not all users opt to make such information public, about 1953 unique tweets had such data, out of which 1894 corresponded to a state. Although just a sample of the total, Figure 2 shows the widespread geographical distribution of the tweets, covering 98 different countries. Most tweets were written from Western countries, in descending order, the United States (26.77%), Great Britain (7.13%), Italy (4.65%), Australia (4.49%), Canada (2.75%), Germany (2.69%), Belgium (1%), France (0.9%) and Spain (0.84%). Obviously, this is in part related to the language of the tweets, but also due to the debate that the BRI provokes regarding China's role in the world, particularly in the United States and Great Britain. China was the second country with most tweets revealing geographical location (7.55%), followed by its regional neighbours that have joined or that are impacted by the BRI, such as India (7.39%), Pakistan (4.22%), Indonesia (3.01%), Philippines (1.64%), Malaysia (1.53%), among others. Users from countries in distant regions also appear

	Topic	Dirichlet Parameter	Author's interpretation of the words	Top keywords for each topic
BRI features	0	0.12023	BRI and debt trap	project country debt chinese infrastructure investment billion trap bank global fund finance world power development year loan good report build
	9	0.13225	BRI and geography	asia economic trade europe world global infrastructure africa country south chinese project india japan plan good east strategy power development
	10	0.07807	BRI and development	cooperation country development international trade chinese business forum investment opportunity economic promote open global silkroad people conference great exchange share
	2	0.12245	U.S. criticism of BRI	world country chinese good ccp people make money trump don war trade win nation stop xinjiang debt thing state communist
BRI partners	4	0.04719	BRI projects in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Kenya	port project railway link chinese today rail sri build lanka europe train city part post key malaysia route kenya sea
	3	0.02995	BRI, Russia and oil	russia oil iran israel investment trump putin usa world gold syria global yuan war plan trade deal saudi back sanction
	11	0.03974	BRI and CPEC	cpec pakistan india project economic gwadar chinese corridor part pak afghanistan pakistani kashmir forum time indian minister myanmar development balochistan
BRI milestones	5	0.04327	Belt and Road Forum 2019	forum beijing president minister international cooperation attend meet jinping leader chinese brf prime april khan imran summit visit hold speech
	1	0.06315	Italy joins the BRI	italy sign join deal country project chinese plan president italian beijing jinping european news europe agreement mou infrastructure state france
Unrelated or not well-defined topics for analysis	6	0.06567	BRI related publications and events	read report interest article discuss talk late today impact research book university join chinese opportunity learn event week discussion check
	7	0.03761	Unrelated	seat drive car good green wear safety traffic train time people make driver side back stop don work day year
	8	0.03545	Unrelated	win good day love year game make time team play film back home trip great week today sun black woman

Figure 3. Results of running the topic modelling algorithm with 12 topics on the corpus of English BRI tweets.

prominently in the dataset, such as Kenia (1.48%), Nigeria (1.27%), South Africa (0.79%), Saudi Arabia (0.84%), Argentina and Brazil (both with 0.74%).

Overall, these figures suggest that Chinese digital diplomacy efforts on Twitter about the BRI, although not extremely popular, have been successful in continuously producing content about the initiative, and in stimulating users around the globe to comment on it. Therefore, it is fair to say that the BRI has become a useful concept to englobe China’s foreign actions, something that academics observed the country used to lack before (Armony and Xiao, 2016).

Topic modelling

The application of topic modelling to the corpus of English tweets provides a bird’s eye view on the main groups of words used by users when tweeting about the BRI. Figure 3 shows the main topics, including the topic number outputted by Mallet, the Dirichlet parameter that is proportional to the distribution of topics within the

corpus, a name given by the author to each topic based on the interpretation of the last column, which shows the most representative words for each topic in descending order. These twelve topics are organised in four groups in the table, distinguishing between topics considered relevant for analysis and those that were dismissed, either because they referred to ways of advertising BRI publications and events (topic 6) or unrelated topics,² which exemplify the challenge of false positives in collecting tweets by keywords and hashtags.

The results give interesting insights on how users comment on the BRI on Twitter. The first group of topics describe different features of the BRI. For instance, topic 10 has words stressing the positive contribution of the initiative to development, whereas topic 9 includes content related to the geographical location of its projects. In contrast, the remaining two topics suggest critical views. For instance, topic 0 has content accusing the BRI of triggering predatory lending that ensnares recipient countries, in other words, what critics call a debt-trap diplomacy. This topic supports Brautigam's (2020) claim that this moniker for the BRI has become a meme, even though its veracity is disputable. Likewise, topic 2 mentions words related to the Trump's administration criticism of the BRI in amidst the so-called Trade War with China.

The second group of topics are related to key partners of the BRI. Take the case of topic 11, which mainly has tweets related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a regional economic cooperation framework between both countries that is part of the BRI. In 2015, under CPEC, China announced investments of US\$ 46 billion during the next decade with the main aim of connecting the city of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province with the Gwadar port at the South of Pakistan (Alí, 2015). Besides, CPEC includes numerous infrastructure projects in different sectors, such as agriculture, energy, telecommunications, etc., aimed to ratchet up Pakistan's development and its connectivity to China. The magnitude of the investment and its salient role in the BRI's corridors (Mayer and Zhang, 2021), explains the wide attention that CPEC has received by Twitter users. Another example is topic 3, which has content on Russia's role in the BRI, in particular in relation to oil, which is in line with the closer bilateral relations that President Putin and President Xi have established. Furthermore, topic 4 indicates the coverage of BRI projects to countries such as Sri Lanka, Europe, Malaysia, and Kenya. Finally, the third group of topics spans content on events of the BRI, including the BRF 2019 (topic 5) and the decision of Italy to join the BRI (topic 1), which are clearly in line with the peaks of Figure 1. Likewise, topic 9 includes tweets related to other events and workshops discussing the initiative that have been continuously organised around the world during the time of data collection.

In sum, the interpretation of the topic modelling output suggests that China has ramped up its digital diplomacy efforts to convey positive narratives on the BRI into Twitter, specially by covering key events, partnerships, and projects. In that sense, China may be telling its stories well. However, the topics depicting the BRI as a debt trap and the one making explicit reference to the Trump administration criticism of the initiative also indicate that there are other users retelling BRI stories in their own critical ways, far from what China's public officials would like to see. In order to shed light on who is constructing such divergent BRI narratives, the following section explores in more detail the communities of users producing them.

Community	Percentage of nodes	Content's orientation towards the BRI (based on top 10 users with most RTs)
1	9.28%	Pro BRI
2	7.90%	Critical BRI
3	7.27%	Critical BRI
4	6.11%	Critical BRI
5	5.53%	Mixed thematic/regional BRI coverage
6	4.02%	Critical BRI
7	3.88%	Pro BRI
8	3.88%	Pro BRI
9	3.88%	Pro BRI
10	3.65%	Critical BRI
11	3.09%	Mixed thematic/regional BRI coverage
12	3.09%	Mixed thematic/regional BRI coverage
13	2.98%	Critical BRI
14	2.87%	Mixed thematic/regional BRI coverage
15	2.55%	Pro BRI
16	2.39%	Pro BRI
Remaining communities	28%	-

Figure 4. Percentage of nodes and content’s orientation towards the BRI of the 16 most important communities outputted by the Louvain community detection algorithm.

Networks tweeting on the BRI

From the corpus, the researcher built the network of retweets to shed light on the communities of users publishing on the BRI from different viewpoints, highlighting those that had more influence in pushing content on Twitter. The obtained retweet network has 147,361 nodes and 282,558 edges, together with 4361 communities that were identified with the Louvain community detection method. Certainly, these numbers are daunting; therefore, to simplify its interpretation, I limited the analysis to the 16 communities with more tweets, which account for 72% of all nodes. Figure 4 lists these communities and classifies them in three groups, namely pro BRI communities, communities critical of the initiative, and four remaining communities that have both praising and critical tweets toward the BRI, which suggests a more mixed stance, and are also characterised by a regional coverage of the initiative. This classification was the outcome of coding the prevailing themes of the content in the tweets of the top 10 users with most retweets within each community. Within the scope of this paper, the following paragraphs will examine the content of the communities with clear pro and anti BRI viewpoints more thoroughly, since they plainly illustrate opposing narratives on China’s digital diplomacy. In contrast, only a minor mention will be included of the remaining group, because it was more heterogeneous than the other ones.

Pro BRI. In line with what Zhao and Wang (2019) described, Chinese official sources have been central in positioning the #BeltandRoad in Twitter conversations (see Figure 5a). Indeed, in the community with most nodes (9.28% out of the total), the users with most

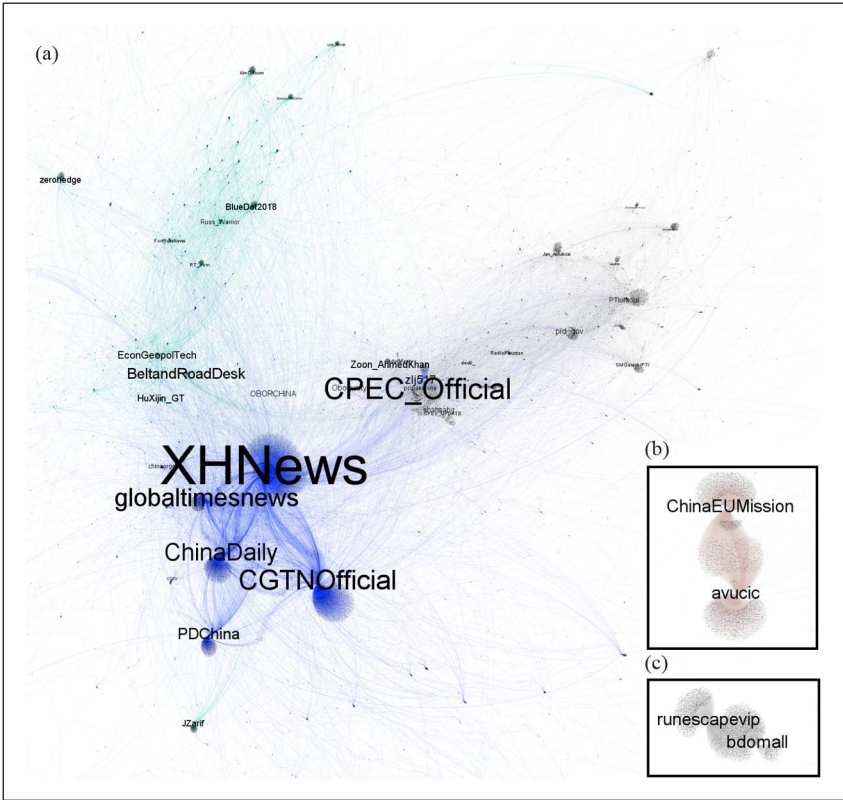


Figure 5. Network of users retweeting pro BRI content. (a) Communities 1, 7, 9 and 15. (b) Community 8. (c) Community 16. Nodes and labels size are proportional to number of received retweets. Links indicate retweets from one node to another.

retweets in descending order are mostly Chinese media, such as, Xinhua news, CGTN, China Daily, Global Times, People’s Daily and CCTV. Despite the difficulties to access Western social media due to the Great Firewall, Chinese international broadcasting outlets are very active in these platforms. For example, the ten state media organisations with more retweets published a total of 2084 tweets (Global Times and Xinhua are at the top with 28.4% and 25.6% out of the total respectively) and received a total of 42,613 retweets. Evidently, this is part of a strategy to tell China’s stories well to foreign audiences, which goes in line with the dimension of international broadcasting of the concept of public diplomacy. Likewise, it matches China’s interpretation of the concept of soft power, where the state-party control of international media is deemed central to explain China to foreign publics, and in reducing the perceived misunderstandings or deliberately biased representations disseminated by Western media (Hartig, 2016; Mingjiang, 2008; Zhao, 2013). Indeed, Chinese media outlets continuously tweet official positive stories on the BRI, such as flattering—and sometimes cheesy – videos of the BRF 2019, progress in relations with BRI partners, and advancement and outcomes of BRI projects. Furthermore, they also tweet

content debunking what they perceive as unfair criticism of the BRI.³ Although this state media bias accentuates the perception by foreign audiences that the content is propagandistic (Edney, 2012), up to a large extent, Chinese media have been successful in terms of output in pushing their narratives about the BRI on Twitter.

Apart from Chinese media, the other user that stands out in this community is Lijian Zhao, who at the time was the Deputy Chief of Mission in Pakistan, where, while overseeing several projects in the country (The Express Tribune, 2019), he actively spread Chinese stories and challenged perceived Western propaganda against the BRI. Zhao's case matters, because he has been the trailblazer of a more assertive Chinese digital diplomacy on Western social media, challenging directly – and in many cases quite undiplomatically – the opinion of Western politicians and analysts. His confrontational manner, previously foreign to China's diplomats, is perhaps one of the reasons he has become so popular on Twitter. Likewise, it may explain why in 2019 he was chosen as Deputy Director General of the Information Department of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to answer increasing criticism by foreign media and the Trump administration. Since then, other Chinese diplomats and embassies have mimicked his belligerent, which has been rebranded by critics as a Wolf Warrior diplomacy, in reference to a nationalist Chinese military movie.

Although China's Internet censorship excludes most of its citizens from using Western social media, those from recipient BRI countries certainly do. Communities 7, 8, 9 and 15 all include tweets in favour of the BRI by Chinese allies and project recipients. As such, they illustrate how the affinity in terms of bilateral relationships among the countries trickles down to a defence of the BRI on Twitter, indicating an increasing relationality of China's digital diplomacy in the production of BRI content that could enhance the image of the BRI – as long as projects promises are fulfilled. For example, communities 9 and 15 give the most evident case of such relationality, since they include tweets related to CPEC by the project's official account, and by Pakistani politicians, media and journalists stressing the benefits of cooperating with China under the BRI. For instance, the tweet posted by Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Insaf, the ruling party, synthesises Prime Minister Imran Khan's speech during the BRF 19, where he praised how the BRI is contributing to the country's infrastructure development (see Figure 6). In a similar vein, the international broadcaster Russia Today and several users, who in their profile present themselves as staunch defenders of Russia, appear in the seventh community publishing both in favour of the BRI and critical of the USA. This cluster also includes the tweets from Iran's foreign ministry visiting the BRF 2019 and left-leaning journalists critical of American imperialism. Finally, community eighth shows Serbia's president Aleksandar Vučić enthusiastic tweets about his participation at the BRF 2019,⁴ and others from the Chinese Mission to the European Union,⁵ which reports on BRI projects in Serbia – although it is yet not part of the EU (Figure 5b).

The remaining community has two users, runescapevip and bdomall, with an extremely large number of retweets, which at first looked like an outlier (see Figure 5c). However, the content that was highly shared were two cartoons mocking USA's opposition to the BRI.⁶ What is interesting about this case is that after checking the Twitter status months after its collection, a discrepancy was found with the gathered data. While the tweet collected on 12th May 2019 for the corpus had detected 1298 retweets, which



Figure 6. Tweet of the ruling political party in Pakistan, Tehreek-e-Insaf.

explain the large size in the graph, the count on Twitter’s site on 19th January 2021 only retrieved 230 retweets. This inconsistency seems to be linked to the fact that Twitter had closed a thousand of the accounts that retweeted the cartoons, because they were suspected of being part of a botnet, a group of fake and automated accounts used to amplify messages dissemination. Indeed, many of the suspended accounts had unusual user-names, composed of random letters and numbers, such as 14q8QvOWthZhkmd and 4gR0tc9SLypwRjZ. Although the data that Twitter publicly provides is not enough to confirm that this was a state-backed network, it is evident that the botnet intended to make a pro-China content far more popular than what it would have otherwise been. Considering that Twitter has been strengthening its detection and ban of botnets since the Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election, this strategy looks like a clumsy effort to propel China’s digital diplomacy. Although many countries are using such computational propaganda strategies (Bjola and Pamment, 2019; Woolley and Howard, 2019), it seems

counter-productive, because, once exposed, it ends up reinforcing the lack of trust that many foreign publics have in China's public diplomacy.

In brief, these communities show China's network of actors, who spread narratives stressing the benefits of the BRI. Moreover, BRI projects are paving the way to the production of content by partners, who can have far more reach on Western social media than what Chinese media outlets can achieve by their own. Thereby, contributing to a more relational Chinese digital diplomacy. Chinese actors also elaborate narratives to respond to the criticism that the BRI receives from foreign actors, using, in some cases, the more polemic tactics of digital diplomacy. To understand this type of adversarial relationality, we must look at the critical narratives produced by other communities.

Critical BRI. The next six communities share a critical stance towards the BRI in general and its projects in recipient countries. Together, these communities have more nodes than the previous ones (31.93% out of the total vs 25.86%, respectively), which suggests that many users have a critical or negative, rather than a positive view of the BRI. Figure 5 shows the main clusters.

The fourth community is led by the English version of several leading news agencies and organisations, such as Bloomberg,⁷ Reuters, The Economist, WSJ, Financial Times among others (see Figure 7a). The key distinctiveness of these users is that they presumably cover facts about the BRI, but mainly referencing articles expressing critical perspectives,⁸ and in minor proportion opinion pieces in favour of it. The large size of the nodes and labels of these mostly U.K. and U.S.-based organisations, shows their relevance in producing content about the BRI that can shape foreign public's opinion. In a certain way, this confirms the fears that Chinese public officials have on the disproportionate Western media influence over the external representations of the country, perceived largely as unfavourable (d'Hooghe, 2005; Hartig, 2016; Zhao, 2013, 2015).

Western think tanks and international relations magazines are key actors in shaping the narratives on the BRI that appear prominently in the 13th community. This includes mainly U.S.-based think tanks, such as CSIS, CFR, Statfor, or analysts within, whose positions on the BRI vary from neutral to more critical pieces, together with well-known U.S.-based foreign policy magazines, such as Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy. These actors attempt to shape U.S. foreign policy towards China with critical perspectives, an understandable endeavour considering the perceived threat that the BRI generates to the so-called U.S.-led liberal world order. Likewise, the second cluster has several strategic analysts, either independent or part of Western think tanks, specialising on India, who underscore the vulnerabilities of the BRI in Pakistan and the threats the initiative presents to the region. Thereby, foregrounding mainstream geopolitical perspectives that see China as a threat to India's rise, over others that stress the potential of economic cooperation (Wang, 2011b).

The third and sixth community cover different types of users that share their blunt opposition to the BRI and China, a type of content that would largely be censored in Chinese media. For example, the third one includes users mainly from Hong Kong and Australia, who do not criticise BRI projects directly, but rather its links to the very negative perception that they have of the CCP. These tweets refer to the Hong Kong protests, accusations of political interference in Australia and to other political flashpoints that

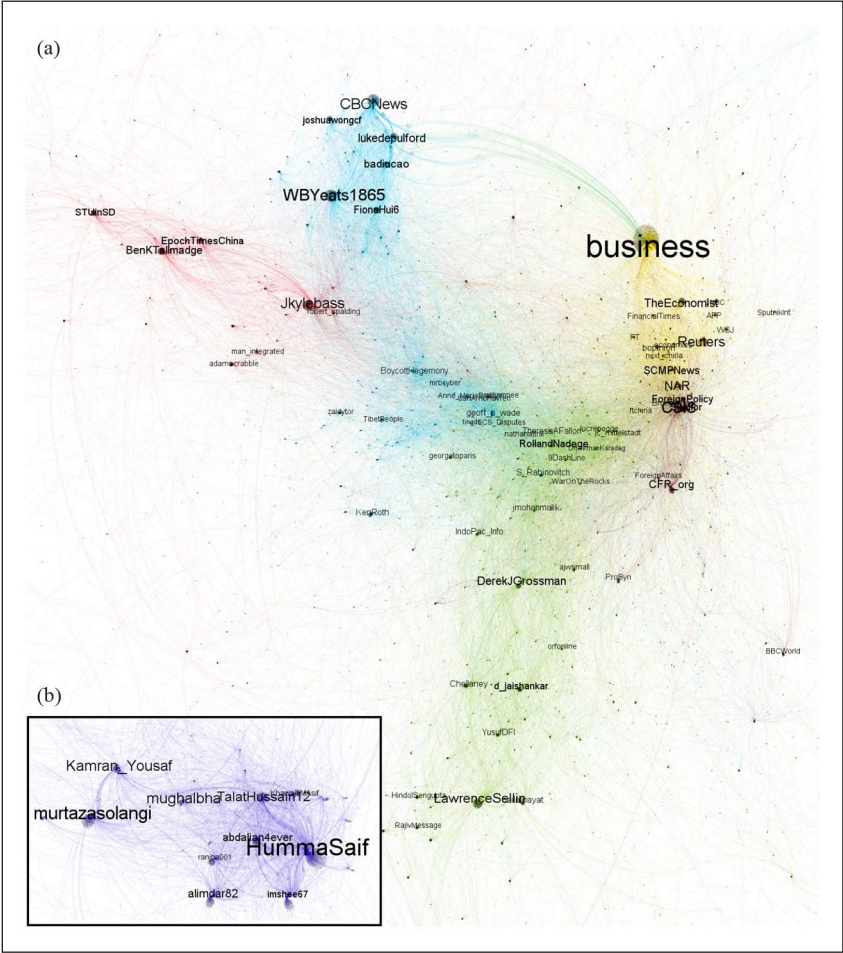


Figure 7. Network of users retweeting anti BRI content. (a) Communities 2, 3, 4, 6 and 13. (b) Community 10. Nodes and labels size are proportional to number of received retweets. Links indicate retweets from one node to another.

China has within, such as Tibet and Xinjiang. Similarly, the sixth community covers traders, journalists, military men and the New York based Epoch times international media. Many of these users denounce what they understand to be the BRI's geopolitical ambitions, namely, a new type of colonialism, portrayed nothing less as a sort of trojan horse to dominate its partners. Besides, top users either directly praise or seem to side with Trump's combative stance against China, since they share the frame that it poses a major strategic threat to the US.⁹ In both cases, these communities had some tweets expressing racism and discrimination against Chinese, which are obnoxious and reprehensible expressions of Sinophobia on the platform. Overall, these communities exemplify the productive power of what researchers have called the China Threat Theory in the West

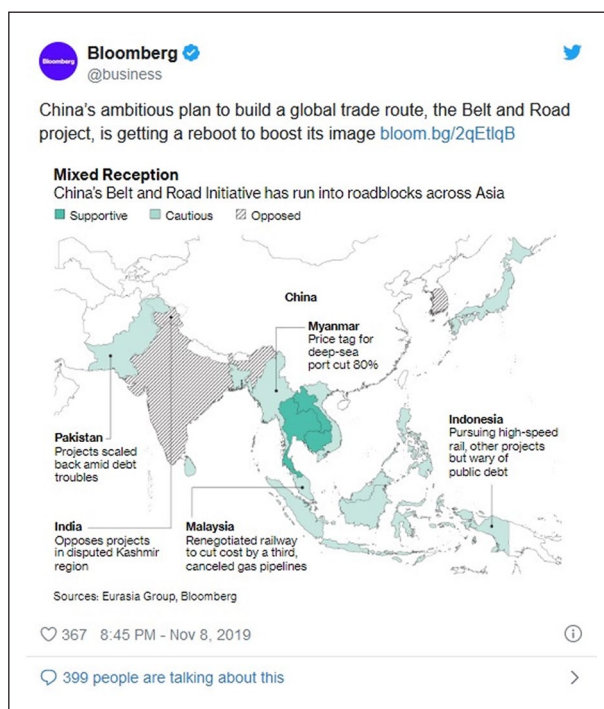


Figure 8. Bloomberg's critical tweet about the BRI.

(Broomfield, 2003; Pan, 2015), which is a discourse that understands everything emanating from China as a menace.

Despite the official messages defending CPEC in the previous section, the tenth community in this group has several users, such as Pakistanis living abroad, researchers, journalists, among others, who share critical perspectives of the BRI, or of Pakistan's PM Imran Khan, or both (see Figure 7b). These criticisms make evident that even if partnership with locals may increase China's relational public and digital diplomacy strategy, it also exposes them to intense objections that they may not be used to handle. In effect, in countries with more freedom of expression than China, Western social media pave the way to ample disapproval of BRI projects wherever they fail to meet expectations, or they become politicised as part of broader national struggles (Figure 8).

Mixed Thematic/Regional BRI Coverage. The remaining four communities have more mixed ways of narrating about the BRI and are also characterised by a regional focus. This may be the result of actors who weight the BRI's pros and cons, trying to find a middle point between the propagandistic content of Chinese media and the malicious reporting of some critics. The network analysis of these communities did not output a well-defined, dense, and easy to interpret structure as the previous ones, rather it mainly visualised the importance of some nodes over others. Therefore, instead of plotting the

networks, in this case I shall only highlight the main types of narratives that the actors with more retweets in each community produced about the BRI.

The fifth community is composed by a heterogeneous group of tweets, many of whom, although recognising the challenges that some BRI projects may have, also underscore their potential positive contributions, something that is impossible to find in the most vocal anti-China communities. For instance, the tweets mention the importance of the BRI for stability in the Middle East or highlight the benefits of the BRI for increasing relations between Asia and Europe, exemplified by the concept of Eurasia. Some tweets also tout the environmental contribution of BRI renewable energy projects, and others cast doubt on the criticism that the BRI is a sort of debt trap. Likewise, community 11 includes tweets from prominent leaders of international organisations, such as the UN and IMF, who expressed normative positions on how the BRI ought to unfold. For instance, the UN's Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, stressed that the BRI could and should contribute to address the global climate crisis.¹⁰ The cluster also include tweets from well-known China experts, such as Yuen Yuen Ang or Kevin Gallagher, who make balanced observations about the initiative.

Two remaining communities have a specific geographical focus. For example, the twelfth community has users tweeting about the BRI from Africa. On the one hand, this includes journalists and media, such as the China Africa blog or Bloomberg in Africa, which include both factual and critical posts on the BRI. On the other hand, the cluster covers politicians from Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia posting favorably about the BRI and their participation on the BRF 2019. For example, the High Representative of Infrastructure development at the African Union, Raila Odinga, tweeted about the importance of BRI infrastructure projects for regional integration.¹¹ Similarly, community 14th has tweets related to Italy's joining the BRI. Among the top users, the Chinese embassy in China and Prime Minister Conte obviously celebrated the move. However, several users criticised and mocked the decision as well, including a member of the European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt, who questioned the decision as 'antithetical to European & Italian interests'.¹²

Discussion and Conclusion

The results indicate that China has shored up its digital diplomacy efforts on Twitter, which is a valid strategy that every state is practicing, and even more so when facing an antagonistic external media environment. Indeed, China has been, so far, quite proactive in pushing stories about the BRI on Twitter by its international media, embassies, and diplomats, which have continuously generated content about the initiative during the analysed months (February 2019 to January 2020). This ramp up of digital diplomacy campaigns in Western media is part of what journalists and analysts have denounced as a propaganda blitz. Although a portion of the criticism may be valid, such sensationalist coverage misses the fact that the BRI does enjoy burgeoning support from some actors in partner countries. In effect, politicians, journalists, and others who perceive the BRI positively, are disseminating such views on Western social media to its followers. In their role as intermediaries, they are conveying positive frames about the BRI in a far more authentic way than what Chinese actors could achieve. It seems reasonable to think that

this may be helping China to address the mistrust that foreign audiences have of its state-backed public diplomacy practices.

Despite the panic that critics express towards Chinese state actors' rising footprint in Western social media, a closer look at the hurdles that its digital diplomacy faces on platforms such as Twitter, leads to a more sober assessment of its alleged effects. First, the vast networks of users tweeting critically about the BRI confirms the Chinese perception of a challenging external environment. Indeed, several Western media outlets, think tanks, analysts and pundits presenting BRI's projects under a negative light – whether unfounded or not – put a boundary to the influence that Chinese stories on Twitter may have. Second, although it has increased, the spread of China's digital diplomacy on Western social media still remains limited. The BRF 2019 attracted significant coverage, but during the rest of the period under analysis, there were no momentous events that drew so much of international attention and that reverberated on Twitter. Third, albeit China's digital diplomacy may be increasing its relationality thanks to BRI partners, most of the content produced by Chinese actors is still published by government-controlled broadcasters, supporting the prejudgment that the positive stories of the initiative are mere propaganda. Likewise, even if the number of Chinese embassies and ambassadors in Western social media has been increasing, so far, they have not played an important role in spreading pro BRI content. Besides, most Chinese embassies lag far behind in number of Twitter followers from their Western counterparts. Moreover, the increasing number of incidents in which China has been recently involved, such as the Hong Kong protests or the situation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, easily tarnishes the more positive image that its leaders want to convey globally.

Apart from these weaknesses, it is important to bear in mind that no matter how genuine Chinese stories on social media of the BRI may be, they face significant structural limits when trying to engage with Western publics, particularly from the U.S. Indeed, its political elites, independent of ideological leaning, coincide in representing China as a threat. According to the Pew Research Center, China's public image in the U.S. has plummeted even further after Covid-19. Likewise, many think tanks and civil society organisations continuously produce content critical of the country under President Xi. Accordingly, the dissemination of positive messages about the BRI will be looked at with suspicion at best, and as blatant propaganda at worst; a product of a Machiavellian strategy of the CCP to undermine the Western-led liberal order. Hence, the spread of positive content about the BRI, even if genuine and objective, has little chance of causing the intended effects in such Anglophone publics. Additionally, the increased relationality that BRI partners may contribute to China's digital diplomacy also has its downside, namely, the politicisation of BRI projects. Pakistan is illustrative of this point. In effect, the analysis of tweets has shown the existence of a community of advocates defending CPEC's projects, but also an outspoken community of critics who condemn its hazardous economic, environmental, and social consequences. Similar political battles are unfolding in other democracies that already have or are planning to join the BRI. Therefore, no matter how well China's stories may be told, its interpretation by local audiences will be filtered by domestic politics.

Methodologically, despite the allure of topic modelling as a technique to automatically classify large datasets, I side with the criticism presented by Brookes and McEnery (2019),

stressing the need for a closer reading of the texts to interpret the results. Besides, without previous knowledge about the BRI, such task would have been far more difficult. Network analysis was supportive in unravelling the networks of actors reproducing and disseminating the narratives that the Chinese diplomacy would like to tell, and those intended to undermine such stories. Nonetheless, a more comprehensive understanding of China's digital diplomacy would require comparing the multiple ways in which Chinese state actors, like media outlets and embassies, persuade audiences and respond to criticisms in different regions and languages beyond English. This could be complemented by more situated qualitative research methods, such as focus groups, to unravel audiences' perceptions towards such strategies.

At the moment of closing this piece (January 2021), the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have exacerbated some of the identified trends in this article. On the one hand, the global ramifications of the pandemic have led to an increase of negative statements about China's projects and racist slurs against ethnic Chinese by politicians, sensationalist media and citizens across the world, who blame them for the spread of the virus. On the other hand, China has unleashed a multi-pronged diplomatic strategy to defend its response, which includes donating key medical supplies, exporting home-grown vaccines to countries in need, expanding its digital diplomacy, but also even more assertive statements by its so-called Wolf Warrior diplomats in Western social media. The outcomes of these trends could be examined in future research projects, which need to acknowledge the limits that Chinese actors face on such platforms. In the case of Twitter, as this article has shown, there are multiple voices that spread narratives that effectively challenge propagandistic, but also those valid, elements in China's digital diplomacy. Amid increasing geopolitical tensions, it is important that future research sheds light on the changing practices of China's digital diplomacy in a balanced way, rather than fuelling sensationalist popular readings that incite conflict and Sinophobia.

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Notes

1. For updated official information on the BRI, see <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn>
2. For instance, topic 7 covers tweets on cars that were captured possibly due to the 'belt' keyword and topic 8 has many tweets related to sports games.
3. See <https://twitter.com/globaltimesnews/status/1121783477009911811>
4. See <https://twitter.com/avucic/status/1122089957093519362>
5. See <https://twitter.com/ChinaEUMission/status/1187754351051313153>
6. See <https://twitter.com/runescapevip/status/1125808622993268736>
7. Business is its Twitter's user name.

8. See <https://twitter.com/business/status/1192392535026675712>
9. See <https://twitter.com/jkylebass/status/1157275530808311808>
10. See <https://twitter.com/antonioGuterres/status/1121649761910583296>
11. See <https://twitter.com/RailaOdinga/status/1121267621645705216>
12. See <https://twitter.com/guyverhofstadt/status/1111216091940995072>

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