

CHINA'S POLARIZING PRESENCE IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

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Abstract

As the world transitions from the bipolarity of Cold War politics to the hyper-globalized era of the 80s and 90s towards the multipolarity of the 2000s, the ossification of political, social, and economic spheres created both opportunities and challenges for the developing world. With the formation of supranational organizations, blocs, and networks, assimilation demands strict rules of conduct and norm adherence that have limited the reach of emerging newly industrializing state actors to capital, expertise, and resources and are subjected to undue pressure to abide. China through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was able to be the developing world's alternative with its generous packages coupled with lighter requirements but with stipulations that have divided perceptions of its risks. The book *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative* endeavors to simplify China's seemingly polarizing BRI program and present an objective take on its impact on the developing world in the status quo.

Keywords: *Belt and Road, Official Development Assistance, ASEAN, Middle East*

Introduction

The core idea of the book *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative* is to introduce China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to new scholars or researchers to the essential narratives, principles, and cases that capture a nuanced and balanced take on a vastly polarizing issue. China's BRI project is examined in the book through a multi and interdisciplinary lens to capture multiple levels of inquiry and understanding across academic perspectives. To realize this, the book covers the origins of the BRI, the principles and rationale behind it, and the challenges that have plagued the development project from its inception in 2013 (p.1). Following the basic grounding of the topic with a succinct and compact introduction, the book familiarizes the connection of economic globalization as a catalyst for China's growth and as a vehicle

for soft power influence through development partnerships with developing states (p. 6).

The BRI is perceived to paint China as a partner for growth through a combination of infrastructure development, financing, and technological guidance. With the BRI as a platform, China's benevolent rise is exemplified and channeled with the fundamental globalist ventures of economic interconnectivity and partnerships analogous to the historic ancient Silk Road. While the positives of the BRI are displayed at the onset of the manuscript, the author balances it out with a stark warning on the limitations of globalization and the systemic risks that come with it (p.14). These risks are scrutinized as necessary growth pains of development that can be alleviated and contained with a novel global governance system (p. 40).

Having been one of the most controversial issues before and after the pandemic era of 2020, the emergence, persistence, and eventual failure of the system in a handful of state partners signals a challenging puzzle for the author to explore and articulate without key fundamental biases. To address this, each chapter is laid out simply and intuitively with context-driven introductions, and data-supported arguments, and capping each chapter with the problems of implementation, current issues, and the possible future of the BRI project with each partner.

The manuscript extends its arguments by capturing the various experiences of each region and country and narrating the origin, motivations, and future of each BRI development case. As an extensive topic to cover, the book covers cases from Southeast Asia and Middle Eastern countries with an emphasis on the experiences of Vietnam, Singapore, Cambodia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Within the discussions of each country are the domestic motivations of the BRI partnership, issues, and possible compromises for the future. Furthermore, the variations of narratives are transitioned well into the expansive articulation of international organizations, economic blocs, and infrastructure financing mechanisms as essential foundations for China's BRI and foreign policy agenda.

Critical Evaluation

The book lays the core foundations of the BRI argument using globalization, development, and partnerships as virtue-signaling anchors for the munificent rise of China in the global system. The increasing BRI investment on the world stage is regarded as a geostrategic scheme to increase China's growing influence and secure the support of the growing economic regional and world power (p.51). In obtaining support from various countries and regions, China can secure its place and maintain a hold of the important shipping routes (p.98), key industrial partners (p.55), and political clout to promote its military partnerships (p.181) as well as feed its domestic economy and secure China's future.

Starting with the ASEAN segment, the book emphasizes the experiences of the Philippines and Vietnam which has the most pushback against China's influence because of the maritime tensions in the South China/ West Philippine Sea. A case on Laos also shows the danger of its growing debt due to BRI with China as its largest sovereign loan partner as well as the Philippines' comparative assessment of loan packages relative to other sources such as Japan and Korea (p.16). While the dangers of BRI are presented as a precautionary tale, it remains balanced in its narration by indicating the potential benefits and domestic views on the BRI given China's manufacturing and industrial capacity. Despite the stated risks, the alignment of countries with China has a sufficient grounding based on potential growth and has been an appealing choice for the developing world, especially for countries with infrastructure gaps such as Laos and Cambodia due to its generous investment package and infrastructure support.

Initially, the partnership of the ASEAN member states with China has consequently solved China's industrial overcapacity and surplus while gaining fundamental clout through the BRI packages that are presented. On paper, the BRI is aimed at addressing the infrastructure gaps of developing countries while also including loan packages with limited conditions. The appeal of the BRI through the China-founded Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank made it viable for countries that may have questionable governance records and credit grades to attain much-needed investments. To fully capture this opportunity, China was able to create the right conditions to justify its higher loan premiums that were designed to cover the risk associated with the loaning regimes. Though on principle it is the standard, the geostrategic interests tied with the loans are highly suspect and are ancillary to its aim to take over critical infrastructure in times of a default or failure to repay. These cases were not talked about in the book in detail which should have been an important feature to indicate the common benefits and hidden risks with the BRI that contributed to China's infamy in South East Asia.

The inclusion of the individual cases of Vietnam, Singapore, and Cambodia, was a good inclusion to show the variations of how China strategizes its BRI plan in each country's needs and political dynamic. Whereas Vietnam has shown its support for the BRI due to its perceived future economic impact, its worries about the one-sided conditions have blanketed what should be a mutually beneficial endeavor (p.83). China while being tagged as "the world's workshop" needs partners to increase its output while maintaining low costs and increasing profit margins. Due to its domestic growth, China's comparative advantage of low labor costs has now shifted to the ASEAN and India. Therefore, China needs to partner with its neighbors to outsource and continue its established production model in production, technology, and sustainability. On the contrary, the BRI echoes a unilateral Chinese model that pushes for the centrality of value toward China with partner countries having little to no participation in the development model (p. 84).

Singapore's case varies immensely from Vietnam and Cambodia with its challenges that are comparatively unique with the creation of the Western Corridor. Singapore being the gateway port to Asia needs to increase its connectivity to the world which can be done with its partnership with China. While the project is a critical step for China, the project itself still has to be proven viable and needs further proof of viability to ensure that it will not be a debt trap for Singapore. Without the help of China in attracting possible customers, Singapore may end up with a white elephant project that will only benefit China (p.94).

Lastly in the ASEAN section, the manuscript celebrates the impact of a successful BRI project with its vast economic impact on Cambodia with untoward growth side effects (p.111). Cambodia's BRI case shows how China's investment strategy can negatively affect a country's organic development trajectory through an infusion of funds that while creating significant growth have had adverse effects in other areas. Such was the case with the Phnom Penh-Shanoukville Expressway that has been in use since 2022 and which according to the book has made logistics and travel easier and faster (p.111). With the instantaneous growth, the rapid gentrification has significantly affected local prices (p.112). The infusion of Chinese investments while boosting the local economy with an infrastructure boom increased tourist traffic and stimulated the local economy, enabling Chinese-run casinos to infiltrate the area and disrupt the local balance and identity. This portrays the adverse effects of growth beyond the organic curve of local economies which can alienate the local population economically and culturally. Even with these, the BRI's effect in Cambodia is depicted as a necessary trade-off for economic stimulation.

With the common need to industrialize and jumpstart growth through infrastructure improvements, Laos' case shares aspects of Cambodia despite not being given a dedicated chapter. Laos' BRI narrative is one of the foremost examples of an essential project that will create a direct economic impact for the nation with increased trade and stimulation of commerce with hidden compromises (p.103). China's role in Laos' economy cannot be denied placing 4th in Chinese investments and contracts among ASEAN member states (p.58) as well as in Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) (p.49). The China-Laos railway has been the most critical infrastructure project in the China-Laos BRI relationship with a projected cross-border cost reduction of 20%-40% (p.58) that in turn will strengthen Laos economy but also secure China's partnership in the long term. Dangerously, this sets Laos on a path of dependence being the 5th most indebted country to China (p.17) and amounting to 50% of its total debts (p.61). The story of Laos sets the tone of the manuscript to show the glaring BRI strategic contrasts and how countries have utilized what China has offered. Although the three cases were presented objectively and fairly, the discussion lacked an analysis of how China was able to secure support from local political regimes despite the contrasts between countries. An insight into the evolution of support and the examination of these dynamics is an integral step

in understanding how domestic politics can affect foreign policy shifts such as that in the BRI over time such as in the case of the Philippines.

Significantly, the book missed the opportunity to highlight this factor of how domestic politics play a role in the adoption of the BRI with mostly countries with more right-wing, authoritarian governments more likely to adopt the BRI than healthy democracies in the developing world. A critical misstep was the omission of the Duterte regime in the Philippines which was one of the staunchest supporters of China in the ASEAN during his tenure as President. Moreover, the Philippines' role in the ASEAN was overlooked which should have created the narrative of how China's BRI is closely linked to strongman-centered politics with questionable corruption track records that many in the region have cultivated in the 2010s alongside the BRI timeline. While the discussion on the ASEAN is extensive, it falls short of exhaustive insights into domestic political shifts that either contributed to the success or current failures of the BRI in the respective country cases. Furthermore, despite having been able to note the growing doubt and distrust sentiments, the cause of these changes was not addressed fully and were transitional narratives to the result of the projects in each case.

On a different note, the shift in focus from the ASEAN towards the Middle East does not at first seem to fit in the flow of the book due to the sharp turn of context yet, it sets a platform for a deeper understanding of China's contrasting strategy in dealing with developing countries and those that are in economically developed and spearheading an economic transition with the dwindling supply of fossil fuels and rise of renewable sources of energy. The strategy employed toward the Middle East is leaning toward innovation partnerships centered on energy and a third-party mediator in the case of Saudi's relation with Iran. This involvement of China in the Middle East shows China as a partner in the East but a global actor capable of transcending cultural, regional, and economic divides. China in this case signals its intent as an emerging and contending narrative against the prevailing Western hegemony and as a possible replacement for the United States, the Gulf's long-standing ally.

Transitioning from Asia to the Middle East; the book ties China's BRI discussion to the role of international organizations and alignments. The concluding topic on the contending paradigm of the G7 and its pivot to the Indo-Pacific (p.141), the emergence of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (p.153), and the future of the BRI with a reconceptualization of its principles centered on energy, health, and Central Asia (p.186) attempts to relink the BRI not as a fragmented strategic experiment but as a cohesive and encompassing policy that has the potential to prove that the multipolar world is in the present with China as its main disruptive force. Albeit with lingering challenges, the book signals a future that remains positive for the BRI once it recalibrates problems such as the China-biased growth model, aggressive debt model, and its antagonistic approach to territorial claims.

Again, while the book has covered some bases in its narration of the BRI, it failed to include half of the BRI's involvement in other regions. Cases such as the thriving relation with the African region, the failure of BRI in South Asia leading to the predatory default schemes, and its mixed results in Europe. These BRI involvements should have been included for it to be a complete and comprehensive introductory reading for the BRI. While the intent is clear, cases are well written and explored; on the contrary, the omission of other significant cases, nations, and issues affects the overall impact of the book on the existing body of literature. With the missing possible chapters, the conclusion of the book lacks substantial evidence for it to have the necessary argumentative depth and extensity. The manuscript would have benefited if the discussion of the BRI was split between regions rather than an effort to promise a full discussion on the subject matter but failed to deliver on both coverage and level of argumentation and should have been avoided with a smaller scope and a deeper exploration on core issues.

Conclusion

In its entirety, the manuscript was able to deliver where it initially promised to a certain point. If it was limited to the Indo-Pacific region, it would solve its fundamental faults such as the topic flow, broad scope, and insufficient discussion of certain underdeveloped arguments that while had the potential, were not fully discussed. The writing style, unit structure, and presentation of arguments are well-grounded and will be better considered as a supplementary reading than a seminal work on the Belt and Road Initiative. The challenge moving forward is to extend the analysis to Africa and Europe where China's presence has impacted domestic and regional dynamics. While Asia remains part of China's main focus, the study of other regions will be a critical and necessary next step in studying the BRI through multiple lenses and experiences which will be apt for a comparative critical study on China's variegated BRI strategy in the world.